

NOT A
FAMILY
MAN

Patricia McLinn

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To Bill, who
—after he stopped laughing—
answered all my questions.

Thanks!

Chapter One

“Guinevere Peters. What the hell kind of name is Guinevere?”

Tucker Gates absorbed the glare that accompanied Deaver’s outraged words without flinching. He’d been absorbing those glares nearly full-time for fifteen years now. They hardly nicked him these days. And this one wasn’t even truly directed at him. He was just handy.

“The kind of name that belongs to someone about as likely to take an interest in the Double Bar X and Park County. Wyoming, as you are to start collecting Faberge eggs,” Tucker said calmly.

“Eggs? What’d I wanna collect eggs for? Manny gets ’em at the store these days.”

“My point exactly.”

“Eggs! Why’re you yammerin’ about eggs when we got something serious to discuss? Don’t even keep chickens around the place anymore! Eggs?”

Tucker took a deep swallow of the thick brew that spurted caffeine directly into his tired bloodstream.

“What is there to discuss?”

“What? This Guinevere, that’s what!”

“I don’t see that it makes any difference if it’s Guinevere Peters or Etienne de Salare who officially owns the Double Bar X. We’ll have as much contact with Guinevere as we had with Etienne a few years back. Probably less.”

Deaver had recovered sufficiently to give a bit of his cackling laugh. “That’s right. I’d about forgot his secretary calling that time to find out if we were close enough to Aspen for the big boss to stop by between runs down the ski slopes.” He cackled again. “Yeah, you gave that

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Frenchy a geography lesson, and we didn't hear any more from 'em."

"Only the occasional official correspondence. And that's all we'll hear from this Guinevere Peters."

"But I thought the French guy sold the Double Bar to the Ferrington bunch."

"He did. And we heard even less from Ferrington Corporation when de Salare sold them the Double Bar. Now we've been officially informed—" he held up the letter he'd been reading to Deaver "—that Ferrington Corporation has sold it to Guinevere Peters."

Actually, judging by the letter's date, they'd been informed more than a month ago, but experience had taught Tucker that letters from corporations were easily left on hold when things got busy around the Double Bar—and with cows dropping calves in bursts now, busy didn't start to describe it. Seemed to him there were a couple more Ferrington envelopes in the stack on his desk. He'd get to them eventually. If that didn't suit them, they'd call.

"We're being passed around like a hot potato," grumbled Deaver.

Tucker shrugged. "Doesn't make any difference to us who owns the Double Bar. Doesn't change when calving season comes or which fences need tending or how much rain we get."

He looked out the window into April's chill dark, almost believing he could see the familiar acres reaching toward the peaked skyline. Or the nearby buildings where he and Deaver would likely spend the night helping a couple more cows bring calves into the world. Why'd the creatures always seem to choose to be born in the middle of the night?

In reality, the window reflected back a room almost as familiar as the scene beyond it, and considerably warmer. He saw bookshelves, filing cabinets and an oversize desk from which he'd run the Double Bar X for more than a decade under three—no, this latest one made it four—

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absentee owners.

As far as he was concerned, having learned the lesson early and hard, those were the only kind of people to work for. The kind who stayed the hell away, and out of his life while he ran their business.

“Time to relieve Manny and Karl. Let’s go.”

“But, geez, Tucker, bein’ owned by a woman.”

Tucker fought down a grin. Except that his voice hit the lower registers, old Deave sounded just like a kid horrified by the notion of playing with girls.

“It won’t make any difference, Deaver. You’ll see.”

* * * *

Jenny knew the silence from the back seat was ominous.

But she was too grateful to care.

She didn’t know how much longer she could have withstood the whining—terrible to call your own children whiners, but she’d finally learned to call a spade a spade. And Greg and Debbie had been whining. In spades.

Whining while they closed up the house. Whining while they waited at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. Whining in the air and whining on the ground during the delay in Denver. The flight to Wyoming had provided something of a respite, but only because they couldn’t be heard over the commuter plane engine without shouting. They’d more than made up for it when she’d insisted the three of them take the rental car and drive directly to the ranch instead of spending a night in the Cody Holiday Inn.

“You’re going to deny us a final night in civilization?” her daughter had demanded tragically.

That remark had felt like a special betrayal. Barely a year older than Greg’s nine, Debbie had always been the quieter, more observant and blessedly less critical of her children.

She’d had to make the decision to go on to the ranch without making a stop. She could feel her own will eroding under the tension of the trip, her children’s unrelenting resistance and the cumulative effect of a year’s worth of

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drastic changes.

Jenny hadn't even stopped to cancel the hotel reservation. She feared if she stepped into the impersonal comfort of the lobby, she'd just curl up on the floor until somebody came and took care of her.

When she realized she'd taken the wrong highway out of Cody, she didn't turn back, unwilling to get even that close to temptation. Instead, she kept going, reading the map by the overhead light found only after fumbling around the strange car with no help from her children.

At least there was little traffic on the road, so if she wove across the center line it didn't really matter. This was a strange sensation for someone who'd always kept her path carefully inside the yellow lines.

She turned onto the narrow road the map promised would carry her back toward where she wanted to go.

"This is the middle of nowhere," Greg wailed.

"It's not the middle of anywhere," Debbie corrected grimly. "Not even nowhere. It's gotta be the outer edge of nowhere."

Jenny didn't answer. She needed every bit of energy just to keep going through the dark, unpopulated landscape.

It was barely ten o'clock, but it had the feel of the small hours of the morning—that deserted, lonely, isolated feeling of the darkest hours. It felt familiar.

Occasionally, a light betrayed an inhabited outpost. But now she didn't feel drawn to them, no urge to stop the car, knock on the door and ask to be taken in.

She stopped keeping track of time or miles. In the quiet, she found she wanted to keep hurtling along through the dark, with the black silhouette of mountains to her left and the unknown all around her, even behind her.

"That's it, isn't it? Don't you see the sign?"

She hadn't. And she wouldn't have if Greg hadn't pointed it out. She would have kept driving until the tires stopped rolling. It had been so hard to get started, she wasn't sure what would happen when she stopped.

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She turned sharply into the road, spraying gravel onto the paved surface they'd just left, and jolting the car over the ruts. All three of them let out grunts as fannies reconnected with car seats.

"Geez, Mom!"

"Sorry. I'm sor—" She bit it off. No more apologizing. Once her tires found the ruts instead of fighting them, it wasn't too bad. Really not much worse than sections of the Edens Expressway that hadn't been repaved lately. Although, Jenny realized as she looked at the speedometer, for the same amount of suspension-jolting, she would be going sixty miles an hour there instead of the nine here.

Bare-limbed trees lined the road, creating a winding ribbon of darkness. The silence in the back seat tightened, and she felt as if she'd been driving on this dirt road for twice as long as she'd been on the highway. Despite the gloves she wore, her fingers were so cold it hurt to bend them, so she held the steering wheel mostly with her thumbs and palms.

Another curve. But at the same time, the road widened and the trees stepped back, opening for a circular road. She slowed almost to a stop.

The loop enclosed a patch of earth about a hundred feet wide. At its opposite side stood a two-story farmhouse, painted yellow and with only one first-story window lit. Behind it and to the right stood a massive barn in faded red, plus angles and slices of buildings that suggested a hodgepodge of structures of varying purposes and vintages. Floodlights atop three poles lit the scene.

She followed the road around. To the right of the farmhouse it widened into an area that once might have been graveled. She tried to look at everything at once, to sort the impressions and questions. From the silence behind her, she suspected the children were doing the same.

With a city-dweller's instinct, she pulled the car into the

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most brightly lit area. She didn't notice it was also the wettest area until the car stopped moving forward, although the wheels kept turning.

"Oh, great! Now we're stuck!"

She gritted her teeth at Greg's too-perfect rendering of his father's tone.

"Since we aren't going anywhere else, it doesn't matter. Let's get out."

She couldn't stretch her leg quite far enough to avoid getting a swatch of mud on her polished flats, but she reached dry land and had time to look around while her children skirmished over which side to exit, what path to take and the "grossness" of the trip through the mud.

The stark lighting gave the buildings the otherworldly, faintly ominous appearance of an Edward Hopper painting. Beyond them was night so dark it seemed to have substance and weight.

"Just a barn," Jenny muttered to herself, pushing back her growing unease. A barn, a shed of some sort and a, uh, a garage, maybe, and. . . She had no idea what the other buildings were.

A man came out of the building to their right that Jenny had identified as the barn, and eyed them while he wiped his hands on a bandanna. He was no taller than Jenny's five foot six and wiry except for a gentle bulge over the top of his jeans. His hair was what her mother used to describe as salt-and-pepper, because Alexandra Ferrington would have considered it impolite to actually say someone was going gray. In this case, the salt had the upper hand, and the pepper had started off as cayenne.

With her best smile, Jenny started forward, but moving cautiously to avoid the generous number of mudholes. Was ice forming a glistening skin on their tops? So much for spring.

"Tucker!"

The man's bellow made Jenny jump and stop abruptly. It even quieted the disgruntled mutterings from her

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children.

A door opened in a small building to their left and someone emerged, so brightly backlit that the figure appeared merely as a man's lanky silhouette.

"Visitors," the first man announced with a jerk of his head toward where Jenny stood, uncertain whether to move ahead, turn back or face this newcomer.

"Help you, ma'am?" The voice was a slightly raspy drawl, marginally polite but not patient.

Before she could form an answer, Greg gave a disgusted snort from behind her. "Yeah, she could use a lot of help."

The figure shifted slightly, apparently to take in Greg, slouching in his baggy pants and oversize Bulls T-shirt under the already abused lightweight ski jacket he'd just gotten that winter. Something in the tenor of that indiscernible look spoke of disapproval, and, as often as she'd tried to get Greg to straighten up—posture, as well as attitude—she tensed.

The figure turned back toward her.

"Need directions, ma'am?"

"No, I—"

"Yeah, which way is Chicago?"

Why couldn't Greg shut up?

This time the figure turned more fully toward Greg, and she saw the outline of a sharp chin and, when he pushed back the low brim of his cowboy hat, a strong forehead and straight nose.

Even before he spoke, his body language had her motherly instincts on alert to defend her offspring from a putdown. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Maybe one putdown wouldn't be so bad. She'd been listening to Greg's snide delivery since first light and she was tired, so tired. . . .

"Well," the figure drawled. "Right offhand, I'd say it's east of here a ways."

The first man made a derisive sound, but Greg opened his mouth for another round, too young, too full of himself

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to know he'd lost the last one.

"Actually," Jenny interposed, "we were looking for the Double Bar X Ranch."

The man turned to her, caution more than welcome evident in his posture and tone. "You found it."

She let out a breath she hadn't been aware of holding. "Thank heavens."

"What do you want here?" demanded the first man, older, shorter and squatter than the silhouetted figure.

"We're staying here."

"The hell you are!" the older man exclaimed.

"Mom?" Debbie sounded shaky.

Jenny felt shaky too, but forced herself to stand straight. "We are staying here, Mr., uh . . . mister." Strong start, weak finish. "It was arranged through Ferrington, because. . ."

Because, not knowing how to go about it, she'd let her father's office take over. She'd told herself it was because she had so many other things to arrange, but here in this starkly lit oasis amid foreign darkness, she knew the truth. She squared her shoulders. She grimaced inwardly. She still had a long way to go. But that was exactly why she'd come to Wyoming.

"Owners!" The older man grumbled under his breath and turned his head toward the darkness behind him.

From the sound, Jenny suspected he'd spit, but at least she didn't see it.

The lanky silhouette moved forward into the light, resolving into a lanky man wearing jeans and a blue work shirt stained by a long day. Strong arms emerged from rolled-up sleeves, with dark hair curling below the cowboy hat whose brim shadowed his face. With those three slow steps, he'd taken command of the spotlight without even trying. Jenny realized everybody was waiting for him to speak. If she had gumption, she'd take charge, she'd. . .

"There's been a mix-up, ma'am. Ferrington no longer owns the Double Bar X."

He was so sure of himself, her apology came

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automatically. "I'm sorry if there's been a mix-up, but—"

The slightly raspy voice rode right over her explanation.

"We'll straighten that out later. What we'll do now is put you folks up for the night—"

"What! Tucker—"

"Deaver." The even-toned word sounded more quelling than a shout. "It's late. It would take 'em an hour or more to get back to Cody. You want to send a woman and two children back out this time of night?"

She noticed he hadn't bothered to ask her what she wanted to do.

"Wouldn't bother me a bit," the older man said staunchly.

One side of the lanky man's mouth lifted. At least she thought it did. It was hard to tell amid the shadows and dark stubble on his face.

"Well, we're not going to. We're going to put them up for the night. Then we'll set this straight in the morning. In the meantime, I'm Tucker Gates, general manager of the Double Bar X. And this member of the local welcoming committee is Deaver Smith."

"You're the manager?"

Maybe he heard something more in her voice than simple relief, because his "yes" had an echo of wariness.

"Then we don't have to wait until morning to straighten this out. It's very simple. These are my children, Greg and Debbie, and I'm Jenny Peters—Guinevere Peters—and I'm the new owner of the Double Bar X."

Tucker Gates said nothing.

What Deaver Smith said had more to do with what street sweepers clean up after horse-drawn wagons come through than with the neighborhood welcoming committee.

* * * *

If she'd known what was in store for her, she might have stayed in Illinois. In fact, she might have stayed in bed.

It wasn't the welcome Jenny would have hoped for.

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Heaven knows the kids' response hadn't been what she would have hoped for. Not even this house was what she would have hoped for.

Up close, the yellow exterior could use at least a good washing and the back porch that a still-silent Tucker Gates led them across needed a wholesale cleaning. Everything that Jenny saw testified to the need for attention—not only the clumps of mud scraped loose just short of the door and left to dry into deformed bricks, but the broken step stool, the plastic bucket with a tear in its side and a nearly bald broom that rested on similar detritus mercifully hidden in the shadows.

The inside wasn't much better, though in a different way. With one exception, the rooms she glimpsed as their ragged procession trailed Tucker Gates's long strides were clear of all extraneous decoration. In fact they were lifeless. Sheets covered large shapes that could be a sofa, a chair, a dining-room table, but in the dim light they resembled huge, wily beasts—or an overcrowded graveyard with blank headstones. The drapes were closed, the walls bare.

With no offer of help with their luggage from either Tucker Gates or Deaver Smith, they'd each grabbed the overnight case Jenny had insisted they carry on-board "in case." She'd been thinking along the lines of lost luggage, not a sojourn in the Addams Family mansion.

She didn't even reprimand Greg when he let the leather end of his bag bump, bump, bump against the wall as they went up the stairs.

On the shadowy second floor, the Double Bar X's manager bundled covering sheets off two single beds in one poorly lit room and off another single in a second room, stirring faint clouds of dust that drew a triplet sneeze from the travelers.

Pointing first to one hall door, then another, he said, "Bathroom. Closet." With that, he headed downstairs.

Greg and Debbie stared at her wordlessly. Reproach shouted from their nearly identical blue eyes. At least they

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were too tired, or too horrified, to say the words out loud.

Jenny forced a smile. “Debbie, why don’t you use the bathroom first, while Greg and I start on the beds?”

Her daughter dredged up a sigh from the depths of her soul as she picked up her overnight tote. “I am not sleeping in the same room with him,” she declared, and sailed off toward the bathroom with the dignity of a queen who’d just tossed off a law or two.

“Yeah? Well, I wouldn’t let you share my room anyhow. Not even in this rat hole!”

Jenny cravenly dived into the linen closet before they could decide to turn their united discontent on her.

Cedar-chip sachets hadn’t quite defeated the mustiness of disuse; it floated out as she made the beds with token help from Greg. The rooms held the same aura of desertion, and even the bracing air that flowed in when she opened a window in each room did not completely dispel it.

In fact, the only exception she’d seen to that air of desertion was the kitchen, the first room they’d come through. It had suffered from the effects of being too much used—counters were cluttered and open spaces dulled with patches of something certainly sticky, while dirty dishes littered the sink, and the floor bore testament to the fact that not all the mud had been scraped off outside the door.

Stereo sneezes followed her from the bedrooms where Debbie and Greg had begrudgingly settled as she started down the stairs in search of that kitchen. She’d longed to collapse into the remaining bed—mustiness and all—but after the reaction from Tucker Gates and Deaver Smith, she feared she’d dream all night of being packed up and dumped back in Cody before she knew it. She was too new at all this. She needed to assert her right to be here before she’d rest easy.

At the base of the stairs, she heard voices coming from the vicinity of a lighted rectangle halfway down the dark hallway that crossed the back of the house, the opposite

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direction from the kitchen. Without thinking about it, she kept her approach quiet as she followed the voices.

“You said this wouldn’t happen,” Deaver’s tone reproached.

“You said that already.”

“Well, how did it happen?”

“I don’t know. But it’s not the end of the world.”

From just outside the open door of what appeared to be an office, Jenny could see Tucker Gates sitting behind a large, plain desk, clearly at home in that position of authority. Despite the hat he still wore, she could see him clearly for the first time. Between dark brows and sharp slashes of cheekbones, his eyes were black and unrevealing. Below a straight nose slightly flared at the end, curved grooves flanked a firm-lined mouth. He was not an easy man, for all the relaxed way he’d hooked an arm over the back of his chair, twisting his broad shoulders.

“Near enough for my taste.” From the position of Deaver’s worn boots—the only part of him visible to Jenny—he sat across the desk from Tucker. “I’d think you’d be the last person to be wanting a couple kids running around the place. The very last person on God’s green earth.”

Tucker said nothing, his expression remaining unchanged, yet Jenny would have sworn the tension level multiplied.

Deaver’s grumbling went on unabated. “Bad enough to be bossed by a woman, but —”

“I’m the boss of the Double Bar.”

Tucker Gates was very sure of himself. So sure that Jenny found herself disproportionately relieved at the appearance of twin creases between his eyebrows. At least he was human enough to show that one small sign of concern or discomfort or uncertainty.

“Yeah, but she’s the owner. And she’s here.”

“Not for long.”

A beat of silence followed.

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“What you got in mind to do, Tucker?” Deaver voiced the question rumbling in Jenny’s head.

“Not going to do anything. Not going to need to. You saw those kids. You saw her. They won’t be sticking around. Just relax.”

Deaver’s relieved chuckle approached a cackle.

Jenny felt no inclination to laugh.

Sometimes in life you had to take a stand. She’d spent most of her life not realizing that. Placating, doing what was expected of her, pleasing others, never rocking the boats other people put her in. In fact, the only real stand she’d taken was divorcing Edward.

In the fourteen months since then, she’d started changing, remaking herself into the person she’d always wanted to be. Now she saw that what had appeared as giant leaps were merely small steps, often as not aided by her father and his wife, Liz, and all leading her to this. Would she turn tail and run before the disapproval of some stranger now?

How the second stand of her life came to be occurring in the office of a Wyoming ranch house some time after midnight on a chilly spring night, she was too tired to unravel at the moment. But a stand it was—and it wouldn’t be the last one, not if the new Jenny Peters was to survive.

“Mr. Gates. Mr. Smith.” Jenny breezed into the room pretending to be blind to both Deaver Smith’s jolt of displeased surprise and Tucker Gates’s narrow-eyed look from her to the dark doorway. Avoiding the other chair pulled up in front of the desk, she removed a shuffle of papers from a worn wing-back by the fireplace and sat down, consciously aligning her forearms on the leather arms in a position of at-ease authority.

“Mr. Gates, please make yourself comfortable by removing your hat.”

She’d been wrong about his black eyes being unrevealing. They revealed in quick succession irritation, begrudging amusement and then the confidence that allowed him

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to acknowledge an opponent's hit.

Without a word, he removed the hat, running his free hand straight back through black hair in an automatic gesture. The hair, well-cut at some point in the not-too-recent past and not trimmed since, curled slightly around his fingers and over the collar of his blue work shirt.

"Thought you'd gone to bed, Mrs. Peters."

"Yes, I imagine you did." Surprised at her own temerity, she met his look steadily. Let him wonder if she'd been listening, and what she might have heard. This uprooting your life, going a thousand miles west, being exhausted and encountering someone who expected you to be weak could be incredibly bracing. "But I've managed temporarily to resist the lure of these . . . accommodations."

He didn't look the least abashed by the state of the house.

His black eyes surveyed her. Not in a sexual way, but like an art critic viewing the latest work by an artist he didn't like. She was abruptly aware that this was probably the first time he could see her clearly. She wished she'd taken time to wash up. Her face was probably pale, her eyes shadowed and her hair ruffled. Not an appearance likely to instill employees with respect for the new owner.

A doubt hit her full force. "You *were* informed by the Ferrington corporate office, weren't you?"

"They wrote and told us the Double Bar'd been sold off again, yes."

Maybe the excessive blandness of his voice prompted her to pursue it. "But about our coming?"

The merest flicker of his eyes toward the desk wouldn't have been noticed by most. But she wasn't a mother for nothing. Her gaze fell on the jumbled pile of envelopes on his desk, and her confidence rebounded.

Raising one eyebrow, she looked from the unopened envelopes to his face and back. "Perhaps you were notified. How could you possibly know?"

"They call if it's something important."

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Just that easily he dismissed her arrival—dismissed her—as unimportant. No apology. No defensiveness for not checking his letters.

An inane urge to apologize herself, the result of a lifetime of training first by her mother and then by Edward, trembled on her lips. No! That was the old Jenny. The new Jenny would take control . . . but how? No answer came. Her mind scrambled for an idea. What would a forceful person do? Her father. . . her father was forceful. What would he do?

“If you’d called, Mrs. Peters, and asked me about coming out here—”

“I own the Double Bar X, Mr. Gates. You are my employee. I don’t have to ask you anything.” Amazing! Her father’s voice coming out of her mouth! She could hardly believe it. But it felt good. . . incredibly good. She was giddy with it.

Tucker Gates, on the other hand, did not look happy; the grooves at either side of his mouth lengthened and the tuck between his eyebrows dug deeper. But he kept on as if she—or her father—hadn’t spoken.

“If you’d called and asked me about coming out here,” he repeated, “I would have told you it wasn’t a good idea. This is a real busy time, with calving season. There’s nobody with time to show you and your kids around the ranch.”

“So?”

“So we can’t be entertaining no women and kids,” grumbled Deaver. “We got work to do.”

“I would hope so,” she replied calmly. “I want my employees to work. Mr. Gates—” she turned to him “—if I’d wanted Walt Disney World, I would have taken my children to Florida.”

“No fear of having Florida weather here, Mrs. Peters. The weather’s unpredictable this time of year. Could be we’d have a blizzard yet. Or mean cold for weeks on end. This isn’t the time to see the ranch. You go on back to Chicago tomorrow and come summer, say July maybe

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August, you bring your kids back here for a week or two—”

“Two?” yelped Deaver.

“—And I’ll make sure they get to ride a little, see some of the ranch, things like that. They’ll enjoy the visit then.”

“Visit?” She mimicked the tone her father had used the one time that new wine captain at Danelo’s had offered him an inferior vintage. “I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood. My children and I aren’t here for a visit. We’ve come to the Double Bar X to live. We’re here to stay.”

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