

ROMANCE IN VALIANT BOOK ONE

# COUNTIN' ON JESSE

**MARY PAT JOHNS**



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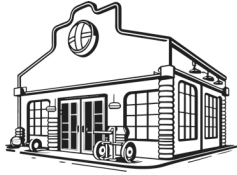
*To Mom:*

*You never doubted I could write a book and only wondered why it  
took so darn long for everybody else to get on board.*



## CHAPTER ONE

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**B**renna McKinley folded two five-dollar bills and handed them to Dicey. “Here’s your tip from Table Five.”

“Thanks for the lookout. Nobody loses a dime on your watch.” Her fellow server grunted.

Patting the slight bump in her pocket, Brenna sighed. If only she could take care of other people’s money on a larger scale. No way this part-time job stretched far enough to make ends meet.

“Have you checked out the guy sitting at the church-folk table?” Dicey bumped her ample hip against Brenna and jutted her chin toward a large table.

Dicey was nothing if not persistent regarding the opposite sex, but Brenna still loved Matt. However, she’d rather not open that can of dark wiggly things.

“Yeah, I noticed.” She donned a pair of disposable gloves as a rowdy chorus of “Happy Birthday” assaulted her ears. Determination flattened her lips. Waiting tables wasn’t even close to her dream job, but Brenna could work at the restaurant

as long as necessary. She'd scoured the ads, gone on interviews, and followed up. With zero results so far.

Cowpokes, a popular steakhouse in Valiant, Texas, groaned to full capacity with the Saturday night crowd. The savory aroma of grilled beef and baked potatoes permeated the dining area. Brenna's arms trembled with fatigue as she scooped the cold lettuce mix for bowls of salad.

Dacey wiggled thick fingers into gloves and jerked her head toward the large table. "*Mmm-mm*. That is one hunk of dude ... A girl would have to be dead not to notice that one." She puckered her lips and blew Brenna a kiss. "Your table too. Girl, you have all the luck."

With effort, Brenna avoided rolling her eyes. She wasn't blind or dead. But the ogle-routine? No, thanks.

Her chest tightened at the near due date of her student loan payment. Maybe the patrons at the large table would leave a decent tip. She peeked at Tall-Dark-and-Way-Too-Handsome. His wavy black hair, bronze skin, and gorgeous face belonged on a Latino magazine cover. He'd dined at the restaurant before, but she'd always kept her distance. Let the other servers giggle and fawn. She'd focus on being helpful. No interest beyond what the job required.

At least Paige sat next to him. She and Brenna had become fast friends over the last few months, though Paige deserved most of the credit. Judging by her relaxed body language, she was friends with Way-Too-Handsome too. Was he the childhood pal who owned a business? Brenna couldn't keep Paige's many friends straight.

Brenna's joints fussed like the cranky baby in Section C. Job hunt frustration had turned her running hobby into grueling contests to see how long her legs would pump. The clock read 8:13 p.m. One hour, forty-seven minutes until closing, and the end of her shift.

A brawny guy hailed her with a “come serve me, wench” jerk of his thumb. What was Leo doing here? Her stomach tightened. Leo had been an unwelcome fixture at her former workplace. The way his eyes roved her body made her feel dirty. Now he was at Cowpokes, in her section, no less. Nerves fluttering, she rearranged salad bowls on the tray.

“Dice, I need you to wait a table for me.” Her co-worker would sass Leo all over Valiant if he looked at her wrong.

Dicey’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Which table?”

“Number Eight.”

Busy with salad prep, the other woman glanced in that direction. “Yeah, he’s got *jerk* written all over him.” She paused, hand on her hip. “He ain’t gonna bother you none here. I got your back, baby girl.”

“Thanks, Dice.” Her stomach settled a bit.

“You owe me. That kind never leaves a tip.” Dicey sailed off, her tray held aloft.

“Probably right,” Brenna muttered as she hefted her salad tray, weaving around tables and chairs.

A guy tilted on the two back legs of his chair. Brenna attempted to go around him, but a small child in the narrow aisle forced her back into his path. His arms flew out before she could sidestep.

*Thwack!* Brenna gasped as her tray shot into the air.

The person closest to her spun around, chair legs scraping the carpet. Air-borne salad descended with a vengeance, landing all over him, bowls clattering everywhere.

Oh. No.

Way-Too-Handsome.

Lettuce and dressing congealed in his dark hair, and olives bounced off his shirt.

Brenna clapped her hands over her mouth, then Arm-Waver’s chair hit the back of her knees. Her arms pinwheeling,

she crashed into Way-Too-Handsome's chest. A groan escaped as her teeth clinked on his shirt button.

Strong hands wrapped around her upper arms and moved her to an upright position, but her feet slipped on the wet salad. Before she could catch her balance, he plopped her onto his lap.

Hoots and whistles rang around the dining room, and one smart aleck yelled, "Kiss her!"

The smell of ranch dressing rose from the salad confetti littering his clothes.

A hush descended over the restaurant.

"Are you all right?" He peered into her face, black brows etched with concern.

"I'm fine." As she pulled away, he released her. She scrambled to her feet, touching her hot cheeks, confident her face blazed as red as the diced tomato on his shirt.

She picked a piece of purple onion off his shoulder, then hastily backed away.

"I'm sorry," she choked out.

Velvety brown eyes locked on hers for what seemed an eternity. His lips moved, but the roar in Brenna's ears deafened any other sound. Finally, their bizarre level of awareness broke with the herd of servers hurrying over, swiping white dishcloths everywhere.

Just when Brenna thought death from embarrassment could actually be a thing, a guy with auburn hair from the church-folk table yelled, "Good show," clapping vigorously. Other applause broke out, and good-natured laughter echoed around the room. At least the customers decided the situation was funny. She flung a desperate curtsy in the general vicinity of the clapping and headed to the kitchen with her best I-got-this-stroll.



Her steps quickened when Leo bellowed, “You can land in my lap anytime.”

Once she pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen, the roar of the dining room shut off like a faucet. She flicked the salad remnants from her blouse into an industrial waste bin. The assistant manager hurried in, waving her over. His eyes pooled with sympathy.

“Breena.” He smoothed a pencil-thin mustache over his grimace. Ramon wasn’t a bad sort—he just never got her name right. “Steve saw the whole thing. What if you straighten out my bookwork for the rest of your shift?”

Her tight jaw slacked. Ramon was offering her a way to stay out of sight *and* stay on the clock. *If* Steve didn’t fire her on the spot. “I owe you.”

“Any reasonable person could see the mishap wasn’t your fault.” Ramon sliced a wary glance behind him and pointed to his office. Reasonable wasn’t one of Steve’s virtues. “Hurry.”

She willed her shaky legs to move.

“Brenna!” Her name boomeranged around the busy kitchen, hushing idle chatter. Too late. Maybe Steve would be in a forgiving mood. She turned slowly. His red face assured her nothing of the sort would happen.

“I guess you’re done.” His tone was deceptively mild.

Ramon moved his head a centimeter, warning her not to disagree.

The injustice iced her veins. “Yes, sir.” She didn’t know if the cryptic words meant she was done for tonight or done as in forever. Rats! She longed for a better job, but spilling salad all over a customer wasn’t the way to go about it.

Minutes later, Brenna trudged through the potholed employee parking spaces. The foul reek of the dumpster summed up the premature end to her shift. However, tiny stars dodged the

darkness and twinkled with hope. An incoming text chimed. Brenna dug her phone out and stared at the screen. Sweet Paige. Probably wondering if Brenna still had her job. A mental image of Mr. Handsome covered in salad fixings popped into her mind. How had she landed in his lap? Heat crept up her neck again.

Job interview lined up for you. Monday,  
9:00 a.m, Peoples' Gym. Dress  
conservatively.

What was this? Her last full-time job had been at a gym—a miserable experience. She texted back.

Not working at another gym!

We've talked about this.

Full-time work and this boss will be  
different. What happened to desperate  
and willing to try anything?

Brenna's thumbs flew.

Anything but another gym!

Appt at 9:00. I'll text physical  
address/office# later. Modest dress.

And why the overkill?

I know how to dress!