

Prologue

Well, it pains me to say that Vanessa—God rest her sweet soul—is not real sure about this next plan me and the boys have hatched.

Ozzie Peyton glanced lovingly at the oil painting of his beloved Vanessa that hung over the stone fireplace. For a moment the flicker of lamplight danced over the delicate blush of her face, and Ozzie could have sworn he saw her cherry lips curve. He gave a smile and turned his attention back to his journal writing. Folks didn't realize he consulted Vanessa about everything he did. They just wouldn't understand.

He licked the end of his medium-tip, black ink pen.

Me and Lloyd and Henry and Vern read a newspaper piece on an outfit out in Los Angeles, California, that held a fancy biddin' auction where the goods was a handsome, interesting date for the night. This shindig was for a charity cause—and that got us to thinkin' we ought to do something like that right here in town. Besides, Vernon pointed out that Shotgun Ridge was as good a cause for charity as anything. After all, we're dying here. In a town with mostly men and hardly any young women, everybody agrees that we're definitely ailing.

I tell you what, though, we've got a pretty darn good start—on getting us some women, that is. Was a little touch-and-go there for a while, but Wyatt Malone is happier than a cow in clover over his new family.

And that's what our cause is all about. Women and babies and families. Vanessa warned me to take it slow, and that's how come we've waited such a spell to make our next move. (That and the fact that none of us wanted to admit we didn't know the first thing about no bachelor auctions.) And the more we got into it, the more nervous we got—especially Lloyd, but I think that was on account of his Mrs. (Iris) jawing at him. She tends to do that a lot, but Lloyd don't seem to mind.

Anyhow, we got to worrying that we might have jumped into a situation where we couldn't at least halfway guarantee the outcome—and I gotta say, controlling the outcome of most anything is a big thing with me. A fault, I'm told, but there it is. Take me as I am.

Vanessa, good woman that she is, never said a cross word or an "I told you so." That's because she always had such faith in me, and that's something that makes a man feel about ten feet tall.

But I'm digressing here. Me and the boys got a mite worried over this here bachelor auction we had planned—and I mean we had it planned. Yessiree, right down to the catered dinner and the requiring of fancy duds. Just so happens there's this new little gal in town who does the best cooking and catering...but more on her at another time.

Right now me and the boys are concentrating on Ethan Callahan. A ladies' man if there ever was one. And a fine catch. But he's so busy lovin' 'em all, he's missing out on the joy of lovin' just the one.

But like I was sayin', this auction shindig threatened to get totally out of our hands, and I'm kind of liking the idea of being able to nudge here and there, to choose just the right match for just the right fellow. 'Cept my mind don't work in a bunch of directions at once, and I like to concentrate on one thing at a time—a hard thing to do when you can't control who's biddin' on who. Me and the boys had a scuffle or two over it—no punches thrown, mind you, but a few verbal barbs. And then, right about the time I was all set to scrap the whole idea, the details fell into place like a lasso over a calf's neck. 'Course we all should have known and trusted that the good Lord does his best work in mysterious ways. (Vanessa had to remind me of that, and I did appreciate it.)

And wouldn't ya just know it, the perfect little filly has turned up....

Never mind Vernon's comment about saints and sinners and babies...I'm not questioning the Man Upstairs on this one!

Chapter 1

Ethan Callahan tugged at the collar of his tuxedo shirt. He owned two of these penguin suits, was comfortable in them, but he'd just as soon be wearing his jeans and hat.

He couldn't believe he'd actually let the old folks railroad him into this ridiculous bachelor auction. A black-tie affair at Brewer's Saloon, of all places. Owned by Lloyd and Iris Brewer, it was down-home cooking, jukebox tunes and the gathering place for friends and visitors to the town of Shotgun Ridge, Montana.

"Well, now. You look right dapper," Ozzie Peyton said. "You bet."

"I feel like an idiot." He half glared at the three old fellas who considered themselves the town matchmakers. The fourth was out in the main room of the saloon on a makeshift stage gleefully emceeding the auction.

They'd gotten it into their heads that the town needed women and babies. And their latest scheme to accomplish that goal was this bachelor auction.

Well they could just turn their sights on someone else. Ethan had no intention of getting married and having babies. He liked his life just the way it was, thank you very much.

He'd agreed to be auctioned off. One date. One night. Fairly harmless if a man stayed on his toes. And if he were to be totally honest, he'd have to admit that it could be fun. He loved women, considered himself a connoisseur of sorts, so a date with one wouldn't be a hardship at all.

But he wasn't going to admit that to any one of the four old matchmakers. They were too full of themselves as it was.

"I don't know why you won't just let me write you a check. You know I can afford to give you a lot more than you'll make on this fiasco."

"Oh, stop your fussin' and your braggin'," Ozzie admonished, giving a tug to Ethan's bow tie.

Ethan smothered a grin as he looked down at Shotgun Ridge's mayor. Seventy-something, Ozzie was still sharp as a tack,

with steel-gray hair and piercing blue eyes. The man meddled, but he was genuinely goodhearted. And he was acting kind of strange, fidgety.

"She should've been here." Ozzie muttered to himself.

"Who?"

The old man's hand stilled, then he brushed at a nonexistent speck of lint on Ethan's tuxedo jacket, his vivid eyes wide with false innocence. "No one, uh, I mean Iris should have been back here by now to get you."

That was a blatant lie, and Ethan started to get a bad feeling. He remembered what the four meddlers had done to his neighbor and friend, Wyatt Malone. Presented him with a mail-order bride. Hannah and her son, Ian, were exactly what Wyatt had needed, and Ethan had even found himself aiding and abetting. *Matchmaking*, he thought with a shudder—but he wasn't going to be caught in the same trap. "What are you up to, Ozzie?"

"I've never known you to be dense, son." Ozzie gave him a pitying look. "We're up to a bachelor auction, that's what. You bet. And I just imagine a fair amount of these ladies will want to stay right here in Shotgun Ridge. A fine class they are, too. They got money to buy a date, they're likely high quality, and if they take it in their heads to migrate here to our fine town, well that's just a bonus."

"Ozzie Peyton, you're sounding like a snob."

"I am not." He looked appalled. "Rich or poor, an executive or a... a church girl, they'll be welcome. Now put on that lady-killer smile and get ready to go on the stage. I'll just run on out and see how things are going. You bet."

Ozzie rushed out, and Ethan felt nerves crowd in. For crying out loud, it was only a little acting, a stroll down a raised plywood stage, a couple of turns. He was master of his own destiny, he reminded himself, a sophisticated man. He'd once dated a press secretary at the White House and dined with the president. He could handle five minutes on a stage.

As much as he pretended to gripe, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for Ozzie Peyton or this town. He owed them.

But when he got home, he was going to kill his two brothers for hightailing it out of town and abandoning him this way.

"Okay, Ethan, you're on." Vern and Henry all but shoved him through the swinging saloon doors and onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've got a treat for sure," Lloyd extolled, his voice booming through the microphone. "This here's our major beef—not to disparage any of our other fine bachelors, mind you."

Major beef? For the love of God, Ethan felt his face heat with the flush of embarrassment.

"Our next and final bachelor up for bid is Ethan Callahan. A fine catch, I'm telling you. A renown horse breeder residing right here in Shotgun Ridge. If it's a fancy five-star dinner in a swanky city you've a hankering for, or a hike through Yellowstone, this man has the means to make your dreams come true. He'll fly you there in his own personal airplane or squire you in one of his flashy cars—though I'm sure there's a sin somewhere in owning more than one pleasure vehicle," Lloyd added dryly.

Hoots and hollers ensued, and it was just the thing to relax Ethan. He was extremely proud of every one of his toys, from the 'Vette to the chopper. And if Lloyd teasingly hinted that it was gluttony to own three cars as well as all the other stuff, so be it. Pastor Lucas would just have to pray harder over Ethan's soul.

Because Ethan was a man who loved to have fun. And from the sound and enthusiasm of this crowd, they were definitely festive and out for a good time.

Okay, he thought, grinning and winking at a brunette in gold sequins. *I can get into this.*

Unbuttoning his tuxedo jacket, he slid a hand in one pocket of his trousers and poured on the charm, working the crowd of women who were raising their hands faster than Lloyd could ask for a bid or raise the amount.

His grin widened, and he scanned the room. He had to hand it to the old guys. They knew how to pack a room and they threw a heck of a party. The place was filled with glittering, sweet-smelling ladies. At this rate the town balance was likely to tip in the opposite direction—too many women and not enough cowboys. He kind of liked the sound of that.

Competitive spirit and ego reared up as he worked the room with his eyes, enticing women to up their bids. If he had to be a part of this crazy plan, he might as well turn it into a challenge, make sure he commanded a higher price than his neighbors or employees.

His gaze swept past the door, then slammed back, causing him to stop his performance mid-stride.

Oh, man, he thought when his brain finally kicked back in gear. *Here comes trouble in a tight pair of jeans.*

As though he'd spoken the thought aloud, her gaze honed in on his, held.

And for an instant Ethan forgot to draw a breath.

She was a dynamite package, self-assured, holding his stare when most women would have coyly looked away. That alone intrigued him...and turned him on.

He raised a brow. An invitation.

She appeared to struggle with a reluctant smile, then shifted her attention, only pausing for a bare instant as she noted the dressy attire in the rest of the room versus her casual sweater and jeans. With a nearly imperceptible shrug, she gave her head a gentle shake, flicked her honey-blond hair off her shoulders and strolled into the room as though she wore a sexy floor-length silk gown and diamonds. With a smile she let Ozzie direct her to an empty seat. Right up front.

Mmm, yes indeed, Ethan thought, following her progress with his eyes, his gaze riveted on the sassy sway of her hips in those skintight jeans. *Mighty fine.*

Suddenly the evening took on a new energy.

But he was falling down on his performance. He was supposed to flirt with *all* the women. Even though he'd already set his sights on just the one.

He smiled at a man in the audience who'd obviously been intrigued by the blonde's entrance, too, and the man smiled

back. A guy-to-guy communication, Ethan thought, then missed a step when the young man raised his hand.

Surely not.

A slight frown tugged at his brows. Lloyd accepted the bid, then another right on its heels—from a woman, thank God. And then...

Shocked, Ethan watched the guy raise his hand again. He nearly stumbled, actually stopped moving for a full five seconds and gawked. Then he jerked his gaze away. Was he encouraging the guy? *A guy!*

The dish in jeans gave a nod of her head, and Lloyd acknowledged it. Ethan started to breathe easier, and told himself he would *not* look back at the male bidder. But he did. And the man's hand was up again.

Genuine panic set in.

My God, the bid was already up to five thousand dollars!

Lloyd was apparently having trouble with his voice and his reflexes, because he was extremely slow to notice when the blonde put her hand up again. He was too busy staring, flabbergasted, at the man who was bidding.

Ethan was beginning to think he'd have to totally embarrass himself and point out the woman who was discreetly attempting to top the bid. He felt a bit like a dog running in circles trying to get his master's attention, and he nearly shouted out the acknowledgment himself. But Lloyd found his stride once more.

And darn it all, studly tuxedo man raised his hand again.

Ethan's brows slammed down. My God, *nothing* had prepared him for this.

The room went silent.

"Six thousand going once..." Lloyd called, a nervous quaver to his voice.

No one made a move.

Ethan's gaze whipped to the blonde. She was actually smirking. Okay, fine. Six thousand dollars was a staggering amount of money to most people. He'd pay it himself, he tried to tell her with his eyes.

"Six thousand going twice..."

"*Please!*" He formed the word silently with his mouth.

Dora Watkins struggled valiantly with her grin. She'd never seen a sexy cowboy so flustered. And she'd heard enough about playboy Ethan Callahan to know that wasn't a characteristic state for him.

When her father had told her to meet up with Ozzie Peyton at Brewer's Saloon for an introduction to the wealthy Shotgun Ridge cowboy, she'd had no idea it would be in the middle of a bachelor auction. But Dora was known to think on her feet and take most anything in stride.

And at the moment she was enjoying herself immensely.

Ozzie elbowed her. "Well, come on, girl. Put the boy out of his misery. You come here for him. Might as well be able to call the shots. You buy him, he's gotta give you all his attention. And I'll personally see to it he pays for the date himself."

"You know that's not strictly necessary. I've got gobs of money." Her grandfather was Texas oilman, Quentin Watkins. Her trust fund alone was more than most people saw in a lifetime—somewhat to the dismay of her conservative parents. "But I didn't come here for him. Katie did."

"Same thing." He winked. "You bet."

Darned if she didn't like this old man. He was intent on matchmaking and being obvious about it. She'd perused the program when she'd sat down, read the captioned advertisement they'd obviously run in the city papers:

Come to Shotgun Ridge's Cowboy Bachelor Auction. Have a Date That'll Likely End in a Marriage Proposal.

Dora wondered if any of the cowboys had seen that little tidbit on the program.

But Dora wasn't here for matchmaking or marriage. She only wanted one thing from Ethan Callahan.

Custody of Katie for herself.

But before she could ask for that, she had to uphold her promise to Amanda. She had to give Ethan a chance to know his daughter.

One month, she told herself. Then he would be begging her to take the baby and leave him to his playboy cowboy ways.

She looked back at the plea in Ethan's sexy blue eyes, saw a trickle of sweat make its way down his temple.

Her smile widened. She didn't in any way think this man could be tamed, but she liked the power she held just now.

"Going—"

"Seven thousand." She said it aloud, calmly, and for an instant not a soul in the room moved.

Ethan whipped around and glared at the male bidder. It was a fierce look that would have had the meanest grizzly apologizing for daring to show his face.

The man shrugged and shook his head, ceding to Dora's thousand-dollar raise.

"Sold!" Lloyd shouted and banged a gavel on the dais.

Ethan's shoulders visibly relaxed. His gaze when he turned it back to her was tender and filled with emotion. It was a look that stole her breath and made her knees tremble.

"Thank you." Again the words were silently formed.

She inclined her head and got up, needing a breath of air.

She had to collect herself before she confronted the man who had every legal right to the child she desperately wanted.

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ETHAN STEPPED DOWN off the stage more relieved than he cared to admit. What had started out as fun had nearly turned to panic. Man, that kind of thing had never happened to him before.

As he made his way through the crowd of women, pausing to speak to a few, he couldn't stop thinking about the little

blonde who'd bought a date with him. She'd been so calm, so self-assured, never even batted an eye at the amount.

With her smile wide and her eyes locked to his, she'd been toying with him. Now that he was able to relax, he could appreciate her verve, her sass. She was a woman he could spend a while on. Instinctively he knew he wouldn't be bored.

Nodding to several of his neighbors and skirting a cluster of women getting to know their cowboy dates, Ethan looked up and came face-to-face with the young man who'd nearly shaken his cool.

He reached up to tug his hat before he realized he wasn't wearing one.

The young man extended his hand, and Ethan stared at it as though it was a diamondback rattler. This was ridiculous, he knew.

He accepted the handshake, gripping harder than usual just to make himself feel better, to establish his position in case there was any question as to what his preference was.

"Tyler Redding," the man said. "I apologize for making you uncomfortable."

In a strictly objective sense, Ethan allowed that Tyler Redding was a decent-looking guy. His jet-black tuxedo spoke of wealth, and his shoulders beneath the jacket were broad on a body kept in good shape.

"I have to ask..." He didn't quite know how to form the words. "Did I do something that gave you the impression I was...that we could...?" He couldn't finish. And now that he'd bumbled through the vague question, he wasn't sure he wanted an answer. His masculinity was smarting.

Tyler shouted with laughter, and Ethan looked around to see if the outburst had drawn attention. It had. Great.

"That's one of the reasons I stopped you," Tyler said. "I figured you had the wrong idea and thought I'd better straighten things out. I was trying to get a date for my sister. She's too shy to bid on her own."

"Oh." *Thank God.* Given that the room was filled with women, he could be forgiven for not noticing a shy one next to Tyler. "Well, then. No harm, no foul."

Tyler shoved his hands in his pockets and turned. "Enjoy your date. And it better be something really good for that price."

Ethan hadn't even thought of that. It was only his bad luck that one of his mares had gone into premature labor. Otherwise he'd have been out of town with his brothers and would have escaped this fiasco.

Instead, he'd been wide open for Ozzie and company to corner him, to shame him into doing his duty for the town.

He remembered coming here as a wary eight-year-old. Remembered this town—headed by Ozzie and Vanessa Peyton—rallying around Fred Callahan in his quest to adopt three messed-up boys who didn't know the first thing about love and family. But with the help of all the citizens in Shotgun Ridge, Fred Callahan had taught Ethan and his brothers just that.

Ethan owed the town.

But was he supposed to parade himself, nearly get bought by a man *and* organize the date?

Recalling the small, spunky woman, his body sent several highly appealing ideas to his brain.

He moved through the swinging saloon doors into the room that was normally set up for pool tables, dancing and—most recently—a cordoned-off section for cigar smoking.

Ozzie, Lloyd, Henry and Vern were lined up like crows watching a cornfield. Ethan felt his heart soften. Their intentions were good. But as much as he was attracted to the sexy blonde who'd "bought" him, could picture himself having more than one date with her, getting to know her, he wasn't about to settle into marriage.

"So where's my date?" he asked.

"Right here," came a soft voice.

He turned slowly. She was a tiny woman with a presence and assurance that made her appear taller, and a whisky voice that grabbed a man's attention and held him in thrall.

And in her arms, she held a cute baby in a frilly pink dress.

He turned up the wattage of his smile. So she had a kid. No problem. The town was full of willing babysitters. "Thanks for bailing me out, darlin'. I gotta tell you, you're more my idea of a fine date than that fella was."

"Oh, I'm not your date...*darlin'*. I bought you for *her*." She inclined her head toward the baby, who watched him with curious eyes, her little mouth wrapped around a thumb.

"Ethan Callahan, meet your daughter, Kathryn Lynn Callahan."