

# HEART AND HOME

THE MACALLISTER BROTHERS



MELINDA BARRON

BLUSHING BOOKS

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Published by Blushing Books®,  
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ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-834-6  
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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# WINDFALL



THE MACALLISTER BROTHERS, BOOK ONE

## CHAPTER 1



MAC'S CROSSING, COLORADO, JULY, 1889

“*I*’m glad you think this is so funny. If you were the one sitting here with your head on the chopping block you wouldn’t be laughing.”

Winthorp Jacob MacAllister II stared at his younger brother, who even now wiped tears of laughter from his cheeks.

“Well, Win, I can tell you one thing. For once in my life I’m glad I’m not the oldest.” Ben MacAllister let out another whoop of laughter, and then buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

Behind his desk, Win narrowed his eyes at his brother. Then he shook his head. He supposed that if it were Ben, or one of his other siblings, going through this mess he would think it was funny, too. But it wasn’t them, it was him. It was his life that was about to come crashing down around his ankles. He had to find a way out of this predicament.

“You know, you’re not helping any. Stop laughing and think of a solution!”

Ben took a deep breath and straightened in his chair. He sniffled and bit back more laughter.

“What can we do? Nothing. Aunt Matilda is on her way. From the date of this letter, a month ago, she may very well be in Denver at the train station right now. Once she catches the stage here to Mac’s Crossing, you’re done for. You’ll be married before you can say Bob’s your uncle. And you’ll be living back in Boston, running Uncle Marston’s law firm.”

“The hell I will. I have a life, you know. And a pretty good one at that. I make good money, I just finished building a house, and one of these days I’ll find my own wife. Besides, there’s one major flaw with that plan. I’m not a lawyer. None of us are.”

“I don’t think Aunt Matty cares. She just wants someone to run the business.”

Win stood and marched to the window. On the street outside, people bustled about and buildings were taking shape. The small town of Mac’s Crossing sat about fifty miles east of Denver. Since his father had founded the town in 1846, some forty years ago, it had grown considerably. Now almost ten thousand people lived in town, or in the surrounding area, farming and ranching. All five of the MacAllister boys had been born here. All five still worked here. And all five planned to stay here.

Their parents, God rest their souls, had died four years ago within months of each other: their mother from pneumonia, their father from a broken heart. Aunt Matilda and Uncle Marston had urged the boys to come to Boston, even though they were all fully-grown.

The boys had refused, preferring to stay in the west. Now that Marston had passed, Matty was insistent that one of her nephews move to Boston to care for her and run the family business.

Win walked back to his desk and picked up the letter. He read it out loud for Ben to hear.

*Your father shirked his responsibilities by taking his family, and your wonderful mother, to the God-forsaken place where you live. Now, one of*

*you has to make amends. Since I have no children of my own, one of you will come back to Boston to care for me.*

*Since you are the oldest, Winthrop, the responsibility falls to you. I will have no other. I will be in your city in one month's time. Please be prepared to accompany me back to Boston.*

Win crumpled the paper and ran his free hand through his dark hair. He was the manager of a bank. He handled hundreds of thousands of dollars in people's money. He hired, and fired staff and fought off bank robbers. And he was scared of a sixty-three-year-old woman whom he hadn't seen in twenty-five years.

"You have to help me."

"What can I do?" Ben asked.

"You could arrest her."

Ben barked out a long laugh. "Win, she's our aunt, and I'm just the sheriff of a small town. She has to break a law before I can arrest her. I could arrest you, tell her you broke some law and have to stay in jail."

"Tempting. But I don't care for your jail cooking. I just have to let her know that I'm not leaving. Period. End of story."

"Ha! Fat chance of that. You remember Aunt Matty, right? Mom always said she was stubborn as an ox. No, what you need, brother dear, is a wife. If you were married, and had some reason to stay here in Mac's Crossing, then Aunt Matty would have to go back to Boston alone, and find someone to run the business there."

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, women aren't exactly popping up all over here. Finding a wife before Aunt Matty gets here isn't going to be easy."

"What about Sarah McKay? She works in Josh's store, and if I remember right, you and she took a shine to each other."

"We tried that. The shine quickly wore off, for both of us. She and Corbin will be a fine match, if they ever open their eyes to the fact."

"Okay, how about Nancy Lise? She's always been head over heels for you."

“Yes, she has, but I don’t return the affection. She sends chills up my spine, and not in a good way. Too damn bossy and overbearing.”

“Okay, how about Melissa, over at the McCarin place? She’s a little young, in her early twenties, but she’s very pretty.”

“Yes, and she married Steve Blankenship last week. Where were you?”

“No kidding? How did I miss that? Well hell, Win. Just go out and rent one. Or tell Aunt Matty you’re expecting a mail-order bride who will be here in a few weeks. That might work.”

Win nodded his head, his eyes taking on a shine.

“That just might work.” Then he shook his head. “Oh hell no, you know Matty. She’d just force me to send the woman back. There has to be a solution somewhere.”

Win sat back down at his desk and buried his face in his hands. His whole life flashed before his eyes, all because of a bossy woman who thought the family owed her.

A loud ruckus from outside caught both brothers’ attentions. Win crossed to the door and flung it open to find his head teller, Mark Pierce, arguing with one of Ben’s deputies, Silas McGee.

“I’ve got to talk to the sheriff. Now!”

Ben stepped out of the office and shook his head.

“Silas, what’s the matter with you? You know better than to go yelling in the bank. It makes people nervous.”

“Sorry, Sheriff, but Miss O’Brien over to the hotel, she needs to talk with you, now.”

Ben took Silas by the arm and pulled him off to a private corner. The younger man started talking animatedly, his hands flying through the air as Ben listened. When Ben had pushed him toward the door, he walked toward Win and smiled.

“Don’t look now, Win, but I think your prayers have been answered.”

“What? How?” Win felt his heart rate increase. Could it be possible? What the hell had Silas just told Ben, and how could it help him?



“Just get your coat and come with me. I think I just found you a windfall.”



“YOU CANNOT KEEP ME HERE! I demand that you release me. My company will see that you are paid.” Vanessa Nicholas stomped her slippered foot and sighed in exasperation. She couldn’t believe this was happening. Damn Wiley Sims to Hell and back. How dare he do this to her, just because she refused to go to his bed?

“Would that be the same company that left you high and dry? Pardon me, little miss actress, if I don’t believe you.”

Vanessa decided to try a different tactic. She smiled at Catherine O’Brien, who put her hands on her ample hips, and stared at Vanessa.

“Miss O’Brien, isn’t it? Please, you must trust me. I promise you that you will get your money, and more, for your troubles. I will see to it personally.”

“I should have known better than to rent rooms to a traveling acting troupe, lot of good for nothing people if you ask me. They left without paying the balance, all I have is the two hundred dollars he gave me as a down payment. You ain’t going nowhere, missy, so don’t think that batting those baby blues at me will help. The sheriff’s on his way. He’ll get my money back. And you’ll stay in jail until I do!”

“How much money are we talking about, Miss O’Brien?”

The stout woman turned toward the doorway and the frown that was on her face did an immediate about face.

“Why, Win, whatever are you doing here? I sent for your brother.”

“He’s here, outside talking to Monty Carp about some missing cattle. He asked me to come inside and see what was happening.”

Vanessa sized up the newcomer. A handsome man in his mid-thirties. Dark hair that was just graying around the temples. Tall

and fit, with large hands that he rested on his waist. Was this the sheriff? Maybe, just maybe, she could work her wiles on him. If she did, then she could catch up with the others at Denver. And demand some satisfaction from Wiley Sims.

“Sheriff.” Vanessa stood and gave him a perfect smile. “This is all just a large misunderstanding, I promise you. If you will allow me...”

“I’m not the sheriff.”

Vanessa sat down with a thump and shook her head.

“Then what business is it of yours how much money this woman is owed?”

Win looked Vanessa up and down, then turned his attention to Miss O’Brien.

“How much?”

“They were here a week. Rented every room in the place and ate meals. They owe me seven hundred and fifty dollars, and not a penny less.”

Vanessa gasped. “What? For this flea-ridden hotel? You can’t be serious.”

“Flea-ridden? Now you listen here, little missy, if there are fleas here your friends brought them, and left them, here.” The larger woman advanced on Vanessa, who stood and balled her hands into fists. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d been in a fight. If the witch would just get close enough she’d take a whack at her.

Win stepped in between the two ladies just as Ben entered the room.

Vanessa assumed correctly that this was the sheriff. And judging by the similarities between the newcomer, and the man already in the room, she assumed they were brothers.

“Sheriff, this is all a big misunderstanding, if I could...”

The sheriff held up his hand.

“Win, would you keep an eye on this young lady while I talk to Miss O’Brien?” The two exchanged a look and Vanessa frowned when the one named Win mouthed, “This will work,” to the sheriff.

She wasn't sure what he meant, but she knew that whatever it was, she wasn't going to like it.



WIN CLOSED the door and turned toward Vanessa. She was a pretty woman, that was for sure. Petite, with long blonde hair that hung around her shoulders and beautiful blue eyes. He figured that Miss O'Brien had pulled her from bed when she'd found the others gone because the woman was still wearing a dressing gown.

"Miss Nicholas, is it?"

"I'm not going to your bed, so you can just forget it. I may be an actress but I have standards."

Her words hurt. He'd always thought himself a man that women would enjoy spending time with. Obviously he was wrong. "I see, and I don't fit them."

Vanessa looked at Win and shook her head.

"No, you're fine in that department. But I don't trade my body for money."

"I'm happy to hear that." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I have something else in mind. Something that will get you out of your current predicament."

Win watched her smooth her hands over her dress and then lift curious eyes to him. "I'm listening."

"I need a wife." The moment the words were out of his mouth he knew he should have eased into the conversation rather than just blurt it out.

Vanessa shook her head and threw up her hands in exasperation. "What part of our earlier conversation did you not understand?"

Win shook his head and sat down next to Vanessa. She scooted away from him and cast a weary look in his direction.

"Miss Nicholas. I'm in a bit of a sticky situation myself. I don't want you to have sex with me. I just want you to pose as my wife

while my maiden aunt is in town. If you do this, I will pay Miss O'Brien the entire amount that she is owed, and you will be free and clear."

Win worked to hide a smile. He could see the wheels turning in the young woman's head.

"You are certain there will be no sex involved."

His eyes widened and he nodded. She was appealing, that was for sure. She had pouty little lips that were perfect for kissing, and other things. It might be hard not to have thoughts of her snuggled beneath him. But this was a business arrangement. This, and only this, would keep Matty from forcing him, or more appropriately guiltning him, into moving to Boston.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Winthorp MacAllister II. My friends call me Win."

"Mr. MacAllister, I warn you, I want this arrangement in writing, and witnessed by the sheriff, Miss O'Brien, and any lawyer that is in town."

"I can get Mr. Daniels, one of two lawyers in town, to draft the agreement this morning and we'll sign it this afternoon. My aunt may show up at any moment, so I want you moved into my house as soon as possible. I'll have Wayne Black deliver your bags."

"And you'll pay Miss O'Brien?"

"I will pay her after my aunt leaves town, which may be as long as a month. Does that arrangement sit well with you?"

Vanessa sat silently for a moment and Win thought his stomach would fly away from his body. This woman was his only hope. He needed her to agree to this.

Finally, she sighed deeply and nodded. Then she bit her lip and gave him a look that almost broke his heart.

"I'm not sure Miss O'Brien will wait that long for her money."

She sounded so downtrodden that he wanted to put his arm around her and reassure her that things would be fine. "You let me worry about the money. Ben is explaining the situation to Miss O'Brien right now. Everything will work out fine, you'll see."

He patted her hands, the warmth from her skin blending with his own. She was soft, and her hands were tiny. Win felt a stirring in his lower region. He fought it back and tried to think ugly thoughts, like losing everything to Matty's demands.

"Mr. MacAllister, I..."

"Win."

"Excuse me?"

"If we are married, Vanessa, you must call me Win."

"Of course, forgive me, Win." Vanessa steeled her shoulders. "I want my own bedroom."

"I'm sorry, darling, but that is out of the question. What sort of newlyweds sleep in separate bedrooms?"

"Lots of them."

"Not when one of them is me, I can assure you. You will play by my rules, Vanessa, or you will go to jail."

Vanessa exhaled a defeated sigh, and he felt like a bit of a cad for telling her she could be behind bars if she didn't go forward with his plan. But he was desperate.

"Fine. But I'm warning you..."

The door opened and Vanessa clamped her lips together. Win's brother, the sheriff, stood in the doorway.

"I do have one concern," the sheriff said. "What if someone recognizes her from the play?"

"Impossible," Vanessa answered. "I was wearing a wig and padding. My character was an older woman."

Win nodded, then guided Vanessa into the drawing room of the hotel. He smiled at Miss O'Brien, who shook her head and frowned at Vanessa. The woman then turned a charming smile on Win.

"Have a good day, Mr. MacAllister. And may I be the first to say congratulations on your marriage?"

"Thank you, Miss O'Brien. My wife and I are very happy."

Win put his arm around Vanessa's shoulder and pulled her close. "Aren't we, dear?"

"Very happy, darling."



“TELL me one more time what my middle name is.”

Vanessa slumped back onto the settee and screamed in frustration. “Why? I’ve already told you fifteen times that it’s Jacob. Jacob. Jacob. Jacob.”

“My date of birth?”

“July 1, 1854, right here in wonderful Mac’s Crossing. Your mother’s name was Beverly. Your father’s name was Winthorp. You have four brothers, Ben, who is the sheriff; Rob, who manages your parent’s cattle ranch; Corbin, who is editor of the newspaper; and Josh, who owns the local store. Corbin and Josh are twins.”

“Very good. What is my favorite food?”

“Leaping lizards! Mr. MacAllister, I...”

“No! Never call me that. I am Win, do you understand?”

“Win! It’s been a long day. I’m hungry and we need to take a break. After dinner you can drill me some more.”

“Vanessa, I think you underestimate the gravity of the situation, for both of us. If my aunt asks you these questions and you give incorrect answers, the game is over. I will be forced to leave my home, and you will go to jail.”

“Oh believe me, Win, I understand. I’ve been an actress for the past fifteen years. I portrayed Juliet in New York City. I know how to play a part.”

She stood and cocked her head at him. “Please, can we break for a little while and have something to eat?”

Win felt a grumbling in his stomach. He looked at his watch and his eyes widened.

“I didn’t realize it was so late. I apologize. Before we eat, though, tell me what types of foods I love.”

“You like beans and cornbread, not to mention meat from your brother’s ranch.”

“Very good. I apologize, Vanessa. This whole situation makes me very nervous.”

"You needn't be worried on my account, Win. I promise you that I will be perfect in every way."

She batted her eyes and Win smiled.

"If I hadn't just spent the last six hours with you yelling at me every other minute, I might just think you like me."

"No, husband, I don't like you. I love you." She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

"You're very good, Vanessa. Shall we go eat?"

In the dining room, they found the table set and cornbread waiting. The cook, who was in a bit of a snit that her dinner had been ignored for so long, brought in a beef stew.

"Oh look, darling, one of your favorites."

Win held out a chair. Once Vanessa was seated, he took his own chair.

"Now, we need to work on the story about how we met. I'm thinking..."

"I'm thinking a nice quiet meal would help our digestion. This really is delicious, um..." Vanessa bit her lip and looked at the cook.

"Mrs. Wallings, her name is Katie Wallings. We've been over the staff. How could you forget their names?" Win rolled his eyes and slammed his fist down on the table. He knew his voice was louder than it should be, but things were getting serious, and the hour grew late.

"Forgive me, Win, it's a lot to take in on the first day. I'm only human, you know."

"There may only be one day. What happened to the consummate actress who could memorize her lines?"

"She left on the afternoon train after being yelled at for hours on end." She toyed with her spoon. "At least with a play I had time to memorize lines. I did not sign up for this."

"You did. I have the paper right here." Win pulled the signed agreement from his pocket and shook it at her.

"To portray your wife, yes. But not for your abuse. Do not yell at me again."

“Do you have another idea for reinforcement?”

“Kindness? You’ve heard the saying ‘kill them with kindness.’”

“Mrs. Wallings, please leave us.”

Win watched his cook leave the room. Then he turned to Vanessa.

“I realize that we are both under a great deal of stress, and yes, I have heard your phrase. But I have also heard the phrase ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’. In this case, I believe it would be proper to say, ‘spare the rod and spoil the actress’. Do you understand my point?”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“I would, if I thought it would make us successful. And by the look on your face, I’m thinking I could be right. One more slip up and I’ll take you, the great American actress, over my knee and tan your little bottom.”

“You are a barbarian! You have no hold over me, and if you try to spank me I will fight you, I promise.”

“I promise you, wife, that your bottom will be so sore you won’t be able to sit on the stage long enough to get to Denver.”

Vanessa stood and threw her napkin on the table. “I won’t stand for this. I will leave immediately. Even if I have to hide out on the stage I assure you I won’t be in Mac’s Crossing tomorrow.”

“Truthfully? You should know the stage arrived half an hour ago. It leaves again in the morning. Perhaps you can catch it before my brother throws you in jail.”

A loud knocking on the front door startled them both. Both of their faces were red with anger. They stood and stared at each other as they heard the front door open, and Ben’s voice in the foyer.

“There’s Ben now. Perhaps he can take you directly to jail.”

Vanessa stomped her foot and groaned in frustration. “You are an arrogant, insensitive bastard.” Her voice was low, and to Win that showed true anger.

“Am I interrupting something?”



"No!" Win and Vanessa screamed the word at the same time.

"All right. I just came by to tell you that Aunt Matty left Boston last Sunday. She will probably be here in two to three days. Which means you two need to get busy."

"We are," Win said, his angry gaze trained on Vanessa.

"Well, I can see that you are, so I'll leave."

Win said, "Goodbye," at the same time Vanessa said, "No, stay."

The room grew quiet and Ben looked between the two.

"Right. I'll be leaving. I just wanted to warn you."

When no one answered he quickly walked out of the room.

"Do we have an understanding, Vanessa?"

"No, Mr. MacAllister, we do not. Threaten to spank me one more time and I will leave, signed agreement or not."

"Fine, then I suppose I must show you that I'm serious. Let's go upstairs, shall we?"

Vanessa looked panicked. Her gaze darted to the door as if to judge how quickly she could run after Ben.

"For all intents and purposes, Vanessa, you are my wife. I'm afraid that I have no choice but to spank you now, to emphasize the point that I am very, very serious about this."

Vanessa didn't hesitate; she rounded the table and took off for the door at a run. Win was upon her at once. He gathered her in his arms and slammed the dining room door with his foot.

"Fine, we'll do it here."

She flayed her arms and legs against him, her fists pounding against his arms as he carried her back to the table and sat down on one of the chairs.

He pulled her across his lap and worked to lift her skirts above her waist.

"Stop that! You have no right."

"I'll be easy on you this first time, Vanessa, and spank you over your bloomers. You need to remember, though, that this will not happen again. Next time you will be spanked on your bare bottom."

"How dare you!" Jessica let out a loud yelp as Win's hand came

into contact with her behind. He slapped her ass again and she kicked out in outrage.

“Stop that!”

“Name my brothers, in order.”

He slapped her ass again and Vanessa screamed in frustration.

“Where is the staff? How could they allow this to happen?”

“They know better than to interrupt when the door is shut. Now answer me!”

Win delivered three more slaps and Vanessa took a deep breath.

“Robert, um...” Her breathing came in short gasps.

Win delivered several more sharp slaps and said, “Their names, in order.”

Vanessa took several deep breaths, and then said quickly, “Ben, Robert, Corbin, and Josh.”

Win delivered four more slaps, two to each cheek, and then stood Vanessa on her feet.

“Next time, Vanessa, your spanking will not be so easy.”

Vanessa pounded her fists against his chest.

“I’m leaving. I won’t stay here!”

Win grabbed her wrists and pulled her close to his chest.

“You’re not even crying, so don’t tell me that it hurt. It did motivate you, though. You remembered the names, in order. I’ll have to remember that over the next few days. Now, do you understand the seriousness of the situation?”

“Yes.” Vanessa’s voice was soft.

“Good. I don’t want to have to do this again.”

“Trust me, I don’t either.” She pulled away from him and ran from the room. Win sat down and ran his fingers through his hair. This wasn’t turning out as he’d hoped. Maybe he should just lay things on the line when Matty arrived. He sighed deeply. He did want to come clean with his aunt, but it was too late now. The wheels were in motion, and they had to follow through.

He hoped his windfall didn’t turn into a tornado.