



The Cowboy SEAL's Triplets (Bridesmaids Creek)

By Tina Leonard

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HER HOMETOWN SEAL

When Daisy Donovan roars into town on the back of John "Squint" Mathison's motorcycle, the people of Bridesmaids Creek start buzzing like bees in mating season! The former bad girl is finally home where she belongs, ready to win over her Texas town—and the hunky former SEAL who is the father of her soon-to-be baby boys.

Although he just had the most passionate time of his life with the woman he adores, John's after a prize he thought couldn't be his. He never had a real home, growing up in a family who traveled from rodeo to rodeo. But now he's determined to show Daisy that he's ready to settle down and be the new favorite son of Bridesmaids Creek—by getting Daisy to the altar before their triplets are born!

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Editorial Review

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John Lopez "Squint" Mathison came roaring into town with Daisy Donovan on the back of his motorcycle, making all the good citizens of Bridesmaids Creek, Texas, buzz like bees in a beehive. The five men who were in love with Daisy—her gang, consisting of Carson Dare, Gabriel Conyers, Clint Shanahan, Red Holmes and Dig Bailey—followed behind them in a truck, with Daisy's infamous motorcycle secured in the truck bed.

It was a very strange sight not to see Daisy riding her own bike. No one could remember ever seeing her on the back of someone else's, and the gossip flew fast and thick.

Squint was ready to see the last of Daisy's gang. And maybe even Daisy herself, despite the fact that she'd once possessed his heart and his romantic dreams.

What he'd been thinking, he wasn't certain.

She was completely wild, as everyone in Bridesmaids Creek had always tried to warn him.

The trouble was, he'd made love to Daisy Donovan while they were in Montana, in a weak moment when he shouldn't have let his stupid heart outstrip his good sense.

Making love to Daisy had been even more mindbending than he could have ever imagined. Then the five Romeos had blown into Montana to retrieve their small-town wild child princess, and Squint had seen that they were—himself included—all dopes dangling after a prize they couldn't win.

At that moment, he'd decided to come back to Bridesmaids Creek, check in on his buddies and shift off to the rodeo. After the rodeo, if his heart was still bleeding, he thought maybe he'd get a job teaching ROTC or something, somewhere far away. He'd make those decisions as soon as Valentine's Day was past, although he couldn't have said why Cupid's Big Day was his marker for a quiet exit.

Daisy hopped off the bike as soon as he came to a stop in front of the main house at the Hanging H Ranch. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem."

"It was great seeing the country from a motorcycle. No windows to block the view." She shook her long, dark locks out of her helmet. "But it's wonderful to be home."

He nodded and headed into the kitchen to find his friends—the men that he could always count on to talk sense into him. Daisy followed, which was a surprise. Wherever Daisy went, so did her love-struck gang, so they came, too.

"I'm so glad to be back in BC," Daisy said, and Squint started. "Montana is beautiful, but after a while, I began craving the comforts of small-town life."

This was news to him. Squint wished he hadn't fallen head, heels and heart for Daisy, and had put plenty of

distance between him and her gang perching at the kitchen island. The gang gathered around the kitchen island, which had over the years become the communal gathering place and feed bag summit. No one ever knocked on the back door of the Hanging H; they just let themselves in.

If you weren't family or friend, you rang the front doorbell—not a good sign in a small town where everyone knew everybody else, and their business. Ringing the front bell meant you were an outsider.

Robert Donovan, Daisy's father, always rang the doorbell. Somehow his daughter had managed it so that she considered herself part of the backdoor squad. Very recently, indeed—and Squint wasn't sure why his poor mushy heart suddenly wished he had his own back door that she could make herself at home through anytime she liked.

But he'd never been one for settling down, never had a "real" home that wasn't on wheels, so he shoved that thought out of his brain, a useless organ that did little to assist him with rational thinking where Daisy was concerned. Out of habit, he shifted the Saint Michael medal he wore, trying to figure out his next move.

"I wonder where Mackenzie and Suz are?" Squint peered into the living room for the house's owners and their husbands, Justin Morant and Cisco Grant—Frog to his friends, though his wife, Suz, had let everyone know that she wasn't kissing a Frog, hence the Cisco. Squint was a nickname, too, given to him for his shooting skills, which were far better than Cupid's as far as he was concerned. Maybe it was time for him, too, to change his moniker back to his real name. Was it more likely that Daisy would fall for "John" rather than "Squint"?

Suz had not been easy for Cisco to catch, but catch her he had, and they'd celebrated that love for a second time last Christmas Eve. This was February—and who would have thought that only two months after Cisco's wedding, John would have made love to Daisy Donovan, the woman who drove everybody absolutely nuts in Bridesmaids Creek. And he hadn't just done it once—she'd sneaked into his bed many times, all under cover of night.

He had been completely aware she wasn't about to let a sign of their new relationship hit the public domain, especially not since she'd mooned after Cisco for months and months. John was aware that Daisy felt as if she was settling by making love to him, and not as in settling down—just settling. Making do.

He was done with that. He'd tried to "win" her fair and square, by Bridesmaids Creek standards, which meant either running the Best Man's Fork, or swimming the Bridesmaids Creek swim in order to win the love of your life. This was a no-fail charm, according to BC legend. But Daisy'd had three chances at the magic, and no time had he ever won her. Apparently the magic didn't work so well for him. A man had to push forward, even if his dreams were in ruins. He'd learned the hard way when he'd served in Afghanistan with Sam and Cisco that with life you have to keep going.

And he would keep going now. In fact, to make certain there were no more loose moments, he was making sure Daisy was parked here for good—then he was leaving town for the rodeo circuit. It was the only way. The second option would be to just cut out his heart and throw it to the wolves somewhere—that would end the pain of knowing that Daisy was only making time with him, even though she'd admitted that she'd never loved Cisco in the slightest. She'd only been after him to keep him from Suz.

Which hadn't worked. Suz and Cisco now had darling twin girls, and the magic of Bridesmaids Creek had cast its happy spell on them.

"Ah, cookies," Dig Bailey said. "It's great to be home."

John took that in without comment. The Hanging H had never been Dig's home, and never would be.

I should have taken Daisy to her house, and left her and her gang behind. Then I could start to forget the colossal mistake I made when I fell into her sexy brown eyes the day I met her.

"I missed the cocoa," Carson Dare said, helping himself to some that was staying warm in a heated pitcher.

John could barely think about cocoa. He tried hard not to watch Daisy settle her delicately shaped, feminine assets on a stool at the island. It was terribly difficult to keep his eyes off her.

The first time he'd ever seen Daisy Donovan—at times known as the Diva of Destruction of Bridesmaids Creek—he'd been captivated by her long dark hair spilling from her motorcycle helmet, her heart-shaped lips, big espresso eyes that practically bewitched his soul, never mind the short black leather skirt that swung when she walked. She'd been wearing black combat boots and her shapely legs had transfixated him, making his brain a pile of ham salad.

Life hadn't changed a whole lot since then.

"Chocolate chip cake," Clint Shanahan said, sighing happily as he helped himself to a piece.

Red Holmes joined him and cut a slice for himself. "There's no place like home, just like Dorothy said."

"Listen, you fellows should probably follow the yellow brick road right on out of here," John said sourly. "I didn't see a kitchen's open sign on the back door." They all stared at him.

"We're from this town," Gabriel Conyers said. "We know when we're welcome. Do you?"

Point well taken. John was the outsider, though employed at the Hanging H for the past three years.

"Besides which, you just want to get Daisy alone," Carson said, "and we've determined amongst ourselves that we're going to make sure that doesn't happen."

"True," Dig agreed. "She may not choose us, but we're not letting you weasel her, either."

Too late, fellows, the weasel's already been to the henhouse. Several times.

"I'm going to the bunkhouse." Since Justin and Cisco weren't here, it was highly likely they were there. Although John was a bit surprised that Suz and Mackenzie weren't around with their plethora of babies. Between them, they had six now at the Hanging H—all girls destined to break young men's hearts.

Something he knew too well about. John shoved his hat on his head, glared at Daisy's gang, and without bothering to look at Daisy, went out the back door. Unable to stop himself, he went around to the front, his boots crunching through the snow piled around the front porch. He wanted just a moment to take in the house, maybe even take a photo on his phone—because he was about to leave forever. There was no point in waiting until V-Day, because Cupid's Arrow Delivery Service wasn't going to bring him an arrow with Daisy's name on it. This was the only real home he'd ever known. Permanent home, to be more precise. When you'd grown up in a beat-up trailer following the rodeo from town to town, home didn't feel as if it had

a stationary place. His parents had raised three children that way, and they'd grown up fine.

He supposed he and Daisy, the daughter of the richest man in Bridesmaids Creek, didn't have a whole lot of common ground, anyway—which was why she'd never particularly gone for him, except under cover of darkness. John's father and his grandfather and his father before him had been clowns and barrel men, with the occasional bullfighter gig thrown into the mix. His mother was a cowboy preacher, her three boys sitting in the front pews without fail.

Maybe that was why the Hanging H meant so much to him. It was permanent. Well, it had almost *not* been permanent, thanks to Daisy and her greedy father, Robert. John raised his phone, snapping a photo of the snow-laden house. It was tall and white in Victorian splendor, its heavy gingerbread detail charming and old-world. Four tall turrets stretched to the sky, and the upstairs mullioned windows sparkled in the sunshine. The wide wraparound porch was painted sky blue, and a white wicker sofa with blue cushions beckoned visitors to sit and enjoy the view. A collection of wrought-iron roosters sat nearby in a welcoming clutch, and the bristly doormat with a big burgundy *H* announced the Hawthorne name, which Suz and Mackenzie had been before their marriages. Their parents had built this farm up years ago, as well as the business they'd started here—the Haunted H, a popular carnival and play place for families.

Nothing had changed, which was comforting. And Robert Donovan hadn't managed to take over the Hanging H, though he and Daisy had given it plenty of effort.

Sometimes John felt as if he'd been in lust with the enemy. He was just so drawn to Daisy, it was as if all that bad-girl-calling vibe shook him down to his knees.

There'd been something of a happy ending, as recently as December, when Suz and Cisco had retied the knot. Robert Donovan had had some kind of epiphany, deciding that he didn't want to be the town bully anymore, and sold the Hanging H back to Suz and Mackenzie for a dollar—though he'd moved heaven and hell to take over the property in the beginning.

Rumor had it that Daisy had turned, deciding she was no longer going to be the Diva of Destruction, and convinced her father—who was already developing a huge soft spot due to his newly acquired desire to be considered a beloved grandfather—that he didn't want to be the town Grinch anymore.

John snapped one last photo, sighed at the memories of the only place that had ever felt like a true home to him, and put his phone away. Then he headed off without another look back, to return to the only other home he'd ever known.

A small trailer he'd recently heard was somewhere just outside of Santa Fe.

He'd be safe there—safe from his heart begging him to make love to Daisy anytime night fell to cover their sin.

"What do you mean, he just left?" Daisy hopped off her stool and ran to the window. Sure enough, there went Squint's truck, hauling down the drive fast enough to make the truck bed lurch. A little concern jumped inside her, but then she calmed it. No doubt he'd just gone to grab a bite at The Wedding Diner. Or gone to see Madame and Monsieur Matchmaker—though now that they were divorced, perhaps it was fair to say that they were no longer Bridesmaids Creek's special matchmakers. Daisy gulped. That split could probably be laid square at her and her father's door, as they'd taken over the establishment where Madame Matchmaker's Premier Matchmaking Services, and Monsieur Unmatch-maker's Services, had once been housed. Now her

gang had the space, and they'd put in a hopping cigar bar, sort of a pickup meet-and-get-sweet kind of place that doubled as a dating service and hangout.

There was no going back now.

Somehow she'd have to win the townspeople over, make up for a lot of the wrong she'd done. Daisy went back to sit with her gang, looking around at the five men who professed themselves in love with her.

"Listen, fellows. We've had a long, good run together." Daisy took a deep breath. "But things are going to have to change."

"Change?" Gabriel sat up. "What kind of change?"

There'd have to be lots of change if she was going to convince Bridesmaids Creek that she was a new woman. "Change. As much as possible."

"I don't like it." Red shook his head. "We've got a great thing going, the six of us."

Yes, but they didn't know that she'd been diving under the sheets with Squint. And the lovemaking was fantastic. Mind-blowing. Once she'd gotten through the smoke and haze of trying to keep Suz and Cisco apart—what had she been thinking?—she'd realized the hunky, tall, saddle-brown-eyed Squint was a really sexy guy. Supersexy, to the point of being mouthwatering. And when he kissed her, she melted. Like a puddle of snow in hot sun. "It can't be the six of us anymore."

They looked alarmed. "But we're so good together," Carson said.

She shook her head. "Actually, we're not. We were the misfits and outcasts together. But that's not what I want to be anymore."

"Whoa," Clint said. "It's Squint, isn't it? John Lopez Mathison is getting inside your head."

Daisy jumped. "Of course not!"

"It was Branch Winters," Dig said darkly. "Every time you go to Montana to his retreat, you change. That was when it started, when you went chasing up there after Cisco. You came home different."

"Yeah," Red said. "You came home not mooning after Cisco anymore. And not really wanting to hang out with us, either."

Daisy got up. They were right, of course. Branch's place in Montana was a spiritual retreat where warriors of all kinds went to reboot. She'd gone to throw a few wrenches into Cisco's works—and found a few thrown in hers instead. It was hard to explain Branch. He sort of lived on the metaphysical, and sometimes hippie, edge of life—but he'd helped her see that she was operating out of fear of never belonging in Bridesmaids Creek.

And only she could change that.

"It's going to be okay, for all of us," Daisy said softly, going to the door. "But change is in the wind. It has to be."

She went outside into the cold February chill, knowing this was the right path—if she was ever going to make John Lopez "Squint" Mathison believe that it was *him* with whom she'd been in love all along.

She didn't know if there was enough magic in Bridesmaids Creek to convince him, but she had to try.

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