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# THUNDER CANYON HOMECOMING

BRENDA HARLEN

*Montana*  
★ MAVERICKS™  
THUNDER CANYON COWBOYS



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MIA caught sight of Jarrett when he walked into the open lobby. It was hard not to notice the man. In a charcoal business suit with a crisp white shirt and striped tie covered by a dark trench coat, he looked more Wall Street than small-town Colorado.

Mia couldn't blame him for keeping his distance. He was probably tired of taking care of her.

Besides, why would a man like Jarrett McKane be interested in her? Why would he want to take on a woman expecting a baby? Yet he'd done so many things for her. He'd been there when she'd needed him most. How could she not care about a man like that?

Heart pounding in her ears, she walked up behind him. Jarrett turned to face her. "Did you get enough sleep last night?"

"Yes, thanks to you," she said, wondering if he'd thought about their kiss. Her gaze went to his mouth, then she quickly glanced away. "And thank you for not bringing up my meltdown."

Jarrett couldn't stop looking at Mia. Blue was definitely her color, bringing out the richness of her eyes.

"What meltdown?" he said, trying hard to focus on what she was saying. "You were just exhausted from lack of sleep and worried about your baby."

He couldn't help remembering how, during the night, he'd kept going in to watch her sleep. How strange was that? "I hope you got enough rest."

She nodded. "Plenty. And you're a good neighbor for

coming to my rescue.”

He tensed. Neighbor? *What neighbor kisses you like I did?* “That’s me, just the full-service landlord,” he said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He started to leave, but she put her hand on his arm.

“Jarrett, what I meant was you went beyond helping me.” Her eyes searched his face. “I’ve asked far too much of you.”

“Did you hear me complain?”

She shook her head. “You should. I feel like I’ve taken advantage.”

“Like I said, I haven’t minded.”

“And I’m grateful for everything...”

Grasping her hand on his arm, Jarrett leaned forward. The memory of last night’s kiss had him aching for another. “I didn’t do it for your gratitude, Mia.”

*Gorgeous tycoon Jarrett McKane has never believed in Christmas—but he can’t help being drawn to soon-to-be-mom Mia Saunders! Christmases past were spent alone...and now Jarrett may just have a fairy-tale ending for all his Christmases future!*

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***“Your kisses say somethin’ totally different, darlin’.”***

“It was one kiss—and it never should have happened.”

“My mama might have raised me to be a gentleman,” Corey said, “but she also taught me to never back down from a challenge.”

“That wasn’t a challenge,” she said.

“Wasn’t it?”

“No,” she insisted vehemently, desperately. “It was a statement of fact.”

He smiled again. “We’ll see about that, darlin’.”

“And stop calling me darlin’.”

“My apologies...Erin.”

The way he spoke her name made it sound more intimate than any words of passion that had ever been whispered between lovers in the dark. She fought the urge to shiver. She refused to give any outward indication of the effect of his nearness on her.

Dear Reader,

Long before I ever wrote my first book, I was a reader—and especially a reader of romance novels. From Victoria Alexander to J. R. Ward and all the authors and genres in between, I love nothing more than to lose myself in a good love story. And a good love story with a cowboy hero is especially irresistible to me, so I was thrilled to be part of the Montana Mavericks: Thunder Canyon Cowboys continuity.

Maybe Corey Traub isn't a full-time cowboy, but he has the attitude and the swagger and more than enough sex appeal to set Erin Castro's heart pounding. But she came to Thunder Canyon looking for answers, and the last thing she needs is a romance with a "too sexy for his own good" cowboy—even if that turns out to be exactly what she wants....

I hope you enjoy Corey and Erin's story and that you have as much fun visiting Thunder Canyon as I did.

Happy reading,

Brenda Harlen



# THUNDER CANYON HOMECOMING

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*BRENDA HARLEN*



**SPECIAL EDITION®**

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Special thanks and acknowledgment to Brenda Harlen  
for her contribution to  
Montana Mavericks: Thunder Canyon Cowboys.



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THUNDER CANYON HOMECOMING

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Thunder Canyon Cowboys*

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## BRENDA HARLEN

grew up in a small town surrounded by books and imaginary friends. Although she always dreamed of being a writer, she chose to follow a more traditional career path first. After two years of practicing as an attorney (including an appearance in front of the Supreme Court of Canada), she gave up her “real” job to be a mom and to try her hand at writing books. Three years, five manuscripts and another baby later, she sold her first book—an RWA Golden Heart winner—to Silhouette Books.

Brenda lives in southern Ontario with her real-life husband/hero, two heroes-in-training and two neurotic dogs. She is still surrounded by books (too many books, according to her children) and imaginary friends, but she also enjoys communicating with “real” people. Readers can contact Brenda by email at [brendaharlen@yahoo.com](mailto:brendaharlen@yahoo.com) or by snail mail c/o Silhouette Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

For two of my most loyal readers:

Marjorie Gennings,  
a wonderful aunt who has been there for me  
through every stage in my life;

and

Marilyn Bellfontaine,  
a true friend who has supported my career  
not only from the beginning but  
'above and beyond.'

And with sincere appreciation  
to the other authors in this series for sharing histories,  
brainstorming details, answering last-minute questions,  
and making this project such an enjoyable one.



## *Chapter One*

Erin Castro stood at the front of the church and tried not to fidget.

It was Erika and Dillon's wedding day and she knew that the attention of all of the guests was focused on the bride and groom, but since she'd arrived in Thunder Canyon, she'd worked hard to blend in and couldn't help but feel uncomfortable with so many eyes turned in her direction.

Her fidgeting fingers found the wide ribbon that bound her bouquet. The satin was smooth and cool, and the rhythmic winding and unwinding of it gave her something to concentrate on rather than the crowd of onlookers.

When she'd come to town a few months earlier, she'd had two suitcases in the trunk of her secondhand Kia, a newspaper clipping in the pocket of her faded jeans and absolutely no clue how to begin the quest she had set herself upon. Then she'd seen the "Help Wanted" sign in the front

window of The Hitching Post and had taken the first step in her journey.

She'd worked with Haley Anderson at the restaurant and when Erin mentioned that she didn't want to live at the Big Sky Motel forever, Haley had helped her find an apartment. With both her job and housing concerns alleviated, Erin had believed that she was meant to stay. A few weeks later, she learned of a position available at the Thunder Canyon Resort. Realizing that the more people she encountered, the more likely she was to find someone who might have answers to the questions that prompted her trip from San Diego, Erin willingly took on the second job. When she started working a lot of overtime at the resort, she'd had to give up the waitressing job, but she had no regrets. It was at the resort that she'd met Erika Rodriguez, who was now exchanging vows with Dillon Traub.

She was happy that her friend was marrying the man of her dreams, but she couldn't help wishing that she was watching the nuptials from somewhere in the back of the church rather than the front. She wound the ribbon around her finger again as her eyes moved restlessly over the assembled crowd, focusing more on the stunning white décor of the winter wonderland setting than on any of the guests.

Her thoughts and her gaze continued to wander, until caught by the hot, intense stare of Corey Traub—the groom's brother.

Her breath stalled, and her heart pounded.

She'd met Corey the night before at the rehearsal. And her response to his presence had been just as powerful then as now—and just as unwelcome.

Her reasons for coming to Thunder Canyon hadn't included any thoughts of romantic entanglements. Especially not so closely on the heels of the end of another relationship.

She knew that her mother had harbored great expectations for the future of her almost-twenty-six-year-old (read “virtually unmarriageable”) daughter and the man she’d already envisioned as the perfect (read “willing to marry her daughter”) son-in-law. And while it shouldn’t have been so difficult to end a relationship that meant more to Betty than it did to her, it had been tough. More so than she’d expected. She’d always felt as if she hovered on the periphery of her family. She couldn’t have said why she felt that way—it wasn’t anything specific anyone had said or done, it was just a sense that she didn’t quite belong, and she desperately wanted to belong. And perhaps on some level, she’d thought—hoped—that a good marriage would give her the gold star she’d longed for.

As the youngest child and the only daughter, her parents didn’t have the same expectations of her that they had of their sons. One of the few things they expected was that she would meet a nice man and start a family. After only a few weeks of dating, Trevor had told her that he wanted to get married.

He’d laughed at the shocked expression on her face, then explained that he wasn’t actually proposing to her. He was just putting it out there, he said, so she understood what he was looking for and so that she could let him know if she didn’t want the same thing.

She *wanted* to want the same thing. She tried to make herself feel more for him than she did because she knew that her parents would approve of Trevor and she really wanted to be approved of. But in the end, she couldn’t stay with a man whose kisses left her unmoved. She couldn’t plan a future with a man whose touch made her want to pull away rather than press closer. She knew that physical attraction was only one aspect of a relationship, but she couldn’t imagine building a long-term relationship with a

man without ever feeling that little quiver in the pit of her belly.

As she looked into Corey Traub's espresso-colored eyes, she felt that quiver—and a whole lot more. There was a crackle and sizzle in the air that assured her his kisses would not leave her unmoved.

When his gaze drifted to her mouth and his own lips curved, she knew that his thoughts were following a similar path to her own. Her body's response was strong and swift, and she was shocked by the purely visceral reaction.

She wasn't the type of woman who got swept away by passion. She wasn't sure she even believed in the kind of all-consuming passion that could sweep a woman away. She'd certainly never experienced anything like it before. And what was wrong with her that she was having such thoughts about a man she barely knew—and during her friend's wedding, no less?

She resisted the urge to lift the bouquet of flowers to her face and use it as a fan to cool the heat that had suddenly infused her cheeks.

"...I now pronounce you husband and wife."

The minister's voice broke through Erin's reverie and refocused her attention.

"You may kiss your bride," he told the groom.

She watched Dillon as he lowered his head toward Erika's, and the obvious love and happiness in his eyes brought tears to Erin's. Standing behind Erika, she couldn't see the expression on her friend's face, but she knew Erika's eyes would reflect the same emotion and joy. Erika had been floating on cloud nine since she'd finally accepted that Dillon loved her and admitted that she felt the same way about him. This wedding was just the icing on the cake—a public ceremony to affirm the love they shared and formalize the commitment they'd already made to one another.



Erin was surprised to realize that she envied her friend. Surprised to realize that getting married and starting a family might not be as far down on her list of priorities as she'd suspected. Of course, she'd have to fall in love first, and she wasn't looking for any kind of personal involvement right now.

She'd never been all the way in love before. Sure, she'd experienced attraction and infatuation and there had even been a time or two when she'd thought what she was feeling might be love. But when those relationships had ended and she'd felt more relief than regret, she'd known it wasn't. And the relief had given way to doubt as she wondered if she would ever know the intensity of emotion that was supposed to be love.

Her parents had it—she recognized it in the looks that passed between them, the casual touches they exchanged, the secret smiles they shared. Even after more than thirty years of marriage, there was an enduring bond of both attraction and affection between them that Erin someday hoped to find with someone.

Of course, her life was too unsettled right now to be making any kind of long-term plans, but...someday.

She glanced at Corey again and found his eyes still on her. Her future might be uncertain, but she wasn't immune to the attraction of a handsome man.

And she found herself wondering what it would be like to be held by him, kissed by him. She wanted him to take her in his arms and hold her tight against his hard body until she was breathless. Which would take all of about half a second considering that just the *thought* of kissing him stole all the air from her lungs.

She tore her gaze from his and forced the treacherously enticing thoughts from her mind.

Because she had no doubt that the six-foot-tall oil heir