



The Brands Who Came For Christmas (The Oklahoma Brands Book 1)

By Maggie Shayne

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Caleb didn't know that one night of bliss last spring with small town beauty Maya Brand had resulted in a pregnancy, until the blackmail attempt arrived on his desk in an unmarked envelope, complete with photos of Maya with a belly out to there.

When he learns the truth, Caleb rushes back to Big Falls, determined to make it right despite what the scandal will do to his high profile career—the family legacy he had never truly wanted.

All he wants is Maya, and their child.

But can a girl whose father abandoned and betrayed her, ever truly believe in the goodness of a man who left town the morning after their one night stand? How can he convince her that he hasn't stopped thinking about her since then, much less, do so with the whole world watching? He has to prove himself to a woman he's not even sure he's worthy of. But he has no idea how.

The Oklahoma All-Girl Brands is a six-book, small town, contemporary romance series with shades of HOPE FLOATS and YOU'VE GOT MAIL. Spin off of the bestselling Texas Brand Series.

The Oklahoma Brands:
The Brands Who Came for Christmas
Brand-New Heartache
Secrets and Lies
A Mommy For Christmas
One Magic Summer
Sweet Vidalia Brand

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maggie Shayne is the bestselling author of more than forty novels, including the groundbreaking vampire series *Wings in the Night*, the most recent of which is called *Prince of Twilight*. Her numerous awards include two Romantic Times Career Achievement Awards, the National Readers Choice Award, and the coveted Romance Writers of America RITA Award. Maggie lives in a small town in southern central New York. Find her at www.maggieshayne.com.

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April Fools' Day, 2000

Maya had always been of two minds about working at the saloon. Of course, it wasn't a five-star restaurant, or even a respectable club. It was where the ordinary folk liked to come to unwind. You would never see the church ladies or the PTA moms on the leather bar stools munching pretzels and sipping beer at the OK Corral. But they didn't have to see Maya waiting tables to know she worked there. It was a small town.

Everyone in Big Falls knew she was a barmaid.

And it probably didn't do her efforts at becoming respectable much good at all. But the thing was, this was the family business. It put food on the table. And it was an honest business, and one her mother had worked hard to make successful. It meant a lot to Vidalia Brand. And respectability or no, family came first with Maya. Always had. That was the way she'd been raised.

So she helped out at the OK Corral, just as her sisters did.

Well, all except for Edie. Edie was off in L.A. chasing her own dreams. And respectability didn't seem to be too high on her list.

Anyway, April Fools' night started out like any other Saturday night at the Corral. Kara helped in the kitchen, where her frequent accidents were heard but not seen. Selene waited tables, so long as no meat dishes were ordered. Mel tended bar and served as unofficial bouncer. And Maya did most of the cooking, and gave line dancing lessons, as she did every Tuesday and Saturday.

In fact, the only thing that truly set this particular Saturday night apart from any other was that it was Maya's last Saturday as a twenty-eight-year-old woman. On Sunday, she would turn twenty-nine. And twenty-nine was only twelve months away from thirty. And she was still single, still alone. Still an outcast struggling to make herself acceptable. Still living with her mother and working at the Corral. Still... everything she didn't want to be. Still a virgin.

So she was depressed and moody, and she'd sneaked a couple of beers tonight, which was totally unlike her. As a result, she was just the slightest bit off the bubble, as her mother would have put it, as she walked out of the kitchen. Wiping her hands on her apron, she strained her eyes to adjust to the dimmer light in the bar. Dark hardwood walls and floor, gleaming mahogany bar, sound system turned down low for the moment. Just enough to create a soothing twang underlying the constant clink of ice and glasses, the thud of frosted mugs on the bar, and the low murmur of working men in conversation. The light fixtures were small wagon wheels suspended over every table, a bigger one way up in the rafters dead center. Dimmer switches were

essential, of course. The only time the lights got turned up to high beam was when they closed the doors to clean up. The row of ceiling fans over the bar whirred softly and tousled her hair when she walked underneath them.

And then she looked up.

And *he* was there.

He'd just come through the batwing doors from the street outside. He stopped just inside them, and he looked around as if it were his first time at the Corral. And as Maya looked him over, she thought he seemed just about as depressed and moody as she was.

"Now that looks like a cowboy who's been rode hard and put away wet one too many times," Vidalia said near her ear.

Maya started. She hadn't even heard her mother come up beside her. And though she tried to send her a disapproving glance for her choice of words, she found it tough to take her eyes off the man. "Who is he?" she asked. "I don't recognize him."

Vidalia shrugged. "I don't, either."

He wasn't tall, but he wasn't short, either. Not reed thin or overweight or bursting with muscle. Just an average build. He had dark hair under a battered brown cowboy hat that bore no brand name or markings she could detect. His jeans were faded. His denim shirt unbuttoned, untucked and hanging open over a black T-shirt with a single pocket. Even his boots were scuffed and dusty. But none of that was what made her so unable to look away. It was something about his face. His eyes, scanning the bar as if he were looking for something, someone... there was a quiet sorrow about those eyes. A loneliness. A lost look about the man... and it touched off that nurturing instinct of hers from the moment she saw it.

She walked closer without even knowing she was doing it, and those lonely eyes fell on her. Blue. They were deep blue. So blue she could see that vivid color even in this low lighting. His lips curved up in a fake smile of greeting, and she forced hers to do the same. But the smile didn't reach his eyes. They still looked as sad as the eyes of a motherless pup as they latched on to hers as if she were his last hope.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked him at last.

He shrugged. "Can I get a beer?" he asked.

"Well now, this *is* a saloon." She took his arm for some reason. Kind of the way a mother would take hold of a lost child to lead him home. "Mister, your shirt's wet through."

"That's because it's raining outside."

"Yes, but when it's raining outside, most people stay inside." She took him to a table near the fireplace. It was in the area where the line dancing lessons would be starting up in a short while, but the man was chilled to the bone. He had to be.

He took the seat she showed him and looked at her sheepishly. "I had a flat on my pickup. Had to change the tire in the rain."

"I'd have let it sit there until it let up."

"I hear it hasn't let up in days."

"I suppose you have a point." She signaled Selene, who came right over. "Hot cocoa. Bring a whole pot."

"Um, I asked for a beer."

"Beer will only make you colder. You want to catch your death?"

He blinked up at her, then shrugged in surrender.

"And see if you can find a dry shirt kicking around, will you, Selene?" Maya added.

Selene nodded, tilting her head as she examined the stranger. Of them all, she was the most strikingly different. A throwback to their father's family, Maya supposed. Her hair was long, lustrous, perfectly straight and silvery blond. Her eyes were palest blue, so they, too, often seemed silver. They seemed silver now, as she narrowed them on the man.

"You new in town?" Selene asked him.

"Just passing through," he told her.

Selene's gaze slid from his face, to her sister's. "That's odd. I got the feeling you were here to stay." She shrugged, tipping her head sideways, and said, "Oh, well," as she turned to hurry away.

The stranger sent Maya a questioning glance.

"This month she's convinced she has ESP," she explained. "Last month she was exploring her past lives in Atlantis."

He grinned widely. "Your sister?" he asked.

"How'd you guess?"

"There's a resemblance."

Maya smiled back at him, feeling warm all over just from the light in his eyes. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You were meant to."

There was something in his eyes that made her heart quiver. She cleared her throat, searched for something to say, and came up with the lamest line in any bar in any town ever. "So, where are you from?"

His smile died. All at once, just like that. He lowered his eyes. Cleared his throat. "Umm...a long ways from here. You wouldn't know it."

"Try me." She wasn't sure why she said it. Curiosity, she supposed. She wanted to know his story. What had hurt him. What had sent him out into the dark rainy night, to a strange town, a strange bar, a strange woman...

He looked up again. Seemed about to say something. Then seemed to change his mind. "Tulsa. I'm from Tulsa."

"Well, now, Tulsa's not far away. And I'm pretty sure everyone in this room has heard of it." She smiled gently at the way his eyes widened, and he looked around. "Hey, don't look so nervous. I'm not gonna tell anyone where you're from if you don't want me to."

His gaze met hers again. Burned into hers. "I appreciate that."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" she asked.

He shook his head slowly. "I'm not wanted or anything, if that's what you mean."

The reply that popped into her head was that he most certainly *was* wanted. Right now. By her. But she bit her tongue and didn't speak. The fire snapped, and its scent made her nostrils burn. The glow from the flames painted his face in light and shadow, and she took advantage of the chance to explore it more thoroughly. He had a straight nose that began high and was on the large side. It made her think of royalty, that nose. His jawline was sharply delineated, and he hadn't shaved in several hours. A soft dusting of dark whiskers coated his cheeks and his chin. Reaching up, she took off his hat, again moving without thinking first. It was unlike her to be this forward with anyone. But she took the hat off, and it was wet. His hair underneath, though, was dry. Brown and fire-glow red in places, when the firelight hit it. It was thick, wavy, but short. If it grew long, she thought, it would look crimp-curved. But short it couldn't. He kept it that way to keep it tame, she mused. He liked control.

And now who was pretending to have ESP?

"Stealin' my hat, ma'am?" he asked, his voice very soft, very deep, and stroking her nerve endings like callused fingers on velvet.

"Umm... it's wet." Turning away to hide the rush of heat to her face, she hung the hat on one of the pegs beside the fireplace. Then she spoke to him over her shoulder, avoiding his eyes. "Might as well hang that shirt up here, too," she told him.

His reply came from close beside her. "If you say so." A second later, his damp denim brushed her arm as he leaned in close to her to hang it up beside his hat. His shoulder was pressed to hers, his hip...and he looked down slowly, and his mouth was only inches from hers as he turned toward her....

"Ahem!"

Maya jumped, and the stranger spun.

"Your cocoa is here," Selene said, her mysterious silver eyes sliding from one of them to the other. She put the pot on the table, set a cup beside it, and tossed a Denver Broncos sweatshirt over the back of the chair. "It belongs to a friend of mine, so make sure I get it back."

"Thanks," the man said. He took the sweatshirt and pulled it on over his T-shirt, arms...

Users Review

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