

A Delightful Debut

Mary Pat Johns makes a delightful debut with *Countin' On Jesse*! The book's cast of characters are so well-crafted that they quickly start to feel like friends, complete with realistic, emotional backstories that will tug at your heart and keep you turning the pages... She kept me guessing, and the ending had me on the edge of my seat! This story sparkles—you won't want to miss it!

LAUREL BLOUNT, AUTHOR OF *JOHNS MILL*
AMISH ROMANCE SERIES AND *LOVE INSPIRED*
CEDAR RIDGE SERIES

A Sparkling Christian Rom-Com

Countin' on Jesse by Mary Pat Johns is a sweet and sparkling Christian Rom-Com with a poignant edge. Written in a breezy and realistic style, the book pulls the reader in from the first chapter and doesn't let go.

MARBETH SKWARCZYNSKI, AUTHOR OF *THE*
ROSE COLLECTION SERIES

A Top-Notch Romance

I loved *Countin' on Jesse*! Mary Pat Johns did an excellent job of grabbing my interest from the first page and never letting go. I loved the opening scene... and had to keep turning the pages to see what would happen next. Mary Pat took my emotions and heart for a fast-paced roller coaster ride of romance. I was cheering for Jesse and Brenna all the way. Good humor, good suspense, excellent romance!

I highly recommend the book, and I can't wait to read Book Two in the series.

SHERRY SHINDELAR, AUTHOR OF *TEXAS
FORSAKEN*

Their Relationship Is Worth the Steep Price

If you're a romance reader, you'll love *Countin' on Jesse*. Brenna and Jesse must both face and overcome past major losses if anything can grow from the obvious spark between them... Brenna's mom tells her that dealing with life requires more than black and white thinking. "Life isn't so clear-cut. Emotions are messy." I loved seeing them pursue deeper faith to lay their pasts to rest for a chance to build a promising future.

DELORES TOPLIFF, AUTHOR OF THE
COLUMBIA RIVER UNDERCURRENTS SERIES, A
TRAVELING GRANDMA'S GUIDE TO ISRAEL,
ADVENTURE, WIT, AND WISDOM, AND
WILDERNESS WIFE

ROMANCE IN VALIANT BOOK TWO

LOVIN'

ON

RED

MARY PAT JOHNS



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To all veterans of war who returned home with life-changing injuries. I salute your honor and your bravery as you adapt to a new life. Your willingness to keep fighting infuses the rest of us with courage.

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CHAPTER ONE



When Vi Summers' phone chirped for the second time in fifteen minutes, she counted to ten under her breath. Mom's name appeared on the screen, and the ten-count stretched to twenty. Patience was a virtue, right? Stepping back to the stove, Vi continued to sauté the green beans. She had already explained her role as hostess for Paige's Thanksgiving dinner, but when Mom didn't like an answer ...

C'mon, girl, no meltdown today.

A voicemail notification flashed. If the phone calls continued, it'd be a win if Vi made it through the next hour.

Vi's foster dog sidled up, gazing at her with droopy eyes. He caught the green bean Vi tossed mid-air and gulped it down. She lifted a brow. "Food tastes better when it's chewed, Thunder." At his hopeful look, she flipped him another. "No more though. Here's the deal, buddy. I'm gonna find you an owner who can't resist your soulful eyes."

With a half-smile, Vi turned her attention back to the skillet. Conflicting emotions rushed to the surface, threatening to undo her fragile poise. But Daddy wouldn't want her to be

upset on Thanksgiving or mad at her mom, no matter how badly Vi grieved his absence. She turned the phone off and slipped it into her skirt pocket.

Rich coffee aroma overpowered the odor of burned toast, a casualty of housemate Brenna's ongoing feud with the toaster oven. Vi would fortify herself with liquid courage, then add more butter to the green beans. Crossing to the corner counter, she poured herself a cup of coffee. One sip later, she grimaced and set the cup back on the counter.

"Did I mess up the coffee too?" Brenna stopped rubbing the turkey with spices to look at her. Brilliant, beautiful Brenna, who found good in everyone. She'd moved in with Paige shortly after Vi. "Jesse prefers it super strong."

Of course he did. Vi bit her lip, guilt-ridden over her uncharitable attitude. After way too much drama—though most of it hadn't been their doing—Brenna and Jesse, the handsome co-owner of People's Gym, aka Peeps, had worked through their issues. Now they contended for Couple of the Year.

"Nah, I'm good," Vi said. The beginnings of a headache tightened like a band around her forehead. She rubbed her temples and studied her prep list. Ah. More butter. Her boots echoed on the pier and beam floor as she carefully skirted around Paige, her other housemate. Heart big as Texas, Paige had insisted Vi move in with her when Daddy died. Declared living alone had passed its expiration date. She didn't mention the other part. Without Paige, Vi would have broken into irretrievable pieces. A rush of cold air cooled Vi's face as she peered into the cramped space.

"Rory should be here any minute. He's making his famous mashed potatoes. Heaps of salt, heavy cream, and butter." As if nothing was wrong, Paige wrestled a bright Fiesta bowl from the cabinet.

The unwelcome news jerked Vi's brain off balance. *Everything was wrong.* She knew Rory's type all too well.

Vi stared into the fridge, attempting to resume her task. Rory, the *other* co-owner of Peeps, belonged to their same close-knit group of friends, but Vi kept her distance. Aside from outrageous good looks, Rory's extroverted personality grated on her last nerve.

"Good luck with that. I can't find the butter." Vi lingered at the fridge, still stunned. Rory would join them. And cook.

His electric presence would overwhelm Paige's tiny kitchen. And Vi.

"I saw it last night when Paige and Rory brought in the groceries. Green beans burning!" Brenna stepped over and shut off the fire. Gray smoke spiraled up from the pan.

Vi dashed to the stove and grabbed a spatula, prying the charred beans loose. An acrid stench rose to her nostrils, making her cough. The smoke alarm noisily alerted—as if the billowing haze might go undetected.

Beside her, Brenna fiddled with the oven timer. Totally unrelated to the shrill bleating, the large pale turkey awaited its fate in a roasting pan.

The doorbell rang. Paige slipped out and returned with Rory. Decked out in navy slacks, a gray Peeps' hoodie, and black cowboy boots, his red hair spiked upward. Vi suppressed the urge to seek cover.

In one second, Rory assessed the chaos, then strode through the cloudy kitchen to the back door and flung it open. Next, he stepped to the window, unlatched the lock, then shoved it upward—all with military precision. Paige and Brenna scurried out of his path as he nabbed a cookie sheet from the counter and waved it in a wide arc. The smoke alarm stopped its incessant shrieking as if bowing down to the male in the room.

Ears still ringing, Vi pivoted, dumping the scorched green beans into the trash. Rory appeared next to her. “You got this?”

Well, bless his heart. “I got this,” she spoke through a tight throat, warm with embarrassment.

Spreading his arms wide, he announced, “Crisis under control, ladies. It’s Thanksgiving, so hugs and kisses for all.”

Vi’s spatula clattered to the floor. From Rescuer to Romeo in less than a minute. The man didn’t possess an ounce of humility.

The meltdown she’d been staving off mushroomed.

Rory wrapped his arms around Paige and placed a modest kiss on her forehead. Then he draped an arm around Brenna’s shoulder, smooching her on the cheek.

When he headed for her, Vi caught the scent of his woody cologne and gazed into his face. Big mistake. His gray eyes churned, similar to waves in the ocean. As if he knew and understood every bit of her pain. A questioning look creased his features. Ever so slowly, he held out his arms. The comfort of a hug tempted her. For a nanosecond. If his strong masculine arms embraced her, she’d unravel like a loose thread. She backed away with the grace of a wet hen.

“I’m going for butter,” she squawked, brushing past him, certain he’d guessed her fragile state of mind. What if she spilled her guts? Told him that her first holiday without Daddy was breaking her heart. And the calls from Mom weren’t helping. Would he understand or downplay her pain? The questions had her bolting out of the kitchen.

Even as she brushed past, he winked at her and said, “We have butter.” As if he recognized her flimsy excuse—but she didn’t stop.

The man redefined enigma. He seemed to have a tender caring side, though in the same breath, he’d get cocky. Vi knew one thing for certain—Rory could hug and kiss all the women

he wanted—just not her. Grabbing keys and purse, she dashed out of the house.

So much for not having a meltdown.

She slipped into her yellow Volkswagen and stomped on the accelerator. As if voicing her inner turmoil, the car squealed down the empty street.

“THAT COULD HAVE GONE BETTER.” Rory pivoted toward Paige. A frown turned her lips down. “What? Who doesn’t need a hug?”

The frown dissipated into a patient look. “Boss, your hugs are the best. It’s too bad Vi shies away from affection—even from women.”

“Why?” His brain rebelled at the idea. Physical contact soothed him more than anything. Truth be told, he’d kind of hoped Vi would be up for a hug. He’d been itching for a reason to touch her hair. Crazy long with the perfect amount of curl. A color no dye or paint could replicate. With effort, he attended to Paige.

“I don’t know. Vi’s a tough nut to crack.” Paige picked up a colander of orange yams, then dumped them into a glass container.

Paige’s pursed lips indicated a closed subject though Rory had every intention of pursuing it later. Vi fascinated him. She’d always been a part of their group. Lately, however, he’d found himself drawn to her in ways he couldn’t fathom. The women he seemed to attract weren’t cutting it. Any conversation with his former flame had revolved around the latest hair salon or getting her nails done. Did Vi even pay attention to girly things? Her gruff exterior suggested a

tomboyish streak, but her little hourglass figure begged to differ. *Knock it off, Spence.*

He bent one leg into a kneeling position and peered into the fridge, mindful of his artificial foot. Opening the bottom drawer, he lifted a bag of apples and pulled out the box of butter. Rising carefully, he shot a *thank you* to the Lord for the mobility the prosthetic provided. The worst thing in his life had also gifted him with a lifelong dream—he'd build a regional rehabilitation center to provide therapy for other amputees.

"Where was it?" Paige asked, nodding toward his hand.

"Right where I put it last night," Rory replied through tight lips. Vi's leaving bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

"I'll let Vi know."

Rory grabbed the bag of potatoes and then searched through drawers to find a scrub brush and peeler. Once he found them, he concentrated on the process, often interrupted by mental images of sky-blue eyes, rife with pain.

Vi's prep list lay on the counter next to a tasty-looking pan of green bean casserole. Since she hadn't returned, a fact he'd already pushed to the back of his mind several times, he recruited Paige's help to interpret the list. While the potatoes boiled, he tackled the first item. Vi's hasty exit had been his doing, so he'd pitch in where he could. Hugs helped too, though Vi obviously didn't share his opinion.

Long after Rory finished the prep list and taste-tested the mashed potatoes, he caught Paige's eye again. He'd already pestered her into texting Vi a couple of times—okay, maybe four or five—but she still hadn't made an appearance. Despite Paige's assurances Vi simply needed space, a disquiet he couldn't ignore chilled him from the inside out.

The doorbell rang again as guests arrived. Rory opened the door to a distinguished silver-haired man standing on the

veranda next to a younger man with red hair brighter than Rory's. "Dad." Rory hugged his father, then addressed his younger brother. "Mark. Glad you could make it."

"Never pass up the opportunity for a home-cooked Thanksgiving dinner," Mr. Spence boomed. He entered with Mark on his heels and cast an appreciative eye around the festive living space. Brightly hued cornucopias decorated two eight-foot tables. A decked-out Christmas tree stood in one corner, multicolored lights twinkling a welcome. The distinct smell of yeasty bread vied with other fragrant aromas. Two women greeted one another as if they were old friends. Brenna's brother and his friend had already become pals with Thunder, Vi's foster dog.

The homey scene made Rory's heart ache. It had been years since Mom had passed, but he still missed her during the holidays. Dad told him once that Mom's hospitality skills had been extraordinary. Rory suspected her giftedness had been the vehicle she used to share Christ's love with everyone she met. People adored her because she radiated grace and mercy. Like his personal assistant, Paige. No way he could juggle Peeps' expansion plans and run his contracting business without his PA.

Did any warmth exist beneath Vi's prickles?

Rory's lips curved upward as Dad charmed a roomful of strangers. Mark, however, possessed an introverted nature from the cradle. Thorny as a Huisache tree. No worries. Today, he'd stick close to Dad and let the older man's gregarious nature pave the way.

Zero chance Vi would call *him*, but Rory checked his phone anyway. Almost time to eat, and she still hadn't shown up. Unease morphed into a hard ball of worry.