

MATCH MADE IN  
WYOMING

**Patricia McLinn**

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For all the four-legged family members  
with warm hearts and cold noses,  
and for all those wonderful people who  
rescue animals – Thank you!

Wyoming Wildflowers:  
Book Two

Wyoming Wildflowers

*Almost a Bride*

Book 1: Indian Paintbrush

*Match Made in Wyoming*

Book 2: Fireweed

*My Heart Remembers*

Book 3: Bur Marigold

***WisRW Write Touch Readers Award finalist***

***OCRW Orange Rose Award finalist***

"A melt-your-heart romance."

— *Pamela James, Old Book Barn Gazette*

"MATCH MADE IN WYOMING is a delightful read with its rich characterizations. The hero's vulnerability makes him especially appealing, despite his tendency to push the heroine away even as they draw closer. . . . The dog threatens to steal the show."

— *Cindy Penn, Wordweaving*

"When it comes to sizzle, McLinn knows how to turn up the heat."

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## CHAPTER ONE

“You and Taylor are standing under the mistletoe, so you have to kiss,” Matty proclaimed a second time over the background noise of a party in full swing. Then she embellished. “Otherwise it’s bad luck for the whole new year.”

Ambushed.

Cal Ruskoff looked from Taylor Anne Larsen, standing beside him with a flush rising up her neck like a long, slender glass being filled with rosy champagne, to the dancing eyes of Matty Brennan Currick and knew he’d let himself be ambushed but good.

As the owner of the neighboring Flying W Ranch, Matty was his employer. Which was one reason he was here at the Slash-C at her New Year’s Eve party.

She was also nearly the only friend he could claim, which was the other reason he was here.

“Never heard that,” Cal grumbled.

“Me either,” Taylor declared staunchly.

She stood beside him, as if they presented a united front, at the same time angling her face away from him. He saw only her light red hair and the turn of her jaw heading toward a pointy chin.

Maybe she’d been ambushed by Matty, too.

“You haven’t heard of it because neither of you grew up around here. Dave!” Matty snagged her husband’s arm as he headed toward the noisy hub of the party in the family room.

“Dave, isn’t it true that if you stand under the mistletoe with someone and don’t kiss them, it’s bad luck—*terrible* bad luck for both people, all year long?”

Cal could see clear as day the compelling look Matty

focused on her husband. Dave Currick's lips quirked, but he nodded solemnly.

"Terrible bad luck," he concurred.

Matty beamed at Dave then turned triumphantly to Cal and Taylor. "You see! And with Taylor as my partner for the Dog Rescue League, I don't want to take any chances of having to share terrible bad luck. *Awful*, terrible bad luck."

"In fact, it's such strong awful, terrible, bad luck," said Dave with a remarkably straight face, "that even if you're three feet away from the mistletoe and don't kiss, you can get hit with it, so..."

He swept Matty to him with one hand at the small of her back and Matty cooperated fully. There was no time to look away before their lips met in a brief but sound kiss.

But it wasn't the kiss that had Cal feeling as if prickles had gotten under his skin—it was what followed. Still molded against each other, the husband and wife exchanged a look that spoke of remembering past moments and of promising there'd be more—and soon—that would be well worth remembering.

Cal didn't envy Matty and Dave having this. He just hated feeling like a starving kid with his nose pressed against the damned pastry shop window, watching what he wouldn't ever have.

But maybe on New Year's Eve, a night somehow separate from both the past and the future... For a moment...

"Oh, hell," he growled, then pulled Taylor to him in much the same embrace Dave held Matty.

Only, Taylor didn't lean into him, pliant and willing. She remained straight, even arched slightly back against his arm, as if to avoid contact with the front of his body. She didn't entirely succeed, and they shifted to keep balanced.

Her head jerked back.

*Shock.*

That was what he saw in Taylor's wide green eyes.

Shock.

He couldn't blame her. Taylor Anne Larsen was a nice woman. Even if she was a lawyer. The kind of woman who wouldn't care for lies of either omission or commission. Polite, a little shy. He hadn't meant to shock her. It wasn't her fault he hadn't had a woman in too long to think about. It wasn't her fault that when he had thought about it lately her red-haired image had come to mind too often for comfort.

Well, there was no hiding his response from her now, so what the hell.

He pressed his mouth to hers.

*Shock.*

That was what he felt popping and sizzling and crackling through his blood stream and nerve endings. Had to be.

Soft lips. Soft warmth. Soft skin when his mouth trailed off to one side. Soft hair that brushed against his cheek when he shifted the angle. And all around, a soft scent like ... like something he couldn't quite name.

He sought deeper for it, finding an opening between her lips, and sliding his tongue inside.

She gasped, and pulled her mouth free.

He didn't even realize he was reaching to kiss her again until she stepped back, abruptly leaving his arms empty.

"So now we're safe against bad luck for the coming year." Taylor smiled, but her voice wasn't steady. She stood barely beyond arm's reach. "Excuse me, I see Lisa, and I want to talk to her about, uh, the dog rescue project."

One step, then she looked over her shoulder, her gaze going from one face to another, and said, "I'm sure I'll see you again before midnight, Matty. And Dave. But I'll say Happy New Year now, Cal."

She walked away.

Something in Cal's chest felt tight and heavy. It took an extra couple of beats for him to realize she'd declared that she didn't expect to see him again for the duration

of this party. Didn't expect to ...and didn't want to?

"Cal." Matty laid a contrite hand on his arm, then murmured, "I'll go talk to her."

"Not on my account."

But Matty was already gone.

"I'm not sure if that's mud in your eye, but I'm positive that's lipstick on your mouth." Along with the comment, Dave offered a small paper napkin.

Cal shook his head, and dragged the pad of his thumb hard across his lips. A smear of red showed on his thumb. Not bright red like the candles Matty and Dave had all around. More like the bow on that Christmas wreath Matty had insisted on putting on the grill of his truck, now that it had experienced a month of sun and wind and snow. Soft.

He rubbed the smear against the side of his index finger until it disappeared from both spots.

"Gone," Dave confirmed.

Cal cursed. "Don't know why grown people would go hanging mistletoe around their house in the first place."

"I would think that would be obvious. Sometimes the pagans had the right idea."

"If you say so. But why put mistletoe here?" Cal said, pointing above his head.

It had seemed a safe place to mind his own business. He'd been leaning on the doorjamb, finding it the most isolated position to park until he could make a quiet exit, when Taylor had appeared from the hallway behind him. That's when Matty had pounced.

"I'd think that would be obvious, too, Cal." Dave nodded his head to the hallway at Cal's back. "That leads to the bedrooms."

\* \* \* \*

Cal stayed only because it was easier.

By staying till midnight, he wouldn't have to listen to Matty yapping at him about being a recluse and a hermit and living like a monk. Least not as much.

Yet, as much as she got after him, she'd never pried into how he'd come to be here in Wyoming, not when

she'd visited the Flying W before her great-uncle's death and not since she'd taken over.

Maybe because at first they'd both been too busy working as hard and fast and cheap as they could to get the Flying W back on its feet. More likely because she hadn't wanted him probing into her secrets in return. Like that she'd still loved Dave Currick a half dozen years after he'd broken off their youthful romance.

But since she and Dave had gotten back together, all that had changed.

Matty was happy, truly happy.

That would be good news if it ended there. But she was bound and determined that everyone else around her was going to be happy, too. He grimaced. She didn't even care if her efforts to make someone else happy made them miserable.

"Thirty seconds till midnight!"

The announcement acted like a switch on a slow-motion mixer. People started moving, shifting across the room, seeking out the person they meant to be beside at midnight. Matty and Dave and several of the other married couples came together in quick order.

"Fifteen seconds!"

Dates shifted near each other in varying degrees of self-consciousness. A group of unattached men started to coalesce near the kitchen door. A knot of women formed in the center of the room.

"Ten!"

"Nine!"

"Eight!"

"Seven!"

Someone said something he didn't hear. There was laughter, and the knot of women shifted toward the fireplace, apparently craning to see something.

"Six!"

"Five!"

"Four!"

All except Taylor Anne Larsen, who remained in the very center of the room, momentarily isolated.

“Three!”

“Two!”

And then Brent Somebody-or-Other visiting from Salt Lake City separated from the other single men, heading straight toward Taylor.

Cal pushed off from the doorjamb.

“One!”

He reached Taylor’s side as the final shout went up.

“*Happy New Year!*”

He took her shoulders between his hands and turned her to present Brent Whatever with her back. He had one second’s impression of her surprise, mixed with a glimmer of something else, before he muttered, “Happy New Year, Taylor.” The last word muffled as their lips came together.

Hers were parted. He stroked his tongue into her mouth, once, then again.

He slid one hand down her back, closing the space between their bodies. The other formed to the curve of her skull, supporting there even as the press of his mouth arched her neck.

He felt her hands clutch—one at his shoulder, the other above his elbow.

The scent was there again, all around him. A freshening breeze blending the lemon tang of freedom and the jasmine richness of gracious comfort.

And then it deepened and heated as her tongue slid against his, first touching, then seeking.

Her fingers skimmed the back of his neck, slipping under the ends of his hair, where the skin was tender and never exposed.

Someone jostled against his right side so hard that both he and Taylor had to take a step to keep from losing their balance, ending the kiss.

Their arms still around each other, their bodies together from chest to thigh, his wanting her was no secret to either one of them.

“Cal.”

That’s all she said. Almost a question.

A question he couldn't answer. Not ever.

He'd never felt further from getting what he wanted in his life.

He turned around and got the hell out of there.

\* \* \* \*

From the passenger seat of Matty's four-wheel drive vehicle, Taylor looked across the snow-dusted, wind-swept landscape passing beyond the windshield, and felt deep gratitude for efficient heaters.

"I don't understand how anyone could leave a puppy at a rest stop," Matty said. "It's February in Wyoming for pete's sake."

When word came during their stint on duty for the Rescue League of an abandoned dog, Taylor had packed the gear they'd prepared, and Matty had picked her up twenty minutes ago.

"At least the truck driver who spotted him called in the report," she said. "Those long-distance guys are on such a strict schedule it's probably unreasonable to wish he'd brought it in."

"Yeah," Matty responded with an absentness that indicated her thoughts had shifted. "Time probably really flies by for them."

These first six weeks of the year had taught Taylor caution in responding to Matty's comments. Although she couldn't see danger in this one, she kept her answer neutral. "I suppose."

"I read somewhere that a sense of time condensing happens a lot. I mean, can you believe it's been more than a month since New Year's Eve?"

*Uh-oh.* Now Taylor saw the danger.

"It was a great party, wasn't it?" Matty was saying. "I can't remember giving a party I enjoyed more. As long as we're on the subject, I was wondering –"

"Don't wonder, *please.*"

"All I was going to—"

"Ask me again if Cal has called me. He hasn't. He isn't going to. I never thought he would—I told you that."

"But he—"

“But he kissed me on New Year’s Eve. Yes. I know that. You know that. Everyone in Lewis and Clark counties knows that. I wouldn’t be surprised if all of the Rocky Mountain region knows that.”

“He didn’t just kiss you. He *kissed* you.”

Taylor really wished Matty hadn’t said that.

Not that way. Not the way that reminded her all too clearly of how thoroughly kissed she’d felt New Year’s Eve. The external sensations of Cal’s arms encircling her, his hard body pressed against hers, and his lips firm and sure on hers. The internal sensations of coiling heat and rushing blood. And the desire to let go—to let his hold be all that supported her, to rely on what his kiss told her and made her feel.

All those sensations made it all the more difficult to remember that behind the heat in those compelling blue eyes she’d seen such incredible bleakness. And despite all that heat surrounding her and inside her, she’d wanted to shiver.

“Believe me, he’s experienced complete, utter and absolute New Year’s Eve Kisser’s Remorse.”

“You’re joking, but I’m serious. Cal needs somebody like you. Other than Dave, there’s not a man I—”

“I’m serious, too,” Taylor interrupted, not wanting to hear Cal Ruskoff’s virtues extolled. It was bad enough having to contend with the unshakable vision of his square face under ash brown hair nearing hers in the split second before he’d kissed her. “The guy exhibits all the symptoms. Crossing the street and sudden U-turns out of the cafe when he sees yours truly seated inside.”

She didn’t tell Matty that each of his evasive moves had left her simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

“Maybe I should—”

“No, Matty. Don’t do anything. Don’t say anything.”

“But—”

“There’s the exit, Matty. C’mon, let’s go rescue a puppy.” *And forget Cal Ruskoff.*

The first impression of the puppy tied to a fence post near the men’s bathroom was of a fuzzy toy with

woefully inadequate stuffing. A piece of cardboard with “Free” traced several times in blue ink was tacked to the post. He was lying on a faded blue towel, worrying a corner of it.

As soon as he saw them, he stood, with the fabric still in his mouth, making him look slightly roguish. His long, fuzzy tail wagged slowly as he watched them with intense interest and a hint of wariness.

“Hi, baby dog,” crooned Matty, drawing off a glove.

“Matty, you should leave your gloves on.”

“He won’t be able to get my scent if I do.”

“He won’t be able to bite your hand, either,” Taylor noted dryly. “Remember what the manual said—most dogs react to fear of being hurt by running, but some attack.”

*Just like men.*

“I grew up with enough strays coming by the ranch to know when one’s mean. This one isn’t. Are you, sweet boy?” The animal stretched his neck to sniff.

“Boy?”

Matty looked over her shoulder. “You *are* from the city, aren’t you?”

“Suburbs. Where dogs wear identification and are nearly always connected to a human, who will tell you nicely if it’s a he or a she. And whether or not it’s friendly.”

“Oh, Baby Dog’s friendly, aren’t you? Taylor, untie the rope from the post.”

Matty kept talking in a crooning tone while Taylor started on the knot. “Let’s see, light caramel brown with white markings, pointed nose, ears that tip—well, one tips. I think you’re a collie, aren’t you, Baby Dog?”

“A collie, really?” As Taylor tugged the knot loose, the puppy took a step, and promptly sat down. “Oh, Matty, he’s weak. He can barely stand.”

Matty lifted the puppy. He made one feeble effort to get loose, then subsided. “Get the towel and let’s go. I want to get him to Dr. Markus.”

“The towel’s filthy.” But she was already following the

order. An envelope fluttered from it, and she automatically snatched that up, too.

“We’ll wash it, but it’s the one thing that’s familiar to him.”

\* \* \* \*

Cal saw Taylor heading his direction from down the street.

He’d avoided her up to now, but surely enough time had passed to temper temptation. Surely he wouldn’t respond as strongly as he had New Year’s Eve.

That had been an aberration. A combination of too long without a woman, an unsuspected streak of sentimentality over the holiday and – okay, yes, no sense denying it – the woman.

But now ...

With his head down as if examining the menu propped in the cafe window, even though the offerings hadn’t changed in the nearly three years he’d lived here, he fingered the scrap of newspaper in his jacket pocket, the one he’d clipped from this morning’s *Jefferson Standard*.

Under the brim of his hat, he watched her walk toward him, her movements easy and smooth.

He had good cause to talk to her now. As a lawyer she’d know the ins and outs of wills, might be able to tell him what some of his options were.

Her gaze focused on him, and she stopped dead. With his head dipped, he still caught the motion of her looking around, as if seeking an escape.

Pivoting away from her, he started across the street.

It had been a bad idea anyhow. She couldn’t have given him any useful advice without telling her some of the story, and he’d be a fool to do that.

No, he’d stick to his first decision, to ignore the whole thing and go on as he had been. Although he would confirm the information first, get a few more details.

Without looking in her direction, he went into the Knighton library.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor had washed the towel twice, using bleach. It

would never be a thing of beauty, but it looked considerably more reputable than the puppy did the next afternoon, dripping flea-bath soapsuds into her bathtub in a second go-around of bathing. Once just hadn't been enough.

And there was a dauntingly good chance that the puppy looked considerably better than she and Matty did as they leaned over the bathtub, hair damp and mussed, clothes spattered and faces flushed. The scent of flea shampoo tickled Taylor's nose and she sneezed.

"Tell me again, Matty, why we couldn't have let the groomer wash him?" She rubbed suds behind his ears. The puppy half closed his eyes in apparent bliss. She smiled, and kept rubbing.

"I see no reason to spend Rescue League funds on dog-washing when we can do it ourselves." Matty reached for the animal's far hip.

"That's because it's not your bathroom," Taylor said morosely, though she knew she had the better end of the deal—literally—at this moment.

"Would you have wanted Baby Dog to stay here without a bath?"

"No!"

"Then start rinsing."

Finally, Matty sat back and announced grandly, "I believe we are ready for the first towel."

"It's right here." Taylor reached behind her. "Just don't let him—Oh, no!"

Taylor turned back in time to get a dog-shaken spray full in the face. If any surface had previously avoided being spattered, it wasn't missed this time.

"Don't you laugh, Matty Brennan Currick. Don't you dare laugh."

"I can't help it. Sorry. It's... I was thinking of what Grams used to call it—the most efficient water dispersal system known to man."

Taylor stifled a chuckle and handed her friend a towel with a stern, "Dry."

It took two more towels each.

“He cleans up pretty good,” said Matty. “He’s past the ball of fluff, adorable stage, but he’ll grab somebody’s heart.”

The puppy trotted to a pile of old towels, curled up, and promptly went to sleep.

Taylor had an odd lump in her throat. “He’s still adorable.”

Matty gave her a look, but Taylor shook her head. “Don’t even think about it. Even if my landlord would let me, it wouldn’t be fair to an animal in this tiny apartment.” She looked around. “All we have to do now is clean up, then find a home for Baby Dog—and fast, before Hugh Moski finds out his tenant is keeping a pet.”

“You promised you’d deliver Baby Dog to the new owner, right?”

“That was our deal. Why?”

“You know who needs a dog? And doesn’t have to worry about the landlord objecting?”

“Who?”

“Cal Ruskoff.”

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