

A man with long dark hair, wearing a white cowboy hat and a white t-shirt, is sitting on a couch. He is holding two babies in his arms. Both babies are wearing pink, textured, long-sleeved jumpsuits. The man is looking down at the babies with a gentle expression. The background is a wooden wall with a window showing a sunset over a landscape.

American ★ *Romance*®

Tina Leonard
THE BULL RIDER'S TWINS

CALLAHAN
Cowboys

Tina Leonard

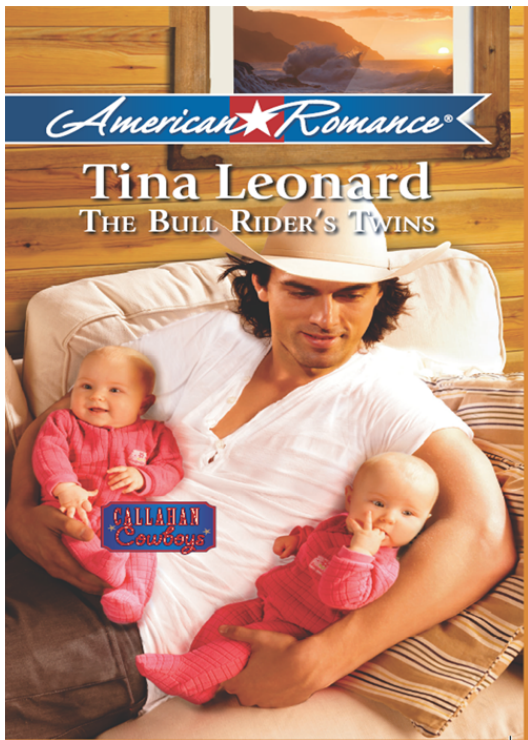
The Bull Rider's Twins

Аннотация

Not The Marrying Kind? Finding Daria Cameron warming his bed is a sight Judah Callahan will never forget. How can a red-blooded cowboy say no? Especially when Judah's desired Darla from afar for years. Only now she's having his babies. . . and planning on tying the knot with another man. Over his dead body! All Darla wanted was one night of passion with the wildly sexy Callahan she secretly loves. But now that she's going to have a family, she has to be practical. And Judah isn't the marrying kind. The die-hard bachelor was even willing to give up his share of his family's New Mexico ranch to his five brothers so he could stay footloose and fancy-free. Now all Judah can think about is getting Darla down that aisle. . . with him. Can he get her to believe in their future together? He'll bet the ranch on it!

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“I’ll think about your proposal.”

“You do that,” Judah said, “and don’t forget to tell the good doc your business merger’s off.” He crossed to the door, putting his hand out to open it for her—at least that’s what she thought he was going to do—before pressing his lips against her cheek, his stubble grazing her ever so slightly.

“Just so you know, Darla, I don’t plan on mixing business with my marriage.”

His meaning was unmistakable. His hand moved to her waist in a possessive motion, lingering at her hip just for a second, capturing her. She remembered everything—how good he’d made her feel, how magical a night was in his arms—and wished his proposal was made from love and not possessiveness.

Judah pulled the door open. “Next time I see you will be at the altar.”

Dear Reader,

I hope Creed’s story made its way to your keeper shelf! With the third installment of the *Callahan Cowboys*, Judah Callahan gets set to avoid Aunt Fiona’s matchmaking, Bode Jenkins’s scheming, his brothers’ mischief and anyone else who might think about pressing him toward the altar. Judah would secretly love to win Rancho Diablo, if only he didn’t have to marry to get it! But when he finds his dream girl, Darla Cameron, naked in his bed, Judah’s determination to stay away from all women wavers. It’s just too hard to stay away from the wedding shop owner and his own heart’s desire.

As school begins and carpool lines form and fall starts to tease us with football and cooler weather, let’s watch Judah “suffer” the joys of home life and earn the love of a good woman in *The Bull Rider’s Twins*. It promises to be a season he’ll enjoy—even if he doesn’t realize it right away. So here’s to the mystical, wild Diablos at Rancho Diablo, and to joy in your own corner of the

world.

All my best,

Tina

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TINA LEONARD is a bestselling author of more than forty projects, including a popular thirteen-book miniseries for Harlequin American Romance. Her books have made the Waldenbooks, Ingram and Nielsen BookScan bestseller lists. Tina feels she has been blessed with a fertile imagination and quick typing skills, excellent editors and a family who loves her career. Born on a military base, she lived in many states before eventually marrying the boy who did her crayon printing for her in the first grade. Tina believes happy endings are a wonderful part of a good life. You can visit her at www.tinaleonard.com.

**The Bull
Rider's Twins
Tina Leonard**

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Many thanks to my editor Kathleen Scheibling, for believing in this series, always having faith in me and editing my work with a sure hand.

There are many people at Harlequin who make my books ready for publication, most of whom I will never have the chance to thank in person, and they have my heartfelt gratitude.

Also many thanks to my children, who by now are both off to college, leaving me with an empty nest. It's not hard to envision me writing a series about babies—I had an extremely blessed experience with my two kids, and I thank you for your faith and encouragement.

And many, many thanks to the very generous readers who are the reason for my success. I could not write without your caring words and loyal support.

Chapter One

“Judah is my seeker,” Molly Callahan said of her toddler son, to which her husband, Jeremiah, replied, “Then the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, my love.”

Judah Callahan couldn’t believe the woman of his dreams was waiting in his bed. Unless he missed his guess, Darla Cameron was as naked as the day she was born.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said, sitting up and holding the sheet to her chest. His throat went dry as a bone in a New Mexico desert. Blond hair cascaded over pale shoulders, and big blue eyes gazed at him with apprehension. She was nervous, Judah realized, closing the door and locking it behind him.

He wanted to say he’d been waiting for her for years. “I’d think you’d been in the champagne, but I noticed you didn’t go near it except to toast Creed and Aberdeen.”

She shook her head. “It was a lovely wedding. Really beautiful. All the valentine decorations were so romantic.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Whatever she thought was romantic about Creed’s wedding was nowhere near as attractive as Darla showing up nude in his bed. A little worry crossed her face, and he realized she was afraid he might turn down what she was obviously offering.

Not a chance.

He seated himself on the foot of the bed, the sight of her

creamy skin setting him on fire. “If not an excess of champagne, why tonight?”

She blushed. “I wish I could tell you.”

That didn’t sound like the Darla he knew. Darla was forthright. An excellent businesswoman—her new calling since she’d hung up her nurse’s badge and gone into business as wedding shop owner with Jackie Samuels. “Try.”

She shook her head. “Be with me.”

He wasn’t going to put her, or himself, through any more agony. He kissed Darla, amazed at the sweet taste of her. “Peaches,” he said, his mind fogging up. “I always wondered what you smelled like, and now I know. You even taste like peaches.”

She moved his hand to the sheet, and he was beset by the urge to tear it away, feel what lay hidden beneath.

“There’s a hook here,” he said, knowing full damn well Darla Cameron wasn’t the type of woman who slept around. “Someone put you up to this, or you want something.”

“I do want something,” she said, her voice soft in the darkness. “Tonight I want you.”

So there it was. Tonight was only a simple hookup. Outside, music played, and fireworks streaked across the sky, popping and hissing. If he opened the window to his second-story bedroom, they would see clouds streaking the moon on a cold Valentine’s night. This would all be so romantic, if he wasn’t suffering from the sixth sense that something wasn’t right.

“How did you know I’d be sleeping in here and not the

bunkhouse?”

“I know all the guests who are staying in the bunkhouse,” she told him, moving his hand slightly so the sheet barely covered her breasts. He could feel heavenly softness just a brush away. Being this close to her at long last was killing him. Parts of him felt like the fireworks, ready to explode.

“And Fiona mentioned that you and some of your brothers were sleeping in the house so the guests could have privacy.”

“So here you are.”

“Here I am,” she said, so sweetly breathless that he didn’t have the heart to keep looking the gift horse in the mouth. Luckily, he had condoms in the nightstand, a groom’s gift from Creed, who had a penchant for stupid gags. No silver letter opener for his groomsmen; no, just boxes of condoms with peace signs and neon inscriptions on the side. Creed’s last laugh, since the brother with the most progeny won Rancho Diablo. Creed was the most competitive of the Callahans.

“All right,” Judah said. “I’ve never thrown a woman out of my bed, and I certainly won’t start now.”

He didn’t get why she was here, but he wasn’t going to worry about it. Since the lady had hunted him down, he intended to make tonight very much worth her while.

TWO HOURS LATER, something made Judah start awake. After the hottest sex he’d ever experienced, he’d fallen asleep, holding Darla in his arms, grateful for the good fortune heaven had thrown his way.

Darla jumped from the bed. "I heard someone in the hall!"

"It's all right," he said, trying to tug her back for another helping of delicious blonde.

"It's not all right!"

She eluded his grasp, so he snapped on the lamp. She was tugging on her party dress like a woman fleeing a crime scene. "Hey," he said, "we're consenting adults. No one's going to bust in here and—"

"Shh!" She glanced at the door nervously. "I think the guests have all left. Your brothers will come upstairs any minute."

"And my aunt Fiona and Burke," Judah said, and Darla let out a squeak of fear.

"Get me out of here! Without anyone seeing me. Please!"

He'd prefer it if she stayed until dawn crested the New Mexico sky, but it was clear she was determined to pull a Cinderella and disappear. He got out of bed and pulled on his jeans.

"Can you zip me? Please?" She turned her back to him and Judah drank in all the smooth skin exposed to his hungry gaze.

"Are you sure you won't—"

"Judah, please!"

He zipped her, taking his sweet time as he pressed a kiss against her shoulder. "Even if any of my family were to see you, Darla, it's not like they'd brand you with a scarlet A."

"I shouldn't have done this. I don't know what came over me." She yanked on her heels, bringing her nearly four inches closer to his height. He reached for her, determined to show her how

well suited they were, but she unlocked the door and dashed out before he could convince her to stay.

Shoving his shirt in his jeans, he hurried after her. He caught sight of a full blue skirt disappearing around the corner as she made it to the landing.

And then she was gone.

“Damn,” Judah said. “I’m think I’m going to have to marry that girl.”

Which was really funny, because of all his brothers, Judah had always known he would never marry. Not for his aunt, who dearly wanted to see all the Callahan boys married. Not for Rancho Diablo, which would go to the brother with the largest family. And not for love, because he really didn’t believe in love. At least not with one woman.

But perhaps he’d espoused that view because he’d always secretly had a crush on the unattainable Darla Cameron. She’d never so much as glanced his way. She’d been a serious student in high school, gone on to be a serious student in college, gotten a grad degree and then become a serious nurse. No, she’d never really given any of the guys in town a look, so he’d figured his chances were slim. He couldn’t even strike up a conversation with her.

All that changed tonight, he thought with a self-satisfied smile. And now that he’d had her, he was pretty certain he wouldn’t be able to give her up.

FOUR MONTHS PASSED quickly when you weren’t having

fun, and Judah wasn't having any fun at all. Darla had barely spoken to him since that Valentine's Day evening. He'd tried to chat with her, done everything but go by the bridal salon and corner her, which his pride would not allow him to do. For a woman who'd seduced him, she'd certainly taken off fast. And lately, he'd heard she'd been lying low. Maybe wasn't feeling great. Aunt Fiona was no help to him, but had dared to nonchalantly ask after his Valentine's night surprise.

Obviously, Darla hadn't been as enthused about their lovemaking as he'd been.

The realization stung like gritty wind. This was worse than when he'd only worshipped Darla from afar. Now he knew what he was missing out on, and it made him hunger for her more. She was constantly on his mind. People said she wasn't taking phone calls, except from her mother, Mavis, who'd put out the word that Darla wasn't accepting visitors at her small bungalow.

He would bide his time. He *had* to have her. There was no other option. She was a treasure he alone was going to possess.

If he could just figure out how.

"The first annual Rancho Diablo Charity Matchmaking Ball was such a success, not to mention Creed and Aberdeen's wedding," Aunt Fiona announced to Judah as he slunk into the kitchen, "that I'm in the mood to plan another party."

He grimaced, not interested in discussing Fiona's die-hard love of partying. It was all an excuse for her to marry off her nephews. The trouble with having a committed matchmaker in

the family was that it was embarrassing when said matchmaker couldn't fix his problem even if he wanted her to. He was sunk. "Do we really need another social function?"

"I think we do," Fiona said. "We raised a lot of money for the Diablo public library, and we made a lot of new friends. And we irritated the heck out of Bode Jenkins, which, as you know, is my life's goal. Not to mention you could stand a little perking up."

Judah grunted. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well," she said, moving around the sunny kitchen, "we need to find our next victim. The easiest way to do that is to keep ladies visiting the ranch." She sent him a questioning glance. "Unless you know something I don't know."

"Like what?" He settled in to eating the eggs and bacon she put in front of him. There were strawberry jam-smothered biscuits on the side, and a steaming cup of brew. Life was too good to mess up with another extravaganza. The feed bag was definitely better when Fiona's concentration was on the Callahans and not on impressing females far and wide. "I'm usually the last to know anything about anything."

"That's no surprise. What I meant was that unless you know that romance is blooming somewhere on the ranch—"

He shook his head, silencing that train of thought. "Dry wells around here, Aunt."

"Then let's choose a victim and get on with it. Time is running out."

He looked up reluctantly from his breakfast. "You got Pete and

Creed married off. That's a third of us who've given up the flag of freedom. Maybe no more weddings are needed. Or children," he added, knowing that was Fiona's real goal. "Pete has three, and Creed has Joy Patrice, but he brought three more with him if you count Diane's. Either way, that's a grand total of seven new kids on the ranch." He smiled, but it was pained. "Plenty, huh?"

She scowled. "Seven is hardly enough to make the case that our ranch shouldn't be sold for public land use. Bode'll never let us get off that easily. We need more."

Judah looked with sorrow at his eggs, his appetite leaving him. "Well, you could try Sam, but I think he likes the ladies a little too much to settle down with just one."

"And he's just a baby," Fiona said. "Twenty-six is too young when I've got hardened bachelors sitting around this place shirking their futures."

Judah rubbed at his chin. "Well, there's Jonas, but that would take too much work."

Fiona huffed. "You'd think a thirty-three-year-old surgeon would be a bit more anxious to find a wife, but *no-o-o*. I don't think he has the first clue about women, honestly. He's such a—"

"Nerd," Judah said, trying to be helpful, which earned him another scowl from Fiona.

"He's not a nerd. He's just a deep thinker."

That was an understatement. "You could pick on Rafe. He's next in line behind Jonas, and as Creed's twin it would make sense. He'll probably start missing that twin camaraderie now

that Creed's got his hands full."

Fiona looked hurt. "Is that what you think I'm doing? Picking on you boys?"

"Oh, no. No, Aunt Fiona." Judah looked at the hurt tears in his delicate aunt's eyes. "We know you just want us all to be happy."

She nodded. "I do. And how do you think I feel about having to make you all settle down before your time—if you have a sense of time at all, and I don't think any of you boys do—when I've lost Rancho Diablo?"

"We haven't lost it yet," Judah soothed. "Sam's gotten a continuance. We may get out of Bode's trap eventually. Somehow."

"But it's better to load our deck for success." Fiona waved at him. "Eat your breakfast. It's getting cold."

Burke, Fiona's lifelong butler (and her secret husband, which she seemed keen for no one to know about, though all the Callahan brothers had figured it out) brought the mail in, handing it to her.

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed, as Judah pushed the now cool eggs around his plate. She waved an envelope in the air. "Cream-colored stock. Always a good sign!"

"Why?" he asked, his gaze on the calligraphed envelope.

"It's a wedding invitation, if I know my wedding invitations, and I think I do!" Fiona tore into the envelope. She stopped, staring at the contents. "Well," she murmured, "I didn't see this coming. No, I really didn't."

Burke looked over her shoulder, peering at the invite. “Uh-oh,” he said, and Fiona nodded.

“Who’s getting strung?” he asked, feeling cheerful that it wasn’t him. Some other poor sack was getting the marital ball and chain, but it wasn’t him. *Pity the fool who falls into the clutches of a beautiful woman*, he thought, as his aunt handed him the invitation silently.

“Ms. Mavis Cameron Night requests the honor of your presence at the wedding of her daughter, Darla Cameron, to Dr. Sidney Tunstall, on June 30,” he read out loud, his breath going short and his heart practically stopping. His gaze shot to Fiona’s. “Didn’t you know about this? She’s one of your best friends.”

“Mavis didn’t say a word to me,” his aunt exclaimed. “I can’t understand why. And the wedding is in a few days, which I also can’t understand. What’s the rush?”

She studied the invitation for another moment, then lifted her gaze to his again. Oh, but she needn’t have worn such a worried expression. He had a good idea why a woman might marry so quickly—Darla was pregnant.

The thought burned his gut.

“Oh, dear,” Aunt Fiona said, her eyes huge.

Judah shoved back his chair.

“Shall I say all the family will be in attendance?” she asked, and he yelled over his shoulder, “I wouldn’t miss it,” as he dashed out into the hot dry wind. Darla hadn’t wanted any emotional connection between them. And he, spare Romeo that he was, had

fallen into her arms and dreamed of a future.

He was a fool. But not a fool on his way to the altar, and there was something to be said for that.

Still, Judah wondered if he heard an empty echo in his bravado. And his broken heart drove him onto the range, riding hell-bent to nowhere.

AN HOUR LATER, Judah was positive he saw the mystical Diablos down in a canyon, well past the working oil derricks and the fenced cattle land. Legend said that the wild horses ran free on Rancho Diablo, and no one could get close to them because they were spirits. They were also a portent of something magical to come. The Callahans didn't see the herd of horses often, but when they did, they respected the moment.

They were not spirit horses, as far as Judah was concerned. He could see them drinking from a small stream that threaded through the dust-painted canyon, though his eyes blurred in the bright sunlight. Nearby, a large cactus offered a little shade, but Judah ignored it, easing back in the saddle to watch the horses. Their untamed beauty called to his own wild side.

They turned as one and floated deeper into the canyon. Judah followed, watching for snakes, hawks and other critters. He and his brothers had explored this canyon many times, knew all its secrets.

His horse went to the thin stream, too. Judah slid from the saddle and took a long drink from the pale water. When he looked up, he saw a rock shelf he didn't remember.

Closer inspection showed the opening to a cave so hidden from the main canyon path that he would never have seen it if he hadn't bent down to drink. Cautiously, he went inside, his gun drawn in case of wild creatures he might startle.

But the cave was empty now—clearly some kind of once-used mine. Judah went past a rough shaft and a basic pulley and cart.

He'd found the legendary silver mine.

But it wasn't much of one, and appeared to have been long deserted. This couldn't be why Bode was so determined to get Rancho Diablo land—unless he thought there was more silver to be discovered. Still, what difference could silver mean to the wealthy man? And even if the Callahans were forced to sell Rancho Diablo, they would make certain they retained the mineral rights.

A loomed rug lay on the cave floor, hidden from casual visitors. There was also evidence of footprints, visible in the fading light that filtered into the cave. Still deeper, what seemed to be a message in some cryptic language was written on the wall, and it looked fresh. He touched the letters, smearing them a little. Underneath, silver coins and a few silver bars were stacked on a flat rock, like an offering.

Judah realized he'd stumbled on a smuggling operation, or perhaps a thruway for travelers who shouldn't be using Rancho Diablo land.

He left the cave, grabbed his horse's reins and swung into the saddle to ride in the opposite direction the Diablos had taken, as

he wondered who might be using Callahan land and why.

For the moment, he would say nothing, he decided—until he understood more about why he'd been led to this place.

THE NEXT DAY, Judah realized drastic steps would have to be taken. The whole town of Diablo, it seemed, was atwitter over Darla's impending marriage. No detail was too small to be hashed over—the bridal gown she'd bought from the store she co-owned with Jackie Samuels Callahan, Pete's wife; the diamante-covered shoes she'd purchased. She'd scheduled an appointment for her hair, which had been dutifully reported. It would be worn long, crowned with an illusion veil that had orange blossoms cascading at the hem, which would just touch her shoulders.

Judah was sick to death of details. He wouldn't know an orange blossom if it grew out of his boot.

Strangely, the bride had not been seen since her invitations were mailed. Nor had the groom, though he was expected in town any day now. Judah knew him. Sidney Tunstall was a popular rodeo doctor and a one-time bronc buster, a man with a spine like a spring, who seemed to be kissed by good fortune. He was also wealthy. And he'd been after Darla for some time, if scuttlebutt was to be believed. Tall and lean and focused, the doctor seemed like a guy who loved what he did and did it well.

Which pretty much stank, but that was how it went. A man could lose to a better rival if he had slow-moving feet, and Judah reckoned his feet had been slower than most.

He flung himself inside the bunkhouse, anxious to sit alone in

front of the fireplace to gather his thoughts.

It wasn't to be. Jonas was like a hulking rock in the den, taking up space with Sam and Rafe. And they'd been talking about him, Judah realized, by the way they shut their yaps the instant he entered.

"What's up?" he asked, eyeing them. "Don't stop talking about me just because I'm here."

"All right," Sam said. "Are you going to the wedding?"

The wedding. As if it was the only wedding in Diablo.

Actually, he hadn't heard of any other Diablo weddings lately, and if there'd been some, Fiona would definitely have been keeping the scoreboard updated for everyone, particularly him and his brothers. He sighed. "I might. Then again, I mightn't."

Jonas shrugged. "Let us know if you need anything."

"Yeah," Rafe said, "short of a shot of pride."

Judah blinked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sam gazed at him. "Look, bro. It's not like we haven't known forever that you've been carrying an inextinguishable torch for Darla Cameron. What we can't figure out is why you're letting her waltz off with another man."

"Maybe that's not how I see it," Judah said, "and maybe it's none of your business, anyway."

Jonas leaned back. "We could be wrong. Maybe you haven't always been in love with her."

"Darla and I are friends. That's it."

Sam sniffed. "As long as you're cool with it, we are, too. We

support you, whatever you decide. I mean, if you get an itch to crawl through her bedroom window, we'll hold the ladder for you."

"No ladders will be necessary." Judah tried not to think about the few moments he'd held Darla in his arms. "She's chosen her man, and—"

"Ah-ha!" Rafe exclaimed. "You admit she didn't choose you!"

"She didn't choose any of you, either. It's not a special situation," Judah said, feeling cranky.

"So you admit you were in a position to be chosen," Sam said, sounding like the lawyer he was. "You were a candidate, if a slightly lazy one. But there's still time to present your case. Females change their minds like the wind. And ladies love it when a last-minute challenger shows up to yodel his heartstrings under ye olde bedroom window. I say go for it. Yodel away. You can borrow my guitar."

"Darla's doing just fine," Judah said. "Everything is in the works. She's got her shoes, her flowers and no doubt something blue."

"The really blue thing at that wedding is going to be you," Jonas said, "if you don't get up off your duff and speak before the forever-hold-your-peace."

There was no use. He was going to be harried to death by the people who should have supported his wish to be a silent sufferer. And this was light treatment, Judah realized, compared to what he'd probably be treated to in town, and especially at the

wedding. Pitying looks, questioning gazes—

“What about the baby?” Sam asked. “What if it’s yours?”

Judah frowned, aware of a sudden urge to stuff a fist in Sam’s mouth. “What baby?”

Rafe studied him. “You know Darla is pregnant.”

“Is that known?” Judah asked, his heart beating hard. “Or is it gossip based on her apparently whirlwind marriage?”

“She was seen buying a pregnancy test a while ago,” Jonas said with a shrug. “This is a small town, and though she sent a friend in to purchase it, the bag made a clear exchange, which was duly noted by several people.”

“Who were spying like old-time geezers,” Judah said, not happy to hear confirmation of his own suspicions. “It doesn’t mean she’s pregnant. It could have been a negative test. She could have been giving it to Jackie, for all you know. And,” he said, finishing with a flourish, “there’s every possibility she’s getting married because she wants to, and is in love, and the lure of owning her own bridal shop finally got to her. If you owned a machine shop, wouldn’t it kill you if you could never use the tools?”

“Boy, are you caging your inner lion,” Rafe said. “Hey, we’ve got your back, bro. We know how to shine the old badge of pride. No one will ever get from us how you got left in the dust.” He shook his head, more sympathetic than Judah could stand.

“That’s it,” he said. “I’ve just seen a flash of my future, and I’m taking a rain check on it. The only way to get away from you

bunch of know-it-alls is to disappear on you.” Judah waved an expansive arm. “With no forwarding address. Don’t even try to find me. Consider me gone with the wind, in order to save the dregs of my life.” He crammed his hat on his head and turned to depart, with one last thought making him swing back around to his brothers, who watched him with open curiosity.

“And you can tell everybody in Diablo that my heart was not broken, thank you very much. You can tell them that rodeo was always my only love, and is to this day.” He made a grandiose exit, proud of himself for the charade he’d perpetrated.

No one would ever know he was lying like a rug.

His brothers looked at each other after Judah left.

“Are we going to tell him that the boxes of condoms we all received at Creed’s bachelor party were gag gifts? Creed’s parting wish that we’d all get hung by our own family jewels?” Sam asked. “It’s possible Judah didn’t get the joke.”

“I think we leave it alone,” Jonas said. “Judah doesn’t seem to want to consider that the child Darla might be carrying is his.”

Rafe nodded. “*If* she is four months pregnant, as we hear she is, and the birth coincides with Creed and Aberdeen’s wedding night, then it may be obvious.”

“Why wouldn’t Darla tell Judah?” Sam’s forehead wrinkled. “That’s the only thing that’s not making sense. Wouldn’t she just say, hey, that night of passion resulted in some passion fruit?”

“They’ve been running away from each other for so long, admitting that she’s pregnant by Judah is the last thing Darla

would do. He never acts as if he likes her, much less loves her. Ladies do not dig the strong, silent type when they need some reassurance, and Judah's been playing the role of Macho Man with gusto," Jonas said. "What woman wants a man if she thinks he doesn't love her?"

"Anyway, we're in way over our heads here," Rafe said. "We could have this all wrong. Maybe they never did the deed that night. Maybe Creed never saw them go off together. Darla could be pregnant by the bronc buster doctor, not that anyone ever mentioned them dating. It's not like we can ask her, because she's not even telling anyone she's in a family way. Rumors may be flying, but no one's going to mention them to the blushing bride."

They thought about the problem some more, then Jonas shrugged. "We'll know by November, I guess."

"Or not," Sam said. "She may choose to never reveal the real father."

"And Judah loses out on being a dad," Rafe mused. "Which would really be a loss, because he'd probably make a decent one. I mean, if Creed and Pete can do it, why not Judah?"

But there was nothing they could do about it. Darla was getting married, and Judah was gone, and neither one of them seemed to care that true love was being held captive by stubborn hearts.

"I hope I'm not that dumb when a beautiful woman loves me," Sam said with a sigh, and both his brothers immediately said, "You will be."

"But not as dumb as Judah," Sam muttered to himself,

listening to Judah's truck roar away.

"I say it's time we engage Aunt Fiona," Jonas suggested, and his brothers nodded. "This situation could be dire."

"Maybe, maybe not," Sam said, "but Judah certainly isn't going to do anything to save himself."

Chapter Two

Rafe, Sam and Jonas went to the kitchen to find Fiona. As a rule, she or Burke could be found there, or nearby, at least. It was nearly the dinner hour, a very odd time for Judah to decide to depart, which just showed that even an empty stomach hadn't deterred his boneheadedness.

The kitchen was empty. The scents of wondrous culinary delights (Fiona could cook like no other, and Burke was no slouch in their shared gastronomic hobby) were absent. Rafe felt his stomach rumble and figured this might be an unannounced catch-as-catch-can night. They had those at Rancho Diablo, though rarely. Usually on the nights their fearless aunt had bingo or her book reading club or a church group, she cut them loose. But at least a pie would be left on the kitchen counter, with a note on the Today's Meal chalkboard that read something to the effect of "Tough Luck! You're Stuck!"

Tonight, all that was on the counter was a single bar of something silver. Rafe, Jonas and Sam crowded around it, perplexed.

"That's not cherry pie," Sam said.

"It's mined silver," Jonas said. "Mined and pressed into a bar. See the .925 on it?"

Rafe blinked. "Why would Fiona leave us a bar of silver?"

"All those years people have whispered about there being a

silver mine on our land suddenly comes to mind,” Sam said, his voice hushed.

Rafe’s gaze went back to the bar. “We’ve been over every inch of Rancho Diablo. There’s no way.”

“I don’t know,” Jonas said. “Why else would Aunt Fiona have a silver bar?”

“Because she’s putting it in her stock portfolio,” Sam said. “She bought some through a television advertisement, or a jeweler, to diversify her nest egg. It’s not sound to leave all one’s investments in the stock market or the national currency. She’s just taken physical possession of some of her holdings, I would guess.”

“But what if it’s not part of her nest egg?” Rafe asked. “What if there really is a silver mine on Rancho Diablo? That would explain why Bode Jenkins is so hot to get this place.”

They heard Burke whistling upstairs, and the chirping sound of Fiona’s voice.

“Quick,” Jonas said. “Outside.”

They hustled out like furtive thieves. Rafe closed the door carefully behind him. His brothers had already skedaddled down the white graveled drive toward the barns.

Rafe hurried after them. “Why don’t we ask her what it is? What if there is silver on the ranch? What if Bode is sniffing around for it?”

“Then she probably wouldn’t have left proof of its existence lying out on the kitchen counter,” Sam said. “By now, Bode’s had

this place satellite mapped, I'm sure. He's had the geographic and mineral composition of the land gone over. If there was silver around here, he would know before we would."

"All I'm suggesting," Rafe said, "is that maybe it's time we quit being so worried about offending Fiona. That we just ask her."

His brothers stopped, gave him a long eyeballing. Rafe shrugged. "I mean, what the hell?" he asked. "If we have a silver mine, hurrah for us. It doesn't change anything."

"If there's a silver mine, and Fiona's been putting away dividends all these years, I don't want to know." Jonas shrugged. "Look, I love Fiona. I don't give a damn if there's solid gold under this ranch from corner to corner, and she plans to ferret all of it off like a conquistador. I really don't care. So I'm not asking."

Jonas had a point. Rafe didn't want to hurt Fiona's feelings, either. She'd given up a pretty decent life in Ireland to come take care of them, which couldn't have been easy. They had not been a snap to raise. "All right," Rafe said, "by now she's probably hidden the damn thing. So can we go back now, act like we didn't see it and go over the Judah problem with her? I'm pretty certain we need a guiding hand here."

They went back to the house, and this time, Jonas banged on the kitchen door.

Fiona flung it open. "For heaven's sake. Can't you open a door by yourselves? Three big strong men can't figure out how to use the key?" She glanced at the doorknob. "The door isn't locked. Why are you knocking, like this isn't your house?"

They stared at their tiny aunt. Her eyes were kind, her voice teasing, but she seemed truly mystified. Rafe swallowed. “Aunt Fiona, we wonder if you have a moment so we might pick your brain?”

“So you’re standing on the porch? You won’t pick it out there. When you’re ready, come inside.”

They went in, glancing at each other like errant school boys. “You bring up the joke condoms,” Rafe said quietly to Jonas. “You’re the oldest. I’m not comfortable talking about sex with my aunt.”

Jonas straightened his shoulders. “It’s not a conversation I want to have, but no doubt she’s heard worse.”

“That’s true,” Sam said. “You go for it, Jonas. We support you.”

Fiona waved them into the kitchen, where they leaned against the counters. The silver bar was gone, which Rafe had expected. His brothers gave him the same “You see?” look, to which he simply shrugged. He was more worried about condoms than silver bars at the moment.

“Rafe wants to tell you something,” Jonas said. “Right, Rafe?”

He gulped, straightened. “I guess so.” He flashed Jonas an irate glare with his eyes. “Judah has departed.”

Fiona nodded. “He said he longed to test his mettle on the back of an angry bull. I told him to have at it. Judah’s been restless lately.”

Rafe swallowed again. “Aunt Fiona,” he said carefully, not

sure how to begin, and then Sam said, “Oh, come on. It’s not that hard.”

Rafe gave his brother a heated look, wishing he could swing his boot against Sam’s backside.

“Spit it out,” Fiona said. “You’re acting like you have something horrible to tell me. I’ve got butterflies jumping in my stomach just looking at you, like the time you came to tell me you’d burned down the schoolhouse. You hadn’t, but you thought you had—”

Rafe cleared his throat. “Creed gave us all boxes of prank condoms at his bachelor party as a send-off.”

Fiona looked at him. “Prank condoms?”

He nodded. “Different colors, different, uh, styles. In the box, there were ‘trick’ condoms. You were supposed to guess which of the twelve was the trick.”

Fiona wrinkled her nose. “What ape thought of that?”

“Creed,” Sam and Jonas said.

“I mean, the product.” Fiona sighed. “Only an imbecile would buy ... Oh, never mind. None of you were dumb enough not to get the joke, so ha-ha.”

“We hear rumors,” Jonas said, trying to help his brother out, for which Rafe was relieved, “that Darla might be expecting a baby.”

Fiona frowned. “What does that have to do with us?”

“Well, is she?” Sam asked.

“It seems there may be a reason for the marital haste.” Fiona

opened the refrigerator and took out a strawberry icebox pie. She cut them each a generous slice, and the brothers eagerly gathered around with grateful thanks. “I have a Books’n’Bingo Society meeting tonight, and I intend to ask my dear friend about this rumor.”

“Creed thinks,” Sam said, around a mouthful of pie, “that Darla and Judah may have had a ...”

She glanced at him. “Romantic interlude?”

All three brothers nodded.

“Did you ask Judah?” she inquired.

They shook their heads.

She gazed at all of them. “Do we suspect joke condoms might come into play?”

“We fear they might have,” Sam said. “They could have. I threw my Trojan horse away,” he said hastily. “But then, I’m a lawyer. I read fine print. When a box says ‘Gag gift only, not for use in preventing pregnancy,’ I hurl it like a ticking bomb into the nearest trash can.”

“Too bad,” Fiona shot back. “I like babies, and four of you are dragging your feet.”

“Worse than dragging our feet. Judah’s gone away with a broken heart,” Rafe said.

“And the joke may be on him?” Fiona eyed each of them. “You believe Darla’s marrying this other man as a cover for a relationship she may have had with Judah?”

“What we’re theorizing,” Jonas said, “is that he may have

thought the condoms *were* the gag gift, not that they were useless.” Jonas sighed. “I, too, threw Creed’s gift in the trash. I didn’t want hot-pink condom sex with anyone I know.”

They all looked at him with raised brows.

“I threw mine away, too,” Rafe admitted. “I’m afraid of children. At least I think I am. Or maybe I’m afraid of getting married,” he said cheerfully. “When I watched Creed go down like a tranquilized bull, I said, ‘Rafe, you are not your twin.’”

“It’s possible Judah tossed them as well,” Fiona said. “And for all we know, Darla isn’t pregnant, although I wouldn’t bank on it at this point.” She wrapped up the strawberry pie and returned it to the fridge. “Rafe, run upstairs and look in Judah’s nightstand, since that’s where he stayed that night because of the wedding guest housing situation.”

“Not me,” Rafe said, “I never snoop.”

Fiona elevated a brow. “We can’t let him go all over several states rodeoing and maybe scattering his seed, so to speak. If he took the condoms with him, and if he honestly needs glasses so much that he can’t read a box—”

“Who reads the label on a box of condoms besides Sam?” Rafe said. “You just whip the foil packet out and—”

“Go,” Fiona said. “Your brother’s future may be at stake.”

“I’m not doing it,” Rafe said, and he meant it.

Fiona plucked three straws from a broom. “Draw,” she told the brothers. “Short straw plays detective.”

A moment later, Rafe held the short straw. “It’s not fair,”

he grumbled. "I'm the existential one in the family. I believe in reading, and thinking deep thoughts, not nosing into places I don't belong." But he went up the stairs. In his heart Rafe knew that Judah and Darla belonged together. But they couldn't just fall into each other's arms and make it easy on everybody. "Leaving me with the difficult tasks," he muttered, reluctantly opening his brother's nightstand.

And there was the black box of joke condoms with the hot-pink smiley faces, peace signs and lip prints.

"Hurry up!" Fiona bellowed from the stairs. "You're not panning for gold! The suspense is killing us."

Rafe grunted. He opened the box.

There were nine left.

"Uh-oh," he muttered, and went downstairs with his report.

"Three?" Fiona said, when Rafe revealed his findings. "Three have been ... are missing?" She looked distressed. "I hope Judah hasn't had more than one situation where such an item might be called for."

They all looked at her, their faces questioning.

"One woman," Fiona clarified, and they all said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, right."

The brothers glanced at each other, worried.

Rafe shifted. "What do we do now?"

They all gazed expectantly at Fiona. This was the counsel they had come to hear.

She shrugged and put on her wrap. "Nothing you can do. No

one can save a man if he decides to give up his ground to the enemy. Faint heart never won fair lady and all that. Good night, nephews,” she said. “Wish me luck at bingo tonight!”

And she tootled out the door.

The brothers looked after her.

“That was not helpful,” Sam said.

“I agree,” Rafe said. “I thought she’d give us the typical, in-depth Fiona strategy.”

“She’s right,” Jonas said. “And we should be taking notes to remember this unfortunate episode in our brother’s life.”

“We probably won’t,” Rafe said morosely, and sat down to finish his pie. “I heard once that men are slow learners.” And he wasn’t going to tell anyone that it was Judge Julie Jenkins, next-door ranch owner and Bode’s daughter, who had thrown that pearl of wisdom at his head.

DARLA LOOKED AT Jackie Callahan, co-owner of the Magic Wedding Dress Shop. “Pull harder,” she said. “I’m not letting out my dress. I just bought it.”

Jackie tugged at the fabric. “The satin just doesn’t want to give. And I don’t think it’s good for the baby... .”

Darla looked at herself in the triple mirror. “I’ve been eating a lot of strawberries. I crave them.”

“That shouldn’t cause so much weight gain,” Jackie said. “Not that you look like you’ve gained *so* very much.”

“On ice cream,” Darla said, aware that her friend was trying to be tactful. “Strawberries on top of vanilla ice cream.”

“Oh.” Jackie looked at her. “Maybe switch to frozen yogurt?”

“There’s only a week before the wedding. I think the waistline isn’t going backward on the measuring tape.” She looked at herself, turning around slowly, and then frowned. “Something’s not right.”

“I think the dress is beautiful on you.”

“Thank you,” Darla murmured. “I’m not sure what’s not quite right, but there’s definitely something.”

“Nerves?” Jackie said. “Brides get them. They want everything to be perfect. We’ve certainly seen our share of Nervous Nells in here.”

“I’m not nervous,” Darla said. *What I am is not in love. And that’s what’s wrong. I’m not in love with the man I’m marrying. And he’s not in love with me.*

“Do you want to try a different gown?” Jackie asked, and Darla shook her head.

“No. This one will do.” She went to change. The gown was not what was wrong. She could wear a paper bag, or a gown fit for a royal princess, and it wouldn’t matter.

“Well,” Jackie said as Darla came back out, “I think I know what the problem is.”

She looked at her, hoping her dear friend, business partner and maid of honor didn’t.

“You’re not wearing the magic wedding dress,” Jackie said. “You always said it was your dream gown.” She smiled at Darla. “It worked for me.”

Darla's gaze slid to the magic wedding dress. It was true. Ever since Sabrina McKinley had brought the gown to her, saying that it brought true luck to the wearer, she had known it was the only gown for her. It was the most beautiful, magical dress she'd ever seen. Sparkly and iridescent, it made her catch her breath.

But she couldn't wear it, not to marry someone she didn't love with all her heart. She was fond of her fiancé. Dr. Sidney Tunstall was a perfect match on paper. Even he'd said that. He needed a wife for his career, and she ... well, she needed not to think about the fact that somehow she'd gotten pregnant by Judah Callahan even though she knew he'd conscientiously used a condom every time they'd made love that incredible night.

He would never believe this was his baby.

"I don't think I believe in magic," Darla said.

Jackie looked at her. "Magic is what we sell."

"I know," Darla said, "but these days, I'm concentrating on the practical." *Practical, not romantic. No magic, just the bare business proposal. And one day, I'll tell Judah the truth—after I've backed it up with a DNA test.*

She'd had hopes that he was in love with her—but she knew better. Hijacking a guy just because he'd spent one evening giving her the pleasure of her life was no way to win his heart. And especially not when he'd been so very careful with protection. Judah was definitely a hunk who didn't want to get caught. He'd always been the favorite of the ladies, and he never stayed with just one.

Practical. That was how it had to be.

JUDAH WAS INTO LIVING lucky. That was his new approach. He was going to swing by his tail in the jungle of life until he beat the jungle back. He was feeling mean and tough, and resolved to win. Focused.

He put his entry in for the rodeo in Los Rios, New Mexico, and smiled at the cute brunette who took his money.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Judah,” she said. “Where have you been hiding?”

“On the ranch.” He didn’t want to think about Rancho Diablo right now. “But now I’m back, and I plan on winning. How many entries are there?”

“Nearly a hundred, all events totaled. You’re just in time. We were about to close registration.”

“Then I’m lucky,” he said.

“You could get luckier,” she said with a smile.

He took that in, maybe half tempted, then shrugged. “You’re too good for me, darlin’,” he said. He winked at her and headed off to find some drinking buddies, telling himself that he hadn’t accepted the brunette’s generous offer because he was in a dark mood—really dark. Refusing her hadn’t anything to do with Darla Cameron.

But thinking about Darla reminded him that she was marrying another man, and he definitely didn’t want to think darker thoughts than necessary, so he pushed her out of his mind. Broken hearts were a dime a dozen, so his wasn’t special. He

headed to the bar, glad to see some cowboys he knew.

He was welcomed up to the bar with loud greetings.

“You’re in?” someone asked, and Judah nodded.

“I’m taking nine months on the circuit to see what I can do. If I can break even and stay healthy, maybe I’ll stay until I’m old and gray.” He took the beer that the bartender handed him, raising it to the crowd. “And one for all my friends.”

His buddies cheered. Judah grinned. This was what he needed. A buddy chorus of men who understood life as he did.

The little brunette slid into the bar, sending a smile his way. Female companionship wouldn’t kill him, either. He couldn’t slobber in his beer over Darla forever.

He’d left his condoms at home.

And that was probably lucky, too. Judah sighed and looked at his already empty bottle. He didn’t need to sleep with a female. He needed Darla, but Darla—damn her lovely just-right-for-him body—didn’t need him at all. Just when he’d finally kissed the princess of his dreams—after forgoing the temptation for years—the princess had turned into a faithless frog.

Which just showed you that fairy tales had it all wrong. It wasn’t the woman who always kissed the frog—sometimes it was the guy who got gigged.

Chapter Three

Darla wondered if she was making the right decision. Her whole world reeled as she left the doctor's office.

Twins. She was having twins. It was the last thing she'd expected to hear at her prenatal checkup. And now she knew why she was getting so big so fast, why her wedding gown was already tight. And her babies' father was the wildest of the Callahans.

Her phone rang, startling her. The display read Rancho Diablo. She didn't necessarily want to talk to Fiona at the moment, but a friendly voice was probably just what she needed. "Hello?"

"Darla, it's Sam Callahan. Get your jeans on, doll. We'll be by in five minutes to pick you up."

"Why?"

"We're getting up a convoy to go watch Judah ride. He needs all the hometown support he can get. He's in the finals, and we're borrowing Fiona's party van to take the cheering squad over to Los Rios. So get your boots on and put the cat out for the night."

She didn't have a cat, nor any reason to follow this Pied Piper. Nothing good could come of it. "Sam—"

"And we're picking up Jackie, Sabrina and Julie just for fun. You don't want to be the only girl left in town, do you?"

Put that way, no. But she was getting married in four days, and she was having twins. She was exhausted.

Then again, the last thing she wanted to do was sit around and think about how her life had spun out of control. And if everybody was going to the rodeo, what harm was there in going, too? “I’ll bring my pom-poms.”

“That’s my girl,” Sam said. “We’ll take good care of you.”

She hung up, feeling like a moth attracted to a bright, hot light. “All right, babies. We’re going to go see Daddy ride a big piece of steak around an arena. Your first rodeo.”

Her children might go to rodeos for years, and they would never know that strong, handsome Judah Callahan was their father. She shivered, thinking about that one wonderful night in his arms.

It would never happen again.

FIONA, RAFE AND JONAS waited as Sam hung up the phone.

“No woman wants to be left out of a party.” Sam grinned. “Just like you said, Aunt Fiona.”

She nodded. “Now remember, when two immovable objects are forced to move into the same space—”

“It’s highly combustible,” Rafe said. “Your play on physics is unique, Aunt.”

She nodded again. “And remember step two... .”

“I feel like a spy,” Jonas said. “You’d better not ever play any of these tricks on me, redoubtable aunt.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t *think* of it,” Fiona said, her eyes round.

Her nephews grunted in unison, not falling for that, and

headed off to pick up the other ladies.

“Did you hear my oldest nephew, Burke, my love?”

“I did.” He placed a gentle kiss against her temple. “I do believe he offered you a challenge.”

Fiona smiled. “That’s exactly what I heard, too. And I wouldn’t dream of not accepting a challenge.”

JUDAH WASN’T NERVOUS about his rides. He’d almost been carried by angel’s wings on every one so far, so high did his bulls buck and thrash, so easily did he hit eight on every ride. Never in his life had he ridden so well. Somehow the bulls he’d drawn were rank, and somehow, he was unbeatable. If rodeo could always be so easy ... and yet, in all his years of rodeoing, he’d never ridden like this. He was living in the moment, blessed by the rodeo-loving gods.

And then it happened. He was sitting outside, thinking about his next ride, pondering the bull he’d drawn—Lightfoot Bill was known for tricks, and better cowboys than him had come flying off—when the hometown crowd came whooping and hollering over to him. It wasn’t a huge scene they made, just enough to let him know they’d brought practically every one of their friends, including Darla Cameron.

She was definitely pregnant. Even he, who had little experience with the changes of a woman’s body, could see that the lady he loved was with child. Her tummy protruded despite the pretty blue dress she wore, and if his eyes didn’t deceive him her breasts were taking on the shape of sweet cantaloupes.

Yum.

She was beautiful, Madonna-like. Judah's heart thundered as he met Darla's gaze.

His concentration went haywire. "Hello, Darla," he said, and she said, "Hi, Judah. Good luck."

And then she went inside the arena, and the other ladies kissed his cheek and wished him a long ride, and his brothers clapped him on the back with hearty thuds, telling him he was *the man!*

But he didn't feel like *the man*. What man wanted to see his ladylove pregnant by another guy? The thought cramped his gut.

He was a wimp. A romantic fool.

He dragged himself inside. A couple of his brothers rallied around, giving him a pep talk he didn't hear. "Why'd you bring her?" he asked dully.

"Who?" Rafe asked.

"Darla." He couldn't speak her name without feeling pain.

"We couldn't leave her behind," Sam said. "Now buck up, bro, and think about your ride. I heard Lightfoot took his last rider for a spin into the boards."

"Yeah." That rider had busted his leg and would be out for a few months. Judah put his mouth guard in, a preride ritual that always focused his mind on the next few moments.

His mind wouldn't cooperate. "She's beautiful," he said, and Sam said, "What?"

Judah couldn't form words clearly around the mouth guard and his rattled brain. It didn't matter. Darla wasn't his, wasn't

ever going to be his, and that baby she was carrying was going to have a rodeo doctor for a daddy. Not him.

And then he realized why Darla was here. She hadn't come to see him. Her fiancé—husband-to-be in just a few days—was working the rodeo tonight.

“Well, I'm not going to need his services,” he said, and Sam said, “What, ass? I can't hear you with that mouth guard in. Why'd you put it in if you were going to go all Oprah on me?”

Lightfoot Bill was in the chute. Judah got on the rails.

It was time to score big. All he needed was to keep riding like he'd been riding—and then it wouldn't matter that his heart was blown out.

Nothing was about to matter, except hanging on.

DARLA DIDN'T KNOW when she'd ever been so nervous. Jackie held her hand, and Sabrina McKinley clutched her fingers on the other side. “Having any visions?” Darla asked Sabrina. “Only that you're having twins,” Sabrina whispered back.

Darla looked at her in shock. “You really are psychic, aren't you?”

“I was teasing. Nice to know I can occasionally guess right.” Sabrina smiled at her. “He'll be fine. At least I hope so.”

Darla hoped the row of Callahan men behind them—and most especially Fiona—hadn't heard her big news. “Don't tell anyone. I'm still trying to get over the shock.”

Sabrina laughed, and Jonas said, “What's so funny? My brother's about to ride down there.” So the women shared an eye

roll and went back to watching the arena.

The gate swung open and the bull came out jacked and on a mission. Darla was pretty certain her breath completely stopped. She didn't realize she was squeezing Jackie's and Sabrina's hands until the buzzer went off.

The brothers jumped to their feet, cheering for Judah. So did everyone else from Diablo. Darla sat back down, closing her eyes for a moment, awash in conflicting emotions. Judah scared her to death. He loved living dangerously. He always had. Her heart had always been drawn to that. She herself was practical, calculating risks and making sure she stayed in a safe zone.

She wasn't safe anymore. She was wildly in love with Judah Callahan, and in four days she was marrying someone who was not the father of her children. Her babies' father was down there being congratulated, so far away from her they might as well be in different hemispheres.

Judah's score shot him into second place, and Darla tried to breathe.

"Man, that was something!" Jonas said. "That bull laid out all the tricks it knew to get Judah off."

"He's got to be happy with that score," Rafe said. "Now, if he can just keep it going."

Darla closed her eyes, wishing she'd never agreed to come. The nurse in her wished Judah had a safer calling; the practical side of her knew he was doing what he loved best.

Which was why she hadn't said a word to him about being a

father.

“You’ll have to tell him sooner or later,” Sabrina said.

Darla stared at her. “Tell him what?” she asked, hoping her secret was still safe.

“That he’s going to be a dad,” her friend said.

“Hey, Sabrina,” Fiona said from behind them. “I’m thinking about hiring you away from Bode. What would you say to that?”

They all turned to look at the older woman.

“Is that wise?” Sam asked. “Not that I don’t approve, but won’t that get Bode on you all over again?”

Fiona shrugged. “I’m in the mood to annoy Bode.”

Burke said, “We could really use the extra help. There’s been so many babies, and Fiona wants to spend all her time holding them.”

Darla felt her heart drop again. Her children would never be part of the love in the Callahan household. It was their rightful place. There were a lot of people at Rancho Diablo who would love the twins, if they knew about them. And she had no right keeping Judah in the dark.

Suddenly, Darla knew Sabrina was right. She had to find a way to tell Judah—before she said “I do.”

It wasn’t going to be easy, and he probably wouldn’t believe her. But her children deserved an honest start in life—no secret-baby surprises. Her gaze found Judah in the arena—though she should have been looking at her rodeo physician fiancé—and it seemed Judah glanced her way before he disappeared.

I'll tell him tonight.

IT WASN'T JUDAH'S POLICY to make love to a woman the night before a big ride. He had two more rides tomorrow. He was sitting on a big score tonight—second place was sitting pretty. It left him room to chase, but he wasn't the target. Second was great.

Therefore, lovemaking was the last thing on his mind.

Well, not the last thing. Every time he glanced up at Darla in the stands, looking like a hot dream, he had to fight his mind to focus.

He wasn't planning on making love.

But when she came to him and asked him if he had five minutes to talk to her—alone—a devil jumped to life inside him. “My room's across the street.”

She stared at him, her cheeks pink. Oh, he knew her fiancé was here. He'd spoken to the good doc at least five times tonight. He didn't hold a grudge against the man.

If he held a grudge against anyone, Judah thought, it was this woman. She'd snared his heart, then trashed it. He didn't feel bad about reminding her that she'd once been behind a locked door with him.

“I can't go to your room.” Darla's face was pale.

“Then talk here.” He crossed his arms. “I'm listening.”

“I can't talk to you here,” she said, glancing around. “Isn't there someplace we can talk privately?”

Judah shrugged and turned back to taking off his gear. “My

room.”

She took a deep breath. “All right.”

He was surprised that she relented. “Here’s my key. I’ll be there in five.” He handed it to her, and she snatched it, looking around furtively, which almost made him smile. Darla did not do sneaky well. She was more sweet than sneaky. She must have something big on her mind if she was willing to rendezvous with him. Idly, he wondered about it, decided he’d never understand the mysteries of the female mind, and promptly dismissed it. She was probably going to do the guilt trip thing, like how the night they’d spent together hadn’t meant anything, and now that she was getting married, if he would keep the little detail about their evening under his hat, she’d be eternally grateful, blah-blah-blah.

He’d act as if it hadn’t meant a thing to him, either, and let her go on to her newly married life with a clear conscience.

But first he let her stew in her juices for a little bit. Then he followed after her, tapping on his door. She let him in.

“Well? What’s so urgent?” He put *I’m a busy man* in his voice, so she’d get her soliloquy over with, thereby sparing both of them the agony.

Darla’s eyes were huge as she stared at him; he could tell she was nervous. Judah kept his gaze away from her belly. Looking at her, knowing she was pregnant, was killing him. No man should be in love with a woman and know she was carrying another man’s child.

“I’m pregnant.”

"I can see that. Congratulations."

"Thank you." She swallowed. "Congratulations to you as well."

"Yeah. It was a lucky ride. I need a couple more tomorrow." He didn't look toward his bed, because if he did, he'd be tempted to drag Darla there. And he was a gentleman. Barely.

"I mean, congratulations to you, because you're having a baby, too."

He laughed. "Not me. I'm—" He stopped, looked at her carefully. Her face was drained of color. "You're not saying—"

She nodded. "I'm afraid so."

He stared at her, gazing deep into her eyes. Darla was not a dishonest woman. She wouldn't tell him this unless she believed it to be true. "I don't get it. How?"

"I don't know! Maybe there was a tear." She glared at him. "You'd know better than me."

He blinked. The condoms had been given to him by Creed at his bachelor party. The side of the box had read *For The Guy Who's Large and In Charge*. Judah remembered vaguely thinking all that might be true, and that it was pretty damn competitive of Creed to try to keep the other brothers from getting themselves in the family way, just so he could stay in the lead for the ranch.

Judah sank into a cracked vinyl chair near a tiny round table. "Why are you telling me this now?"

She breathed in deeply, obviously trying to calm herself. "I wasn't going to tell you at all. But then I realized that was wrong.

I don't want to have secret babies.”

“Babies?” His heart ground to a halt in his chest. “*Babies?*”

She nodded. “We’re having twins.”

Judah’s world opened up, chasmlike. His pulse jumped, more fiercely than when he’d been on the back of Lightfoot. “You say we’re—”

“Yes.”

He passed a hand across his forehead, realized he was sweating under his hat. “I don’t mean to be coarse, but how do you know that you’re pregnant by me and not by your fiancé?” He wasn’t about to say the man’s name.

“Because I’ve never slept with him.”

“Why not? Not to be indelicate—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Darla said. “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

Maybe the man was an idiot. Maybe his thing didn’t work. Judah couldn’t believe that a guy who was fortunate enough to get a ring on Darla’s finger wouldn’t be making love to her like a madman every night. “Every man has *that* kind of relationship, darlin’.”

She wore embarrassment like a heavy winter cloak. “When Sid asked me to marry him, we agreed on a business relationship. That’s it, and no more.”

Sid. Judah leaned back, trying to take in everything he was hearing. “That’s why you were so eager to get in my bed that night. You wanted a good time before you tied yourself to this

business relationship.”

She hadn't been interested in business with Judah.

A blush crossed her cheeks. “I—yes. And I'm not sorry about it. Even now.”

“Nice to know you don't regret it.” He couldn't help the sour tone in his voice. “So what does Tunstall think about you being pregnant?”

Darla stared him down. “It was unexpected, obviously, but he's not opposed to being a father.”

Judah jumped to his feet, crossing to her. “Let me tell you something, Darla Cameron. If you're telling the truth—and something tells me you are—no one will be a father to my children but me. Let's just get that straight up front.” He studied her, deciding it was time this relationship got on the right track. “Something's going to have to change about your wedding plans, sweetheart.”

Darla shook her head at him. Judah was angry. She'd expected anger, but not his statement about her wedding. “What exactly does that mean?”

He went back to his chair, dropping into it with an enigmatic smile shadowing his lips. “It means you've got the tiger by the tail, and now you're going to have to tame it. I shouldn't have to spell anything out for you. You knew when you told me this that your wedding to the good doc was never going to happen.”

“I know no such thing!”

“You're not marrying another man while you're carrying my

children. So put all that out of your sweet head.”

Darla felt her own stubbornness rise. “I’m not having children out of wedlock when I’ve got a perfectly good groom planning to be my husband, Judah. It’s no inconvenience to you if I’m married. You’re not planning on being around.”

She could see by Judah’s expression that he was fighting to be civil. But he didn’t have the right to tell her how to run her life.

“It’ll be inconvenient for you when two grooms are standing at the altar with you on your wedding day,” Judah said.

“You’re not suggesting that you want to marry me?”

He nodded. “If you’re pregnant by me, the only man you’re marrying is me. That’s the way *I* do business, babe.”

Annoyance rose inside her. “Not that I expect romance in a proposal, but I don’t want to be told what I’m going to do, either.”

“And I don’t want to be told that I’m going to be a father, and that someone else is planning to raise my children.” He gave her a determined stare. “I’m being very reasonable, under the circumstances.”

This was awful. No woman wanted the man she loved this way. Darla wished she could walk out the door and forget these past ten minutes had ever happened. But she couldn’t. Her pride couldn’t be the most important thing to her right now—she had her children’s welfare to consider. “I’ll think about your proposal,” she said coolly, going to the door.

“You do that, and don’t forget to tell the good doc your business merger’s off.” Judah followed, putting his hand on the

doorknob to open the door for her—at least that’s what she thought he was going to do—before pressing his lips against her cheek, his stubble grazing her skin ever so slightly. “Just so you know, Darla, I don’t plan on mixing business with my marriage.”

His meaning was unmistakable. His hand moved to her waist in a possessive motion, lingering at her hip just for a second, capturing her. She remembered everything—how good he’d made her feel, how magical the night in his arms had been—and wished his proposal was made from love and not possessiveness.

Judah pulled the door open. “Next time I see you will be at the altar. Till death do us part, darlin’.”

Darla stared at him for a long, wary second before stalking off.

If Judah Callahan thought she was going to marry a hard-headed, mule-stubborn man like him, then he was in for a shock.

Chapter Four

Judah had never been one to let someone else fight his battles. So it wasn't even a stretch for him to hunt up Dr. Sidney Tunstall. The good doctor was taking a breather in a bar down the street, which was good because Judah needed a drink himself.

First things first. "Tunstall," he said, seating himself next to the ex-bronc buster. "We have business to discuss."

Sidney put down his beer and gave him a long look. "Do we?"

Judah nodded. "I think it's only fair to let you know that you'll be hearing from Darla that your wedding is off."

The doctor raised a brow. "And how would you know?"

"Because," Judah said, "we just finished having a chat, Darla and I. And we came to the same conclusion. She can't marry you."

Sidney finished his beer, waved for another. "I'll wait to hear that from her, if you don't mind, Callahan."

"See, though, I *do* mind." He put down the money to pay for the beer. Sidney grunted, not about to utter any gratitude, and Judah couldn't blame him. "Darla says she's expecting my children. So that means she'll be taking the Callahan name. *My* name."

Sidney turned. "I happen to know that Darla thinks you're an ass she wishes she'd never met. And she's never mentioned you being the father of her children, so as far as I'm concerned, you're

not even in the picture.” He raised his bottle in a sardonic wave. “Thanks for the brew, but buzz off and let me drink it in peace.”

Judah elected to ignore the insult. “What do you mean, you don’t know about her being pregnant by me?”

The doctor shrugged. “We never talked about it. I don’t need to know everything in her past. And until I know better, you *are* her past.”

Judah slumped on his bar stool for a moment. He couldn’t be mad at Tunstall—the man clearly wasn’t in possession of all the facts. Just like a woman to leave out important details. Judah stood, tossed some tip money on the bar. “Look, Tunstall, you’re an innocent party here, so I’m going to cut you some slack. But don’t get in my way. I’ll be standing at the altar with Darla, I’ll be raising my own sons, and that’s just the way it is.”

“Maybe,” Sidney said, “and maybe not.”

The man had no idea how thin Judah’s temper was at the moment. It was all he could do not to pound good sense into him. But Darla was the person he needed to be setting straight, so he took a deep breath and sauntered off to collect his wits before his rides tomorrow.

It wasn’t going to be easy. His concentration had never been so scattered.

He couldn’t decide if it was suddenly finding himself altar-bound or becoming a father that had him the most bent.

“*HOW DARE YOU?*” Darla demanded when Judah made it to his motel room an hour later, where she was waiting outside

the door. He cast an appreciative eye over the snapping fire in her blue eyes, and her long blond hair. She looked like an angel, but she was going to bless him out like a she-devil.

Which meant that Tunstall had given her the bad news. And that suited Judah just fine.

“I dare,” he said, unlocking his door and stepping inside his room with her on his heels, “because that’s what I do. *I dare.*”

Her lips compressed for a moment. “You have no right to interfere.”

He tossed his hat into the chair. “Just one man chatting with another. Don’t get your panties in a twist over it, sugar.” Grinning, he pulled a beer from the six-pack his brothers had thoughtfully left in his room, satisfied that matters should be straight as an arrow between him and his buttercup.

“I’m not going to marry you, Judah.” Darla’s chin rose, and her tiny nose nearly pointed at his chin. He so badly wanted to run his finger down her face and tell her everything was going to be just fine, if she’d only settle down and let him take care of her.

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow after I ride. There’s a lot of things we’ll have to plan, like naming my sons. You’ll need to enroll in a prenatal yoga class, too. I hear it’s very beneficial for the mother and the babies.”

Darla’s cheeks went pink. “I’m leaving now,” she told him, “and I *am* marrying Sidney. Quit trying to take over my life.”

“Whew,” Judah said, pulling her close against his chest. “You’ll know when I’m trying to take over your life, babe. I’ll say,

‘Get in my bed,’ and you’ll go happily because you’ll know I’m going to make you feel like a princess.”

Irate as Darla was, she leaned into him, and for a moment, completely relaxed.

But she suddenly pulled herself away and marched to the door. “Not a chance, Judah. Goodbye.”

THE NEXT DAY Darla carried the magic wedding dress to the back of the store where she couldn’t see it. Lately, it had begun to call to her with a siren song of such temptation that she could barely resist it.

“Just try on the gown,” Jackie urged. But Darla didn’t want to fashion hopes and dreams through simple fabric.

“I don’t need fairy tales and magic in my life. I’m making a solid, practical decision to marry a man who’s as even-keeled as I am. Judah is a winter wind blowing through a canyon. I could never rely on him.”

“But he’s the father of your children,” Jackie said. “You don’t want to do something in the heat of passion, Darla.”

“I already did that,” she replied, “which is why I’m choosing to be quite selective with my children’s futures now. Sidney will be a good father. He comes from a very small family, and has always wanted a large one. We’re good friends. I’ll be an organized, supportive doctor’s wife.” Darla stowed the magic wedding gown in the very back of the stock closet, behind back-stock dresses. It did lure her. Sometimes in the night, she could hear a faint rustle of musical chimes, like an antique jewelry box opening to play

a lilting melody. The dress was beautiful.

And she wanted it so badly. But she wouldn't admit that to Jackie. Darla wanted to believe in romance and dreams and fairy tales, just like any other bride. Yet she couldn't afford any mistakes. Her whole makeup was geared toward thoughtful, careful decision making. There really wasn't any room for loving a bonehead like Judah.

Unfortunately for her, that bonehead made her body shiver and ache every time she thought of him. It was like that wild winter wind blew over her skin, reminding her of how much she loved him.

But that was the problem. She did love Judah—and she was just another responsibility for him, much like the ranch, and his family, and rodeo. Nothing special or different. Something he had to rule over, boss, command. Before their night together, he'd never spoken to her, nothing more than a passing hello and chitchat about the weather. And he hadn't so much as sought her out at the store since that night, either.

A woman knew when she was the object of a man's passions, and she wasn't that to Judah. He was too wild for her, too unsettled for a woman who liked calm rational choices in her life. Judah was her one moment of reckless abandon—and it didn't take a psychic gift to know they were not meant to be.

"Speaking of psychic," Darla said, and Jackie glanced up.

"Were we?" she asked.

"No, but is Sabrina really going to work for Fiona?"

“I think so. Why?”

“Because I was thinking about asking her if she wanted to work in the shop while I’m out after the babies are born. You can’t do it all by yourself,” Darla said, staying in practical mode.

“I’ll be fine,” Jackie assured her.

“You have three little ones. We need backup.”

The door swung open, sending the bells over the shop door tinkling. Judah strolled in, the man of her dreams obviously on a mission, judging by the hot gleam in his eyes. Darla’s heart jumped into overdrive.

“We need to talk,” he stated, and Jackie said, “I’ll be heading out for a coffee break. Nice ride last night, Judah.”

He tipped his hat to her, and when the door swung shut behind her, he put the closed sign in the window.

“You can’t close my shop,” Darla said.

“We have to talk.”

“Not while I’m working.”

“The brides of Diablo will just have to wait while you take a fruit and juice break.” He handed her a small bag. “Organic. Every bite.”

She began to seethe. “I eat healthy, Judah. You don’t need to concern yourself with my diet.”

He nodded. “A husband takes care of his wife.”

“Not to point out the obvious—”

He handed her a box. “Darla, you have to quit being so stubborn.”

“What’s this?” She eyed the small dark box as if it were a bomb.

“What a man gives a woman he wants to marry.” He grinned, clearly pleased with himself.

She handed it back. “I’ll keep the organic breakfast. You can keep your Pandora’s box.”

He put it on the counter. “If you don’t want me to romance you, I’ll stop.”

“Thank you.” She folded her arms.

He shrugged. “If that’s the way you want it.”

She didn’t say anything to confirm his statement because it really wasn’t the way she wanted it. But under the circumstances, “no” was the only option. Judah was a conqueror. He wanted to bulldoze her ivory tower and take her prisoner—but letting him do so would be a mistake.

“Why aren’t you at the rodeo?”

“I can’t ride when I’m all torn up like this.”

That stopped her. She checked his eyes for signs of amusement, found none. Surely he was jesting, though. Judah wasn’t a man whose emotions ruled his life. He was all action, sometimes even brave, fearless action. She again checked his expression for teasing, but he looked just as deadly serious as he had a moment ago. It was like gazing into the eyes of an Old West gunslinger in a classic movie: resolute, determined, honest.

She caught her breath. “We don’t know each other at all.”

He looked at her. “We know each other well enough to be

parents.”

“It’s not enough, Judah. Marriage between two people who don’t love each other is a mistake.”

“So marrying Sidney would be just as big a mistake,” he pointed out.

She took a step back. “I meant that marrying you when you never loved me would be a mistake. And you can’t say that you do, Judah.”

He remained silent, and she felt he’d conceded her point.

“If you’re worried about having access to the children, you’ll always have that.”

“That can be taken care of legally,” Judah growled. “I don’t waste any energy worrying about that.”

She blinked. “Legally?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “I could have Sam draw up custodial papers tonight if I was worried about you keeping me from my children. That’s the least of my concerns.”

“It’s very nice to know that you’ve considered all your options, even as you bring me a token of your questionable affection.”

His lips thinned. “That’s not what I meant.”

She turned away. “It doesn’t matter, Judah. I don’t want to marry you.”

“Guess I’ll have to take the good doc out and ask him what his secret is.”

She whirled around to face him. “There isn’t a secret. We have a lot in common. I like the security of knowing that I’m marrying

someone a lot like me.”

“Sounds boring.” Judah leaned against the counter, giving her a lazy smile. “You’re too sexy to be boring.”

“Sexy?” She looked at him, startled.

“I think so.” He shrugged. “Does Sidney?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know,” Darla said, confused. “I don’t believe so. I mean, why would he?”

Judah grinned at her, and suddenly Darla felt like a mouse in the paws of a playful lion.

“I don’t know why he wouldn’t,” Judah said. “Maybe you should ask ol’ Sid.” He pushed himself away from the counter, approaching her too quickly for her to step away, even if she’d wanted to, which she didn’t. Not really. She was kind of curious to see what new trick he had up his sleeve.

And she wanted him to kiss her. Just once more, to see if it was as good as she remembered.

He stopped in front of her, towering like a strong redwood tree. “I’m sure almost anyone would say that the good doctor is the better man. I know you’ll rest comfortably with your very prudent decision.”

“Quit being a rat,” Darla snapped, and Judah kissed her—on the forehead.

The jerk. She wanted his lips on hers, and she had a feeling he knew it.

“I know when I’m beat.” Judah strode to the door, tipped his hat, then placed it over his heart. “Congratulations. And I’ll let

ol' Sidney know that I have stood aside, his bride having made her choice.”

Darla stared as he flipped the closed sign to Open, and loped down the main street of Diablo. Judah Callahan was the most maddening man she'd ever met. Why she'd ever slept with him, she didn't know.

Passion. She'd wanted one night of passion, which she knew Judah would give her, before she did the practical thing and married Dr. Sidney Tunstall. She'd wanted a lusty bedding before her marriage of convenience shut her up in a gilded prison of diligent routine for the rest of her life.

“I have no regrets,” she murmured, and then her gaze fell on the small jeweler's box Judah had left on the wrap stand, next to the healthy snack he'd brought her.

She glanced once at the door to make certain he wasn't outside spying in on her, ready to tease her if she gave in to temptation. But Judah was long gone. There was a crowd on the sidewalk, so she knew that several women had run to chat with him, Judah being a female magnet like all the Callahan men.

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