



Man of Her Dreams (Quaid Horses Book 2)

By Tami Hoag

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From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Tami Hoag comes this romance classic about a man in love—and the woman who's determined to prove it to him...

Maggie McSwain should have been thrilled when Rylan Quaid asked her to marry him. Instead, she was crushed. After all her romantic fantasies, Ry's proposal was missing one crucial element: *love*. But Maggie would prove to Ry that he had a heart—and then she'd use every teasing, tempting ounce of seductive power she had to capture it. The next time he proposed to her—and there would be a next time—common sense would be the last thing on his mind.

As far as Ry was concerned, solid partnerships made for lasting marriages—and that's what he could have with Maggie. Of course he wanted her, as any man with eyes would want her. But he couldn't love her...because he'd vowed never to fall in love again. Now it seemed that the only way to make her his wife was to use reverse psychology. He'd just retract his proposal—and pretend to be immune to her charms. He had no idea what a challenge that would turn out to be.

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Tami Hoag is known for combining thrilling plots with character-driven suspense in her fiction, and her novels have appeared regularly on national bestseller lists since the publication of her first book in 1988.

Deanna Hurst is an actress, voice-over artist, and singer-songwriter. She has performed on stages throughout the United States, and her television credits include *Judging Amy*, *Hunter*, and *Silk Stalkings*. She has voiced hundreds of commercials for radio and television. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two dogs.

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Chapter One

"Well, hell." Rylan Quaid sighed, leaning his elbows on the picnic table. His gray-green eyes were narrowed against the brilliance of the sun slipping over the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. He stared at the woman sitting across from him and took a slow, deep breath. "I suppose we could just as well get married."

Maggie McSwain choked on the champagne she'd been drinking to toast her best friend's marriage. The sparkling gold liquid sloshed out of her glass and skittered down the satin bodice of her pink bridesmaid's dress, leaving a dark trail in its wake. She stared at the big man, a wild combination of emotions surging through her: panic, disbelief, soaring joy, and crushing disappointment. "Pardon me?"

Ry's straight dark brows drew together in irritation. He wasn't a patient man; he didn't like having to ask twice. Now that he'd decided to marry Mary Margaret McSwain, he wanted her to just say yes and have it done with. He stubbornly ignored the ripple of nerves in his stomach. Of course he wasn't nervous, he assured himself. What did he have to be nervous about?

"I said," he drawled with a hint of his characteristic sarcasm. "I suppose we could just as well get married."

Maggie sat back and stared at him, quite beyond words. Here they were at the wedding reception of her best friend, Rylan's sister, Katie. It had been a glorious day, full of fun and love and romance, and now the man she had secretly loved for years had proposed to her. And she felt as if she'd been hit over the head with a cast iron pan.

What's wrong with this picture, Mary Margaret? she asked herself. Everything.

Oh, she had envisioned Rylan Quaid asking her to marry him. She'd fantasized about it a zillion times. Reality was proving to be a trifle less idyllic. Ry had shucked his tux in favor of jeans and a faded denim shirt as soon as they had reached Quaid Farm, where the reception was being held. There was a stain of cocktail sauce on his breast pocket. Not only had he not gotten down on one knee to ask her to marry him, he

hadn't even mentioned her name. She wondered wildly if he would have settled for any woman who had happened to sit down across from him. That certainly seemed to be his attitude.

She'd been going out with him for eight weeks. Of course, she had known him for ages. She and Katie Quaid had been friends since their freshman year at William and Mary, nine years ago. Maggie had fallen up to her ears in puppy love the instant she'd laid eyes on her roommate's older brother.

Rylan Quaid had been big and masculine and dangerous in a male animal sort of way. He hadn't had the time of day for her, but Maggie had dreamed about him endlessly. She had flunked out of calculus because the only figure she had been able to concentrate on had been Rylan's.

Well, he'd finally taken notice of her. After nine years of dreaming about him and flirting with him, he'd finally asked her out. After eight weeks of dating, he'd asked her to marry him. She should have been ecstatic. She should have been dancing on the table.

She wanted to brain him with the nearest heavy object.

"Let me get this straight, sugar," she said, deceptively calm, her voice all magnolias and honey. "You suppose we could just as well get married?"

Ry grunted, forking up a mouthful of potato salad. He had it all figured out. He wasn't getting any younger. He was thirty-four; it was high time he settled down and had some kids. Maggie was the ideal choice for his wife. She was fun, feisty, willing, and able to stand up to him. Willing to go out with him had been a major prerequisite—he wasn't exactly the most handsome guy in the commonwealth of Virginia.

Maggie wasn't hard to look at either. In fact, he imagined a man could get lost taking in the view of her generous hourglass figure and big brown eyes. He even liked her dark sorrel red hair, which bounced around her head in a perky bob.

They were perfectly suited. Getting married was the practical thing, Ry told himself, deliberately cutting his heart out of the thought process. He had learned long ago to be a practical man. Romance was for poets and idiots and a few lucky people like his sister and her new husband. His one attempt at it had been a miserable disaster, one he wasn't going to repeat.

Certainly he had some tender feelings for Maggie. He cared about her—the way any human being cared for another human being. He was attracted to her—the way any man with eyes in his head would be attracted to her. He would have cheerfully choked any stray male who wandered too close to her.

He wasn't in love with her. He would have sworn up and down he wasn't in love with her. The feelings he experienced around Maggie weren't love, couldn't be love, because he had taken a solemn vow never to fall in love again.

When his mother had walked out on the family, Ry had watched love destroy his father. With stars in his eyes, Tom Quaid had made promises he couldn't keep to a woman who had never wanted his way of life. Bitterness in Joanne had grown and soured and hardened over the years. When she finally walked out, she left her husband desolate. The man had gone on loving a woman who felt nothing for him but contempt.

Ry had had his own experience with love, or something like it, when he'd been nineteen and just young enough to hope, young enough to want to be proven wrong about love. He'd fallen hard for a girl who was in

love with his image as a budding college football star. When he'd been forced to leave school to take over the farm, she had made it abundantly clear that she had been more interested in the football jersey than the man who'd worn it.

Ry had given up on the concept of romantic love then, at least as it pertained to him. He simply wasn't loveable. Women fell in love with men like his horse trainer, Christian Atherton, or Nick Leone, Katie's husband—handsome, charming men, not big rough farmers who didn't have the time or the inclination to be suave and charming.

Love was more trouble than it was worth anyway. As far as he was concerned, marriage was a partnership, and partners needed to be compatible, not in love with each other. Love was too tenuous a thing, too transient. It came and it went. Solid partnerships were enduring.

Maggie sat back and folded her hands on the lap of her champagne-stained dress. Ry hadn't said one word about love. He hadn't even said he wanted to marry her. He made it sound as if he had suddenly grown weary of being single and had decided to settle for her instead of looking further. She felt as if she were something being picked out at Kmart because he was too lazy to go across town to a fancier store.

The hurting started around her heart and spread out in ever-widening concentric circles until even her toenails ached. Her hair ached. Her eyelashes ached as she stared at the big, rugged man across the table from her.

He wasn't handsome by movie star standards. Handsome was too tame a word for Rylan Quaid, too pretty a word. The hard, angular planes of his face could have been chiseled from granite. His cheekbones were too high, his gray-green eyes too narrow. He was hardly a slave to fashion, and he combed his dark hair whichever way it happened to be leaning when he got out of bed in the morning. With his bold, high-bridged nose and fierce expression, he made her think of an eagle or some equally predatory creature.

No, he wasn't a handsome man, but he was all man. He was six feet four inches of raw, roped-with-muscle masculinity. Just looking at him made Maggie's blood heat—and she had done little more than look over the past eight weeks. Heaven only knew why. She had certainly wanted to do more than look. The hunger in Ry's kisses at the end of each of their dates had made her think he wanted more too. Yet he hadn't once suggested they go to bed. Nor had he explained why he apparently didn't want to. And now he was asking her to marry him.

Somehow the proposal seemed even more impersonal because they hadn't been intimate—no, it was because he seemed indifferent to the fact that they hadn't been intimate. If he had explained to her that he was old-fashioned and believed in waiting until marriage, she no doubt would have been touched by the secret romantic in him. However, romantic wasn't how he was coming across.

He was coming across as an insensitive, boorish lout. Hardly the man of her dreams. Still, she loved him. She loved him, and it hurt right to the ends of her bobbed red hair.

She didn't want to be the woman he settled for. She wanted to be the woman he'd waited for and loved. She wanted to be the one privileged person he let in behind the steely tough exterior he presented to the rest of the world. In her heart she knew there was something under there besides gristle and orneriness. She wanted to bring out his tender side. She would have laid her heart at his feet if only he had asked.

"You suppose we could just as well get married," she said again quietly. She glanced to her right to see if any

of the other wedding guests at their table were witnessing this trampling of her most tender feelings. The other people at the table were engrossed in a spirited discussion about the best way to prepare clams. Maggie felt as if she had swallowed a clam whole. She turned back toward Rylan, who undoubtedly had a clam for a brain.

"Jeepers cripes, Mary Margaret," he said irritably, not willing to admit to himself that he was terrified she was going to say no. Why would he be terrified if he wasn't in love with her? He wouldn't be. He wasn't. "How many times are you going to repeat it? We could have settled on a date and written out half the invitations by now."

Maggie stood up, her temper seething so much that she was certain billowing clouds of steam were rising from her head. "Rylan Quaid, you are the most mannerless, arrogant, unfeeling, boneheaded creature God ever put breath in! I wouldn't have you on a platter, even if they could find one big enough to serve you up on!"

What champagne she hadn't already spilled on her dress went sailing into Rylan's surprised face. Maggie stumbled out from the bench at the picnic table, set on making a grand exit, but the hem of her long rose-colored dress caught on a splinter on the bench, nearly yanking her feet out from under her. The sickening sound of expensive fabric tearing nearly snapped the hair-thin thread of her control. Never in her life had she wanted to burst into tears the way she wanted to right now.

"Son of a sailor," she muttered under her breath, turning back toward the bench. If she started crying and mascara ran all over her face in front of all these people, she was going to publicly flay the hide from that big lumox who now sat staring at her with champagne dripping from the end of his nose. She grabbed the torn hem of her dress and pulled, shortening it from floor-length to tea-length with one good tug.

The rest of the guests at the table dropped their clam debate and turned to stare at Ry and at the stiff retreating back of Maggie McSwain as she marched toward the house.

Watching Maggie storm away, Ry wiped the champagne from his face with his shirtsleeve. Well, that suggestion had gone over like a lead balloon, he thought sourly. He glanced back at the expectant faces of his sister's in-laws and shrugged his mile-wide shoulders.

"It might have been something I said."

Not sparing a glance for any of the people she stalked past, Maggie stomped up the steps, across the wide front porch, and into the big old farmhouse. She was going to find her purse and go home where she could lock herself in her room and bawl her eyes out in private.

How could he do this to her? How could he humiliate her this way? If it had been such a distasteful chore for him to ask her to marry him, he could have waited at least until there weren't two hundred and fifty witnesses to the act.

She went through the rambling house, stepping into one room after another, her brain too fuddled to remember where she'd put her purse. Finally she opened a door on someone who was changing clothes.

"Sorry," she mumbled, backing out into the hall.

"Oh, Maggie, come on in," Katie Quaid said, glancing at her friend's reflection in the mirror above the dresser. "Be a darlin' and zip me, will you?"

For a second Maggie didn't move, at a loss as to why Katie was there. Katie. Wedding. For heaven's sake! She'd forgotten all about the wedding. She'd been so immersed in misery over Rylan's behavior, everything else had been pushed from her mind.

Get a hold on yourself, Mary Margaret, this is Katie's big day. No way on earth are you going to spoil it.

She pushed her Cupid's bow mouth up into a smile and walked into the room to where Katie stood with her heavy mane of dark hair lifted out of the way. Katie was as petite as Rylan was enormous. Sometimes it was difficult to remember they were brother and sister.

"How's it going outside?" Katie asked as she applied fresh lipstick. "Is everyone having a good time?"

"Oh . . . you can't imagine," Maggie said brightly, zipping her friend's dress. "There you go. Hic."

Her hand went to her mouth. Her sable brown eyes widened in horror as she met Katie's concerned gaze in the mirror. As quickly as she could, she turned toward the bed and began fussing with the beautiful white satin wedding gown that lay across it. "Don't you worry about this dress, now, y'hear? I'll take it to the cleaners for you first thing Monday morning. Hic."

"Maggie? Maggie, what's wrong?"

She felt Katie's small hand on her shoulder, but she didn't turn around. Terrific, she thought. Caught between a hand-beaded wedding gown and a blushing bride. The need to cry welled up behind her eyes stronger than ever, but she told herself she was not going to cry. She truly was so happy for Katie. She didn't want to do anything to cast a shadow on this day.

"Nothing's wrong," she said on a laugh. Unless you want to count what that big jackass brother of yours just did, she added silently.

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