

Prologue

Well, it's about to begin, and I've gotta hope there won't be no shootin' to go along with it.

Ozzie Peyton tapped his pen against his journal and gazed at the photo of his late wife that held center stage over the fireplace mantel where most ranchers hung animal heads and prize antlers.

I'm the one that done the writin' seeing as I'm the romantic in the bunch. Plus, my sweet wife, Vanessa—God rest her soul—was a schoolteacher. I didn't spend all them years helping her grade English papers and not learn a thing or two. Besides, Vanessa taught nearly every boy and man in this town. She'd approve of the plan; she'd want to see these fine young fellows get hitched and have babies.

But left to their own devices, those boys would just go on about their merry lives and before you know it, Shotgun Ridge would die out from lack of procreating! It's not right. The Good Lord started us out with a dang good plan and by dog, the citizens of Shotgun Ridge have abused the whole thing! We've all grown old and our offspring have moved on.

And here we find ourselves in a town full of men.

And those men seem to have forgotten that they have a God-given responsibility to the future of mankind.

Well, me and Lloyd and Henry and Vern have cooked up just the thing to set these cowboys to rights. We all agreed that what we need are women and babies. The gettin' part was just a little tricky.

Especially when it comes to makin' decisions. Like I said, I done the writin'—and I don't for a minute consider any of it lies—but we all, me and Lloyd and Vern and Henry, did the decidin'. (And Vanessa had a say in it too, but I don't like to go on to folks about how Vanessa and me still talk. They'd think I was touched in the head or something).

Anyway, what we decided was to put a picture in the magazines and run a couple of ads in the big-city papers to let the women know that we got an unbalanced situation here.

Now, I imagine young Wyatt Malone might be a bit surprised to find that his good-lookin' mug was flashed in the fancy magazines, but the boys and me, we figured he'll get over it. Why it's plain as the nose on a man's face that Wyatt's got a hole in his heart the size of a canyon and it needs healin'.

The thing is, I gotta wonder if we made the right decision when we picked out our candidate from the mail we got. Course it's a little late for second thoughts seeing as how she's due to show up tonight.

Ozzie paused and flexed his hand, working the kinks out of his old joints. He gazed at Vanessa's portrait, gaining strength from her beautiful, soft eyes. Nodding, he licked the tip of his ballpoint pen.

I've known Wyatt Malone all his life, and the boy's as fair-minded as they come. And that's a pretty good thing seeing as how Miss Hannah might be a bit of a surprise....

Chapter 1

Hannah Richmond touched the crystal pendant at her neck. The necklace had been a gift from her Aunt Shirley. Hannah had visited her aunt's farm often as a young girl, visits that had created powerful, poignant memories that were etched for a lifetime.

To Hannah, the necklace was a symbol of what she desperately wanted for herself and her children—life on a ranch, a slower pace, love that was genuine. It was an ideal that had grown in her mind to near obsession, an ideal that had compelled her to drive from California to Shotgun Ridge, Montana to start a new life.

To be Wyatt Malone's mail-order bride.

She still went into near hyperventilation about every fifteen minutes—each time she allowed herself to think about her nerve and the enormity of the step she'd actually taken.

She put her hand on Ian's shoulder, gave a reassuring squeeze, both for herself and her son. Just four years old and too often he felt like he had to be a little man. Having a father abandon you tended to do that. And it wasn't fair.

She shivered beneath her lightweight sweater, but didn't want to go back to the truck to get a coat. She might chicken out and keep right on going.

No, she told herself, she wouldn't. This was her ultimate dream and she intended to grab it with both hands. But she sure hadn't realized that springtime in Montana would be this cold!

Taking a breath, she pushed through the door of Brewer's Saloon and paused, scanning the interior. The smell of beer, cooking grease, onions and sweet cigar smoke swirled around her. A sign over the bar admonished patrons to watch their language, that this was a family establishment. She smiled, eased a bit even though butterflies still knocked against her solar plexus, stealing her breath.

The place was more restaurant than saloon, its name misleading. Booths lined two walls. Tables draped in red-and-white-checked cloths were scattered in no particular formation across the plank floor. Through chest-high, swinging saloon doors, a separate room housed a jukebox that played a Faith Hill ballad as cowboys unwound over competitive games of pool.

How was she going to find him?

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Ian?"

"Do we get to eat now?"

"Soon, champ." She'd been traveling in wide-open country for what felt like hundreds of miles, and she hadn't passed a single fast-food restaurant. She was heartened to see that this saloon was indeed an eating establishment. Not that it had been all that long since they'd last eaten, but Ian seemed to be a bottomless pit lately. Probably the boredom of being cooped up in the truck.

She was debating whether to order first and search later when she spotted him. Her heart lurched. Just like it did every time she looked at his picture.

He was standing by one of the booths, smiling and talking with a woman dressed in western wear who looked to be around forty. It was hard to tell.

But Hannah knew the man was Wyatt Malone.

Her cowboy.

She recognized him from the magazine picture she'd carried around with her—the one now tucked inside her purse. She'd memorized this man's features, placed her hopes and dreams on him even though they'd never met.

This was a man whose handwriting she'd traced a hundred times, but whose voice she'd never heard.

With Ian clutching the back of her broomstick skirt, playing peekaboo with the customers in the booths and tables they passed, she made her way across the room.

"Wyatt Malone?"

He turned, did a double take. "Yes?"

Her heart fluttered again. It had been a while since a man had done a double take, given her a quick distracted pass then let his gaze slam back. It did her tattered ego good.

And it gave her hope. It let her know that the physical attraction was mutual.

A person could build on physical attraction. She was banking on it.

"I'm Hannah Richmond?" She hadn't meant to make it a question, for heaven's sake. She sounded like she didn't even know her own self. Which could actually have some validity given the huge chance she'd taken by coming here.

He grinned and tipped back his buff-colored Stetson. "Pleased to meet you. This is Cherry Peyton," he said, nodding to the woman who stood by his side. "My neighbor."

Cherry held out her hand and Hannah took it, wondering if she was any relation to Ozzie Peyton. "Nice to meet you," Cherry said, though there was reserve in her voice. "You're new in town."

"Yes." She sensed the other woman expected more information, but Hannah wasn't used to having intimate conversations with strangers. At least not about why she was "new in town." She was still getting used to the idea herself.

Cherry shrugged and looked back at Wyatt. "I'll leave you be for now. Call me tomorrow and we'll talk about that bull."

"Sure thing." His tone was distracted, apparently because of where his gaze had just landed...and froze.

Hannah lifted her chin and deliberately rested her arm on the shelf of her pregnant stomach. She'd *told* him about the baby, and about Ian. So why did he look so surprised? As though he'd never heard her name or hadn't the slightest idea what she was doing here.

She felt conspicuous and out of place with a room full of cowboys watching her, and an incredibly handsome one standing right in front of her, his eyes kind, yet full of questions.

Fight or flight signals sent adrenaline pounding through her veins, making her dizzy. Her lips felt stiff and shaky with the effort she made at keeping her features pleasant.

Then, Ian peeked out from behind her skirt. "Boo!"

Wyatt leaped back doing a credible job of acting scared, which sent Ian into a gale of giggles. Watching him, Hannah realized that despite his pretense, he looked like he'd truly had a jolt. Then his cheeks creased and he smiled. "Hey, there, partner. Where'd you come from?"

"California," Ian said and hopped up in the booth. "Are you a w-wa-weal cowboy?"

Hannah made a grab for Ian, who'd already clutched a handful of pretzels and was stuffing them in his mouth. "Slow down buddy." His stuttering had improved considerably in the past few months, but he still bobbed his words when he was excited or unsure.

"Yeah, I'm a real cowboy." Wyatt took off his hat and brushed it against his thigh. "Have a seat," he said to Hannah.

"I'm here about the ad?" *Well, duh, Hannah. Great opening line.* She slid into the booth, shifting the bowl of pretzels out of Ian's reach. Why did she keep making her statements sound like questions?

His features cleared to one of recognition, as though he'd finally found himself on solid ground after somebody had given him a rude push. "Ah, yes, the stud."

"Excuse me?"

"The bull."

"No, the bride." She handed him the ad she'd already extracted from her purse.

She was getting a bad feeling here. Wyatt Malone had gone red in the face. And deadly quiet. He held the magazine ad and stared at it as though he'd just awakened from a coma.

That bad feeling inside Hannah grew. "Has there been a change? Mr. Peyton said—"

His head jerked up. "Ozzie?"

"Yes. I wrote to him first and he assured me the ad was legitimate. But he told you that, right?"

Wyatt opened his mouth to answer, but an older man with steel-gray hair and piercing blue eyes rushed over to their table.

"Hannah Richmond," he said, taking her hand and holding it between both of his. "And this must be young Ian. Welcome to Shotgun Ridge. I'm Ozzie Peyton, remember me? We wrote...uh, that first time."

"I remember." But apparently, Wyatt didn't. He was still looking shell-shocked. "I think there's been a mistake, though," she said softly, holding Wyatt's gaze with hers, her eyes as well as her tone asking a question.

"Nonsense," Ozzie said, dismissing her statement with a wave of his age-spotted hand. "You're just feelin' a bit awkward and overwhelmed is all, right Wyatt?"

"I imagine that's the case." His words were slow and deep, his steady gaze unreadable.

"Good. I'll let you two get acquainted." Ozzie fairly ran from the table.

Wyatt smiled, though it felt wooden. He had that sick-in-the-gut feeling as though he'd just been mounted on the meanest bronc in the state and been bucked into the next county.

Ozzie Peyton had some explaining to do.

"Would you excuse me for a minute, Hannah?" He got up from the booth. Keeping his smile in place, he tried to act nonchalant. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why he didn't just tell her how confused he was, that he'd never seen this ad before in his life.

A color advertisement for a mail-order bride.

The photo was definitely of him, there was no mistaking that. Taken at his ranch, with his hat on his head, a bandanna around his neck, gloves held in one hand, arm propped on the corral fence, booted legs crossed at the ankle, his horse, Tornado, bumping a nose against his shoulder. In the background was the verdant expanse of the Montana prairie and endless blue sky that made the state famous.

"Flag down Maedean and order yourself and Ian a burger. They're messy and greasy, but the best in the county. I'll be right back."

With the ad clutched in his hand, he strode across the room at an agitated clip, his boots scuffing against the scarred plank floor.

Ozzie Peyton stood behind the bar with Lloyd Brewer, the owner of the saloon. He had to give the old geezer credit for not hightailing it out of there when he saw Wyatt coming.

Leaning his elbows on the bar, trying to keep his voice even and reasonable, he said, "What the heck is wrong with you, Ozzie Peyton?"

"Now don't go getting your teat in a wringer, Wyatt."

"*You're* going to have more than that in a wringer if you don't start explaining. That woman over there apparently thinks she's here to be my bride. And from what I've gathered so far, she got that impression from you."

"Well, maybe at first. The rest she sort of thinks she got from you."

"Me?"

"We wrote to her."

"Who's we?"

"Me and Lloyd and Vern and Henry."

The four geriatric musketeers of Shotgun Ridge. God help them all. "Why?"

"Because it ain't right, that's why," Ozzie said in a stage whisper that drew the attention of several of the cowboys belled up to the bar.

Great, Wyatt thought. Make the spectacle public. He glanced over his shoulder, noticed that Maedean was doing more chatting than order taking with Hannah Richmond.

Double great. The waitress would have Hannah's life history in a matter of seconds and the rest of the town would know it five minutes hence.

Projecting fast forward, he saw events playing out in one of two ways. Either his neighbors would rib him for advertising for a woman—or string him up if he turned her away and caused her sorrow. Never mind that not a soul in town knew the first thing about Hannah Richmond.

The men of Shotgun Ridge were sticklers over how men should treat women, be they sister, mama...or a pretty lady who had the innocent eyes of a fawn and the lips of a siren.

A potent, dangerous combination.

He took a deep breath and tried counting to ten. It didn't work. It still felt as though his life had just slipped out of control like a flatbed hay baler without brakes. "What's not right, Ozzie?"

"The way all you boys around here have ignored your duty. It's a crime against the good Lord, I'm telling you. Shotgun Ridge is dying out. That's why we put the ads in the papers, you bet."

"Ads? My, God, are there more coming?"

"Not for you, so calm down."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." A man would have to be dead to be calm in a situation like this.

"We ran ads in the papers inviting women to come to town. The ad in the fancy magazine with your picture was the only one for a bride."

His ego reared up in fine form. "And only one woman responded?" Not that he cared he told himself. He wasn't going along with this nonsense.

"Of course not," Ozzie said, giving him a look that suggested he wasn't overly bright. "But me and the boys screened them all and—"

"You screened them? Not very well, apparently. Ozzie, in case you hadn't noticed, Hannah Richmond has a kid and she's in the family way again!"

"I know that, Wyatt. And I'm surprised to hear you take that tone. You're the least judgmental man I know."

"I'm not judging anybody."

"That's a fine thing to hear. Because the way we see it, this town's in a mess and it's high time somebody did something to rectify matters. There's too much concentratin' on breedin' cows and horses and not enough on breedin' young 'uns!"

“So you brought Hannah Richmond here to have her baby.” Well, that wasn’t too bad, he thought, relaxing some. Perhaps he’d misunderstood. Perhaps they just wanted her to have her baby here and increase the population.

“And other babies...providing the two of you suit that is.”

Tension shot his spine rigid once more, the image of that insinuation punching Wyatt in the gut. Even after all these years, the pain was still raw. He dismissed it, looked at Ozzie, tried like heck to stand his ground. “Other—?”

“You bet.” The old man nodded his head. “We’ve got an unbalanced situation with a town full of bachelors.”

“Oh, now Ozzie, you’re exaggerating. You make it sound like there are no females in Shotgun Ridge when there surely are. One of them comes out to clean my house twice a month. And Miz Parnel over at the beauty shop does a good enough business.”

“How do you know?”

“My mom patronizes Arletta’s shop, so obviously the doors are still open for female business—”

“And did she run right home and tell you there were young, eligible women getting permanents and hair dyes?”

“No—”

“I rest my case.”

Wyatt could taste frustration in the back of his throat. Communicating with Ozzie Peyton often felt like trying to herd a bull backward through a squeeze chute. “Why would my mother come home and tell me about the customers at the beauty shop?”

“She’s a mother wanting grandbabies in her lifetime. That’d make her a natural matchmaker. She’d a told you.”

He started to snap that Mary Malone had a grandchild. Just because his son was resting in the family plot didn’t make him any less of a Malone family member.

But Wyatt didn’t have the energy to bring up the argument. Apparently, he had bigger problems on his hands.

“So, since Mom’s in Florida, you four old guys are matchmaking?”

“After a fashion, you bet.”

Wyatt ran his hand down his face. “And you’ve corresponded with that woman over there and led her to believe I’ve invited her here to be my bride?”

“That about sums it up, you bet.”

Tonight, Ozzie’s distinct habit of tacking on “you bet” to his sentences grated on Wyatt more than usual. “And she’s expecting to go home with me?”

Ozzie nodded.

Wyatt turned his full attention to Lloyd Brewer who was watching him in silence, polishing the same glass he’d started on five minutes ago. He was about to rub the shine off it.

“You’re in on this Lloyd?” he asked quietly. “My own father-in-law?”

“Becky and Timmy are gone, Wyatt.”

Wyatt’s jaw tightened and his stomach churned. “I think about that just about every day, Lloyd. I don’t need the reminder.” When he saw the older man wince, he regretted his tone. Lloyd had taken his daughter’s death hard. Still—and because of that—he was surprised that Lloyd would be a party to trying to marry him off to another woman. A stranger.

“It’s time to get on with your life, Wyatt.”

His fist tightened around the coated paper printed with his picture. “I’m happy with my life just the way it is.”

Ozzie and Lloyd gave him a pitying look.

He ignored it. “You all said it before. We’re a town of bachelors. Why me?”

“We took a vote,” Ozzie admitted uneasily. “It was between you and Ethan Callahan and Stony Stratton.”

“Just the three of us?” His tone held a bite but he couldn’t help it. This was absurd. “What about the sheriff and the doc? They’re young and single. For that matter, so’s the preacher. And Ethan’s brothers.”

“It’s a done deal, Wyatt...well, sort of.” Ozzie glanced across the room at Hannah. “Give her a chance. Get to know her and see what happens.”

“Nothing’s going to happen, and you both know it. I had my chance at family and lost it.” He looked at Lloyd, then at Ozzie. “Now I just have to figure out how badly you’ve messed with Hannah Richmond’s life and how to let her down easy.”

“Don’t make too hasty a decision, Wyatt.”

He stood, smiled at Hannah who was now looking at him with uneasy questions in her pretty green eyes. Maedean was on her way back to the kitchen, obviously armed with Hannah’s order and plenty more....

Like enough information on mail-order brides to entertain the entire population of Shotgun Ridge.

“Bring me one of those messy cheeseburgers, would you, Maedean?” he called, his voice raised above the Friday night crowd and the music.

“You got it, honey.” She gave him a bawdy wink.

He sent the gesture back as though nothing in the world was amiss, as though a pregnant woman and little boy weren’t waiting for him to come back and jerk the rug right out from under them.

The jukebox was belting out a Shania Twain tune admonishing folks not to be stupid, and two older couples were doing a cowboy waltz across the floor. Glancing around the room, Wyatt realized that what Ozzie said was pretty much true. The men outnumbered the women five to one. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? Because he hadn’t been interested. Since Becky and Timmy’s deaths, he’d concentrated on his ranch and his friends and parents.

Still, a lack of young women was no excuse for the old geezers to run a crazy advertisement in a magazine.

And neglect to tell the beef on the hoof—*him*—about it.

He slid into the booth opposite her. “Did you put in your order?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Ian crawled under the table and climbed up on Wyatt's lap.

"Are we g-ga-gonna be your family?"

Wyatt felt as though somebody had reached a fist into his chest and squeezed his heart. The boy was looking at him with solemn eyes filled with hope. No kid this little should hold that much seriousness in his eyes. Before Wyatt could answer, though, Hannah spoke.

"Ian, honey. Remember, we said we'd see?" She looked at Wyatt. "I know my agreeing to come here takes you off the market, but I do want to be cautious."

Off the market? As far as he'd known, he hadn't been *on* the market to begin with. He was beginning to feel a real affinity with his cattle.

"Uh, being cautious is always smart," he said, and nearly swallowed his Adam's apple when Ian's head pressed against his shoulder, little boy breath puffing against his neck.

Maedean came back to the table bearing red plastic baskets filled with steaming French fries and paper-wrapped cheeseburgers. Ian lifted his head to have a look.

"There you go, hon," Maedean said, cupping Ian's cheeks with grandmotherly affection. She frowned, and pressed the backs of her fingers to his forehead. "This little guy's feeling a bit warm."

Hannah was out of the booth and reaching for her son before Maedean had even finished the last syllable. With one knee braced against the vinyl seat right at Wyatt's hip, she steadied herself with a hand on his shoulder, then checked for heat in her son's face.

Her full breasts were aligned perfectly at mouth level; she smelled like a sun-drenched orange grove.

Wyatt's appetite went right over the top, and it wasn't for cheeseburgers.

"Oh, you are hot. Come to Momma, sweetie."

Well, sure. He jerked, cutting off the thought and felt his ears heat when Hannah Richmond gave him a frowning look. Thoroughly disgusted with himself, he concluded he'd been out on the ranch for too long and had completely forgotten his manners. Never mind that the breach was only in his mind.

"Want me to rustle up a thermometer?" Maedean asked. "We could put it under his arm and get a quick reading."

"I think he'll be okay," Hannah said. "But thank you, Maedean."

Wyatt knew they were discussing the boy's fever, but for the life of him, his overactive mind was placing other connotations on the conversation.

"No thanks, needed, hon. You holler if you change your mind, hear?"

Maedean left to attend to the other customers, and Wyatt leaned back, feeling it prudent to put an inch or so of distance between himself and temptation. When Hannah tried to lift Ian from his arms, he shook his head.

"Sit. I'll hand him to you. He's probably too heavy for you in your condition."

"I'm fine."

She didn't look all that fine. When he finally got his randy thoughts under control, he noticed that her peaches-and-cream complexion was pale with exhaustion, her green eyes weary.

There was a wholesome innocence to her that he normally wouldn't have associated with a woman her age—close to thirty, he'd guess.

He hated like crazy to tell her she had to turn around and go home, that there had been a terrible mistake, but it would be the kindest thing.

Attempting to stand, he was thwarted by the tightening of Ian's arms around his neck. The boy did feel warm. And the smell of French fries didn't seem to tempt. That right there was a sure sign of a kid feeling poorly.

"Don't you want to go sit with your mom, partner? Have something to eat?"

Ian ran his fingers over Wyatt's chin. The rasp of whiskers reminded him that he hadn't gone to a lot of extra grooming trouble before coming to town. Then again, he hadn't expected to be confronted with a bride and a family all rolled into one neat package.

But whether or not he'd shaved was the least of his troublesome thoughts.

"Are you g-gonna be my daddy?"

"Ian!"

Trust a little kid to get right to the heart of matters, and give him the perfect opening to admit that there had been a mistake fostered by four old matchmaking geezers.

But for some darn reason, he couldn't make the words he needed to say come out. Sticky fingers poked at his Adam's apple and a hard head clipped him in the chin. Fever or not, the kid still had energy to spare.

Hannah Richmond was looking at him with both embarrassment and fragile hope.

Ah, hell. Pregnant with a kid. And apparently prepared to put her future in his hands.

"Why don't we get you home and in a warm bed?" he answered Ian instead, feeling his insides go still at the relief that came over Hannah's soft features.

Relief and a flare of something else he was half afraid to speculate on.

It had been a long time since a woman had gazed at him like he was her salvation, her knight in shining armor. He didn't know why in the world she would do so.

But his ego was just rusty enough to respond, his soul desperate enough to believe.