

LOST AND FOUND GROOM

Patricia McLinn

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A Place Called Home Series:
Lost and Found Groom
At the Heart's Command
Hidden in a Heartbeat

To Celeste Hamilton and J.P., who have the wisdom to know the right words to say at the right time, and the unfailing generosity to always say those words.

The author is very grateful to pilots Abbie Fridell and Tom Buckman for their generosity and insights in answering her many questions. They truly helped this story take off.

And many thanks to Jenni Sapp for her winning contest entry that gave this book a name.

Affaire de Coeur Reader-Writer Poll:
Best Contemporary Category Novel finalist

Prologue

*Twenty years ago,
Far Hills Ranch, Wyoming*

“Tell us the Far Hills legend, Aunt Marti,” urged eleven-year-old Kendra Jenner.

Before Marti Susland could respond, Dale Sinclair, who wasn’t even part of the family, scoffed with all the disdain of a thirteen-year-old, “We don’t want to hear that old story again.”

“Yes, we do,” Amy asserted staunchly. Although Marti’s half-sister was a few months older than Kendra, she always followed Kendra’s lead.

Twelve-year-old Ellyn Neal backed their vote up with a nod.

“Aw, only girls and babies want to hear that story, right, Grif?” Dale appealed to the oldest, consigning to babyhood the youngest of the gathered youngsters, Luke Chandler, son of the Far Hills foreman.

At fourteen John Griffin was noticeably more serious and silent than in previous summers. He looked at each of the faces around the campfire until he came to her. Marti looked back at the only child of her oldest sister and felt a renewed ache of loss at Nancy’s death three years ago.

“I’d like to hear it, too. One last time.”

Marti’s breath hitched. It was as if the boy had read her mind. Or shared her premonition. *Was this last campfire of the summer also the last for this gathering? Could she truly feel the ties that bound them to this place and these summers unraveling?*

All these children had spent summers at Far Hills

all their lives. Even after Father remarried and had Amy, Marti's older sisters, Nancy and Wendy, had returned to the ranch with their husbands and children. At least for a while.

First, Father and his second wife, Cindy, were killed in that hotel fire, leaving Marti, at twenty, to take over Far Hills and raise her infant half sister.

Then Wendy's pilot husband, Ken Jenner, was reported MIA.

Soon the strain in Nancy's marriage to Lt. Col. John Griffin Sr. became too obvious to miss, followed by her diagnosis and long, losing fight.

But even with the adults scattered, Marti had begged, cajoled and badgered them into sending their children—Nancy's son Grif and Wendy's daughter Kendra—each summer to the ranch that was their heritage.

Each summer, with Kendra and Grif joining Amy and Luke in living while their friends Dale Sinclair and Ellyn Neal spent more time here than at their homes in town, Far Hills Ranch was nearly what Marti had always dreamed it could be. Unclouded by the past.

A past embedded in the legend these innocents considered a thrilling story heard around a campfire. No, she wouldn't tell it this time, because if she did—

"Please, Marti," whispered Amy.

Marti looked at her half-sister and relented. As always.

"It happened right here, in 1878," she began, using the familiar words she first heard from her grandmother. Every face turned toward her. "The campfire burned for four days and four nights on that outcropping on Crooked Mountain that lets you see all over Far Hills, until Charles Susland—your great-great-grandfather Kendra and Grif," she broke off to explain, as if they hadn't heard this too many times to count.

"And our great-grandfather," supplied Amy.

"That's right. That fire burned for four days and four nights after Charles Susland turned Leaping Star

away from the house, until, finally, he rode up the mountainside. He only did it then to still his new wife Annalee. If she hadn't been expecting a baby he'd have ignored her blathering and vapors. She'd given him one son already, but he wanted many sons.

"The Crow woman rose slowly when he rode into her camp and spoke to her."

From long custom, Marti automatically dropped her voice to gruffly speak her ancestor's part.

" 'I told you when you came to the house—you have no place here.'

" 'This is my place, my only place, my people's place,' Leaping Star told him. 'They brought you to it when you took me as wife. They helped you. And you took our place.'

" 'Far Hills is mine. I built it. Your people didn't make anything of this land, I did. And now your place is the reservation. Go back, Leaping Star.'

" 'Your children die there. White Deer and Yellow Sky died at the full moon. Runs At Dawn is very weak.'

Amy drew in an audible breath of sympathy.

" 'Then go take care of her.'

" 'There is nothing left in me. Only enough to come to you, Charles Susland. Care for our daughter or she will die.'

" 'I can't go running off leaving Far Hills. And I have a son now. A white son. He'll learn to build something on this land instead of roaming like a pack of animals.' He pivoted his horse.

" 'Charles Susland.'

"He would have kept riding if he could have, but Leaping Star's will was too strong.

" 'You turn away from your children, so your blood will be alone. You turn away from my people, so your blood will have no home. You turn away from me, so your blood will be lost. Only when someone loves enough to undo your wrongs will the laughter of children live beyond its echo in Far Hills.' "

Marti paused. As she always did here.

“One more night the fire burned on the overlook. And then it went out.”

At Marti’s final hushed words, a log shifted on their small fire and dimmed the flames.

Dale emitted a ghostly laugh, “And so you’re all doomed—*cursed!* Just like everybody in town says—the Far Hills Curse, that’s why all those Suslands die like flies.”

“Shut up, Dale,” ordered Amy. “You don’t know anything about it—you’re not a Susland.”

“So what. Neither’s Luke!”

Luke calmly watched Dale and Amy, but contributed nothing to the dispute his name had been dragged into.

“He’s a lot closer than you’ll ever be, because he’s part of Far Hills Ranch.”

“Big deal. And Ellyn isn’t even—”

“How could he not go back to his children?” Kendra’s voice trembled, but it seemed to be with outrage, not tears.

“Maybe he didn’t know how to be a father.” Grif stared into the fire as he spoke. “Some men just don’t.”

Marti licked her dry lips, tasting the whisper of winter coming. “There’s one more part I’ve never told you before.”

All eyes turned to her.

“But now . . . now I think I have to tell you. In case there’s not another time . . . in case we’re not all together again.”

Marti swallowed and resumed her story-telling voice. “Leaping Star said one more thing to Charles Susland. ‘If these wrongs are not righted in five generations of your blood, then they will never be undone, and Far Hills will be ever silent.’ ”

Amy’s wide eyes stared at her. “What does that mean?”

“It means somebody who had Charles Susland as an ancestor needs to make right all those things he did wrong,” said Kendra. “But there are others besides us,

aren't there?"

Grif shook his head. "I remember Mom showing me a family tree. Lots of people died off young and—"

"Just like I said!" crowed Dale.

"—that means the group of us sitting here are the last of Charles Susland's descendants. But even if you believe in this sort of thing, Aunt Marti, how could folks living now make right something that happened a hundred years ago?"

"If I knew, Grif, I'd do it, no matter what."

By his widening eyes, she could see her nephew recognized her words gave away that she *did* believe.

"All I know is that Amy and I are the last to carry the Susland name, but it will be our children, if we have any, and you, Grif, and you, Kendra, who must make sure the curse is lifted. Because you're the fifth generation of Charles Susland's blood.

"You're the last hope of Far Hills."

CHAPTER ONE

"I am *not* cursed."

Kendra Jenner set the mug on the wood table with an emphatic *clunk*. The gesture lost a good deal of its effect because the mug resembled the head of a cartoon duck, complete with blue bill. It was her son's favorite.

"First of all, the entire idea of that legend is absurd," Kendra declared. "And second—"

"Oh, I don't know—" started her friend and neighbor, Ellyn Sinclair.

"And second," Kendra repeated, "I'm not a Susland."

"Not by name, but Charles was your ancestor, right?"

Kendra opened her mouth to reply, but a more pressing matter intruded.

"Mo' doose."

Kendra looked at her son seated beside her at their kitchen table. Despite the familiar swell of love that always twinned with an ache of loss, she kept her voice light. "Only if you'll drink it this time instead of using it as hair mouse."

Matthew, his thick, dark hair displaying new and interesting spikes, ignored that caveat and returned to the heart of the matter, hands opening and closing as he reached for the mug. "Mo' doose."

"Single-minded child you have there," Ellyn said with a smile from across the table. She had arrived early for their meeting, catching Matthew in the midst of a lunch where more food went on than in. Although Meg and Ben Sinclair were school-age now, as a widowed mother of two, Ellyn had taken in the situation—including, no doubt, Kendra's frazzled state—served herself coffee and took a chair at a safe distance. "Must take after his mother."

You wouldn't think so if you met his father.

The thought came before Kendra could stop it, and so did the ache. She pushed both away.

“Determination is a good quality,” she said as she gave her son the mug. “Both hands, Matthew.”

“Doose.” He drank loudly then raised his head to beam her a smile. “Dank you.”

Matthew’s smile eased some of her tiredness. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

“Hello, sorry we’re late.” The back door opened to Marti Susland and her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Emily.

“Come on in, Marti.”

Kendra had stopped calling Marti Susland “aunt” so long before she had come back to Far Hills to live that she couldn’t remember exactly when she’d started viewing the older woman as an equal. Maybe it had been when Amy died, leaving Kendra and Marti united in grief. Since Kendra’s return to Far Hills, she and Marti and Ellyn had formed a support system built on friendship and all being single parents.

“I’d like to blame it on traffic—” Kendra and Ellyn chuckled, since Marti lived just up the private road at the Far Hills home ranch. She shook her head, setting her mixed brown and gray chin-length hair swishing. “—but I fear I’m getting slower and slower. Sometimes keeping up with Emily makes me feel like I’m a relic from history, instead of researching it.”

They were meeting today to organize their work on a freelance local history supplement to the *Far Hills Banner*, where both Ellyn and Kendra worked part-time. Using Marti’s research, Kendra would do the writing and Ellyn the graphics and layout. Kendra had the extra income earmarked for her son’s college fund.

Matthew’s interest was riveted on Marti’s daughter, a dark-haired, dark-eyed sprite. He craned his head around the side of the high chair to call hello, then whipped his head back to his mother.

“Down. Down.” he ordered, already trying to undo the tray.

“First you need to be cleaned up, young man, or the first time you touch Emily the two of you will be permanently bonded.” Wiping the worst of the damage from Matthew’s scrunched up face and squirming arms, hands and neck, Kendra added to Marti, “You’re not late at all. We’ll get the kids situated and then get to work.”

“Down, p’ease. Down.”

Kendra lifted Matthew’s sturdy body and swung him down to the floor. He made a beeline for his friend.

Emily eyed him askance. “You dirty?”

“No dirty,” Matthew denied. He raised his small hands palms up in a gesture of reassurance. A memory blindsided Kendra. *His father had made that exact gesture to her.*

“Kendra?”

She blinked back to the present to find Marti and Ellyn staring, clearly waiting a response to something she hadn’t heard.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

“Not much,” Marti said, “The truck battery is truly dead, so I hooked a ride with Luke when he came to start fixing that fence so you won’t have cattle in your yard anymore.”

Luke Chandler was foreman of the Far Hills Ranch, but all three women’s households relied on his skill and generosity as general fix-it man.

“Do you need a ride to the babysitting co-op meeting tonight?”

“No, that’s okay, Luke’s going to run me in to town later this afternoon to get a new battery. He said he could get it in in time for me to meet Fran for supper before the meeting. So, Kendra, do you want to set the kids up in the den? I brought a couple of Emily’s favorite videotapes.”

“Sure. That’s fine.”

She joined Marti in arranging their children in the small den off the kitchen with Matthew still thrilled enough at seeing Emily to accede to her demand to watch “The Little Mermaid.”

“This is quiet time, Matthew and Emily,” Marti instructed as the adults returned to the kitchen. “If you can’t be quiet together, it will be nap time. Understand? Emily? Matthew?”

Already lured into the movie, they responded with absent nods.

“Go sit down, Marti, and I’ll get your coffee,” Kendra offered.

“Thanks. I finally got those prints you each asked for from Matthew’s birthday party. I figured I better do it fast or his next birthday would be on top of us.” She placed two packets of pictures on the table. “So, how far have you gotten?”

“We haven’t even started.”

“Except to talk about the curse.” A glint of mischief lit Ellyn’s eyes as she tucked curling strands of rich brown hair back into a loose knot at her nape. Kendra was glad to see Ellyn’s humor returning after Dale Sinclair’s death, she just wished Ellyn had found a different topic.

“It’s not a curse, it’s a legend. And I wish you’d never badgered me into telling you about it,” Kendra grumbled as she wiped remnants of Matthew’s lunch from the table and high chair.

“I just wanted a few details filled in. You forget—I heard it all long ago during our summers together. But it wasn’t until you moved back that I started thinking part of the Susland curse fell on you.”

Kendra snorted as she placed coffee in front of Marti.

“Why do you think Kendra is cursed?” Marti asked with a seriousness that caused Kendra to try to catch Ellyn’s eye to warn her off.

Ellyn missed the signal. “Being cursed would explain things about her that are hard to figure out otherwise.”

“Like what?”

“Like why a woman with Kendra’s talent is reporting for the *Far Hills Banner* instead of the network

like she used to and—”

“A lifestyle choice makes—”

“And,” Ellyn overrode her, “like why a woman like Kendra is alone and—”

“I’m not alone. I have Matthew and all my friends here, including you two. Unless,” she added darkly, “you keep talking about this ridiculous legend, and then I’ll have one less friend.”

Kendra’s protest didn’t stop Ellyn from adding, “And it explains why you look like hell.”

Kendra pushed her hair back from her forehead with both hands, then propped her elbows on the table. “Thanks a lot, Ellyn. Compliments are not going to get you out of your share of work on this supplement.”

“I mean it—you look like hell. Or at least as much like hell as you ever look. You have that annoying habit of looking pulled together and cool even when you’re not.”

“You do look washed out, Kendra,” Marti contributed.

“I’m tired, I suppose. Now, about the section—”

“Ah-hah!” said Ellyn. “You had the dream again, didn’t you?”

“What dream?” Marti asked.

The dream. The dream that whispered into Kendra’s not-quite asleep mind like the softest breeze fluttering silk against her skin.

The first year she’d fought both the dream and the memories. Now she knew fighting did no good, especially not against the dream.

It lifted her out of herself, carried her against her will from her orderly, practical life in Far Hills, Wyoming, taking her back . . . back to Santa Estella . . . back to those fear-drenched hours . . . back to *him*.

She opened the packet of pictures in front of her with a show of examining them.

“I didn’t sleep very well.”

Ellyn shook her head, dismissing that excuse. “I remember that look from when the kids and I stayed with

you.”

“What dream?” Marti repeated.

Ellyn turned to her. “The one that made her cry out during the night and look like this in the morning. It happened a couple times in the week we stayed here during the work on Ridge House.”

With troubled eyes, Marti stared at Kendra. “A nightmare?”

Kendra put her hand over the older woman's. “Not really.”

During her childhood visits to Far Hills, Kendra had seen Marti as a distant figure, as remote from her as her mother. Kendra had known Marti through Amy's eyes then—how Marti had taken over the ranch and raised Amy when their father and Amy's mother had died. Amy had later been Kendra's college roommate and closest friend. When a car accident killed Amy, grief brought Marti and Kendra together in a bond that endured even as the grief eased.

When Kendra's life shifted irrevocably three years ago, it had seemed right to turn to Marti.

Their new relationship was cemented when Kendra helped Marti adopt Emily from an orphanage on Santa Estella, a small island off the coast of South America, shortly before Matthew's birth.

Since she'd returned to Far Hills, Kendra had come to an even greater appreciation of Marti's strength, generosity—

“So what is this not-exactly-a-nightmare about?”

—and tenacity.

Kendra sighed. “It's . . . the hurricane.”

“That's all?” Ellyn said. “The hurricane?”

“Don't you think that's enough? I could have been killed. It was the most frightened I've been in my life.” Her laugh grated on her own ears. “And it was the stupidest I've been in my life. I should have left with my crew instead of hanging around trying to get a scoop on Taumaturgio.”

“Taumaturgio?” Ellyn stumbled over the

pronunciation.

“It means miracle worker. A legend on Santa Estella. Sort of a cross between the Scarlet Pimpernel and Robin Hood. Some authorities there were incredibly corrupt, lining their pockets with proceeds from aid meant for the island’s children. Taumaturgio ‘liberated’ supplies before the officials could sell them, and he took them to the children. He also flew kids who desperately needed specialized medical care into the United States—highly illegal. But the doctors who treated the kids weren’t about to turn him in.”

“Sounds like someone worth knowing,” Ellyn said.

“Certainly someone worth doing a story on,” Kendra said dryly. “Oh, how I wanted to do the story . . . But that’s a pretty weak excuse for being stupid.”

“Some stupid things have good results.” Ellyn glanced toward the spread of snapshots taken at Matthew’s birthday.

“Yes.” Kendra looked at the laughing face of her son, caught by the camera as he stood on a chair contemplating the possibility he could defy nature and fly. He was a miracle in every minute of her life. She would never—could never—regret having him.

That didn’t change her stupidity. Barely two days of madness had turned her practical life upside down.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Ellyn asked.

“About what?”

“The dream.”

“Not sleep?” Kendra suggested.

“Looks like you’ve tried that. I should have said about making the dream stop.”

“Believe me, I tried. I’ve given up. So I lose some sleep. I’ll survive. I was tired when Matthew was a newborn and when he was teething and God knows I’ve been tired since he started walking—”

“I told you to enjoy the peace when he was crawling,” said Ellyn. “Wait until he goes to school and comes home with his first bloody nose.”

"Hellfire, wait until he goes on his first date," added Marti, who'd gone through that phase as surrogate mother to Amy.

Kendra groaned, then they all shared a grin.

"But I suspect that doesn't have anything to do with this dream," Marti said. Oh, yes, she had tenacity to spare.

"It's not—"

"You should go after him."

Ellyn's pronouncement surprised Kendra into an unguarded, "What?"

"You should go after Paulo."

"Who's Paulo?" Marti asked.

"I don't know," Ellyn admitted. "But I've got some ideas."

They both turned to Kendra, who said, "He's no one."

"Okay," Ellyn said. "You have no reason to tell me who Paulo is, but I know he's not no one, because that's the name you call out like your heart's breaking right before you wake up. But I do understand if you don't want to talk abo—"

"No, Ellyn, you don't understand. He's really no one. He doesn't exist. I mean, the man exists. Or he did. The man who . . . Let's just say Hurricane Aretha brought us together, and when it passed, there was no reason to stay together."

"Wasn't there?" Ellyn asked with a significant look toward the den doorway where Matthew and Emily were visible.

"You're right. He was Matthew's father. But Paulo doesn't exist."

"I don't understand." Marti said.

"I'm not sure I understand myself," Kendra admitted. "He rescued me, he kept me safe—" *He gave me Matthew.* "And afterward, he took me back to the American consulate and disappeared."

"He just disappeared?" Marti's voice was harsh.

"I asked at the consulate—but no one knew him. I

was evacuated from the island as soon as they repaired the runways. When I got back to the States I tried to forget. It should have been easy, because the ironic thing is my reports on the hurricane did for my career what I'd hoped the Taumaturgio story could do. Then, I found out I was pregnant . . .”

She remembered shaking as she'd dialed Marti's phone number. Marti had simply said to come home to Far Hills.

“I tried to contact him. I advertised he had a reward coming. I called the consulate and asked for help finding a man named Paulo Ayudor. The storm killed a thousand people, and more died afterward, and I wondered . . . But he wasn't on any of the lists. Nothing.”

“You mean you told the consulate you were expecting the man's child, and they didn't help?”

“I didn't tell the consulate official. It was none of his business, besides . . .”

“You weren't sure if Paulo would run even further,” Ellyn filled in softly.

Kendra didn't answer. She didn't have to. So many times she'd wondered if Paulo had seen her efforts to contact him . . .

“You feared he would turn his back on his child.”

Marti's voice sounded a little odd to Kendra, but Ellyn didn't seem to notice, asking, “What happened?”

“The man at the consulate shunted me off to local officials. One told me Paulo Ayudor was the name of a character in island folklore. Santa Estella's Johnny Appleseed. Only he planted miracles—helping people in their direst hour of need. A close relation,” she said with a twist to her mouth, “of Taumaturgio.”

Ellyn's eyes widened. “Oh, my . . . You mean Paulo was—”

“I don't know. I've wondered. From the little description I got of Taumaturgio, it could have been. How would that be for irony? The man I'd sought all over Santa Estella was the one who ended up—”

Sound erupted from the small room off the kitchen.

“Mermaid!” declared Emily.

“No!” responded Matthew with his new favorite word. “No Mermay! No. No!”

Kendra and Marti swooped in and efficiently settled the dispute with the Solomon-like option of putting both children down for naps in Matthew’s room. They sat down again only to have the front door bell ring.

“Who on earth . . . ?” Locals used the kitchen door.

“Must be somebody who got lost,” Marti suggested.

“Or a salesman. I’ll get rid of him.” Kendra started to rise, but Ellyn put her hand on her shoulder as she passed behind her.

“I’ll do it. I can use the practice,” she added with a smile. “Remember me? No more Ms. Nice Guy.”

They heard the squeak of the front door hinges, unaccustomed to being opened, then a male voice.

“Is this the home of Kendra Jenner?”

“Yes.”

“Never answer their questions,” Marti murmured.

But the overheard exchange absorbed all of Kendra’s attention.

“May I speak with her, please.”

Kendra’s heartbeat stuttered. That voice . . . She’d heard it before, hadn’t she?

“I’ll ask if she can see you. What’s your name?”

“Daniel Delligatti.”

The name meant nothing. But the voice nagged at her. Familiar, but not quite . . . right. She had stood when Ellyn appeared.

“Who is he?” Marti asked.

“I don’t know, but . . . there’s something about him.”

“There’s something about serial killers, too,” Kendra said grimly. “I know, I know. My cynicism is showing. I’ll see him.”

Aware Ellyn and Marti followed her closely, she turned the corner from the kitchen, staring down the

short hallway created between the back of the couch and the wall, toward the man who stood at her front door.

Late August sunlight from the small windows across the top of the door backlit the figure. But she could see more than enough.

The clothes were vastly different—a soft blue oxford cloth shirt tucked into faded jeans instead of near rags. The hair was different, too, shorter and the waves mostly tamed by a precise cut. But the features were unchanged. She knew the strong jaw line and penetrating dark eyes in less than a heartbeat.

She should know them. She saw them every day. They were the features of her son.

And she saw them many nights in her dreams.

“Paulo.”

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