



McKettricks of Texas: Tate

By Linda Lael Miller

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Libby has her hands full taking care of her mother—and running the Perk Up Coffee Shop. Caffeine, she needs. Tate McKettrick, with his blazing blue eyes and black hair? No. Oh, heck—yes. But can they really hope for a second chance?

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Libby Remington was devastated when Tate betrayed her with a casual acquaintance and fathered twin daughters. Since that time she's gamely soldiered on with her animal-rescue and coffee shop work while avoiding Tate as much as possible. But Tate's marriage collapses soon after the girls are born, and now he's running the ranch, trying to be a good parent and cope with his ex-wife's outrageous demands and tantrums, while battling his never-forgotten feelings for Libby. Miller's contemporary romance introduces a new branch of her enduringly popular McKettrick clan with the first in a series of three tales centered around hell-raising brothers Tate, Garrett, and Austin and their true loves, the three Remington sisters (Libby, Julie, and Paige). Expect high demand from loyal readers, although this tale is weak in terms of character development (the sisters seem more passive-aggressive than Miller's usual take-charge protagonists), focus (subplots introduced to ramp up the emotional tension fade away unresolved), and real-life details. --Lynne Welch

About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than 100 historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the "First Lady of the West" hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the New York Times list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. She personally funds her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women. Visit her at www.lindalaelmiller.com.

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Cheryl's relatively small backyard was festooned with streamers and balloons and crowded with yelling kids. Portable tables sagged under custom-made cakes and piles of brightly wrapped presents, while two clowns and a slightly ratty Cinderella mingled with miniature guests, all of them sugar-jazzed. Austin's childhood pony, Bamboozle, trucked in from the Silver Spur especially for the birthday party, provided rides with saintlike equanimity.

Keeping one eye on the horse and the other on his daughters, six years old as of 7:52 that sunny June morning, Tate counted himself a lucky man, for all the rocky roads he'd traveled. Born almost two months before full term, the babies had weighed less than six pounds put together, and their survival had been by no means a sure thing. Although the twins were fraternal, they looked so much alike that strangers usually thought they were identical. Both had the striking blue eyes that ran in the McKettrick bloodline, and their long glossy hair was nearly black, like Cheryl's and his own. His girls were healthy now, thank God, but Tate still worried plenty about them, on general principle. They seemed so fragile to him, too thin, with their long, skinny legs, and Ava wore glasses and a hearing aid that was all but invisible.

Cheryl startled Tate out of his reflections by jabbing him in the ribs with a clipboard. Today, her waist-length hair was wound into a braided knot at the back of her neck. "Sign this," she ordered, sotto voce.

Tate had promised himself he'd be civil to his ex-wife, for the twins' sake. Looking down into Cheryl's green eyes—she'd been a beauty queen in her day—he wondered what he'd been drinking the night they met.

Gorgeous as Cheryl was, she flat-out wasn't his type, and she never had been.

He glanced at the paper affixed to the clipboard and frowned, then gave all the legalese a second look. It was basically a permission slip, allowing Audrey and Ava to participate in something called the Pixie Pageant, to be held around the time school started, out at the Blue River Country Club. Under the terms of their custody agreement, Cheryl needed his approval for any extracurricular activity the children took part in. It had cost him plenty to get her to sign off on that one.

"No," he said succinctly, tucking the clipboard under one arm, since Cheryl didn't look like she intended to take it back.

The former Mrs. McKettrick, once again using her maiden name, Darbrey, rolled her eyes, patted her sleek and elegant hair. "Oh, for God's sake," she complained, though he had to give her points for keeping her voice down. "It's just a harmless little pageant, to raise money for the new tennis court at the community center—"

Tate's mind flashed on the disturbing film clips he'd seen of kids dolled up in false eyelashes, blusher and lipstick, like Las Vegas showgirls, prancing around some stage. He leaned in, matching his tone to hers. "They're *six*, Cheryl," he reminded her. "Let them be little girls while they can."

His former wife folded her tanned, gym-toned arms. She looked good in her expensive daffodil-yellow sundress, but the mean glint in her eyes spoiled the effect. " *I* was in pageants from the time I was five," she pointed out tersely, "and I turned out okay." Realizing too late that she'd opened an emotional pothole and then stepped right into it, she made a slight huffing sound.

"Debatable," Tate drawled, plastering a smile onto his mouth because some of the moms and nannies were looking in their direction, and they'd stirred up enough gossip as it was.

Cheryl flushed, toyed with one tasteful gold earring. "Bastard," she whispered, peevish. "Why do you have to be so damn pigheaded about things like this?"

He laughed. Hooked his thumbs through the belt loops of his jeans. Dug in his heels a little—both literally and figuratively. "If other people want to let their kids play Miss This-That-and-the-Other-Thing, that's their business. It's probably harmless fun, but *mine* aren't going to—not before they're old enough to make the choice on their own, anyhow. By that time, I hope Audrey and Ava will have more in their heads than makeup tips and the cosmetic uses of duct tape."

Eyes flashing, Cheryl looked as though she wanted to put out both hands and shove him backward into the koi pond— or jerk the clipboard from under his arm and bash him over the head with it. She did neither of those things—she didn't want a scene any more than he did, though her reasons were different. Tate cared about one thing and one thing only: that his daughters had a good time at their birthday party. Cheryl, on the other hand, knew a public dustup would make the rounds of the country club and the Junior League before sundown.

She had her image to consider.

Tate, by contrast, didn't give a rat's ass what anybody thought—except for his daughters, that is, and a few close friends.

So they glared at each other, he and this woman he'd married years ago, squaring off like two gunfighters on a dusty street. And then Ava slipped between them.

"Don't fight, okay?" she pleaded anxiously, the hot Texas sunlight glinting on the smudged lenses of her glasses. "It's our *birthday*, remember?"

Tate felt his neck pulse with the singular heat of shame. So much for keeping the ongoing hostilities between Mommy and Daddy under wraps.

Cheryl smiled wickedly and rested a manicured hand on Ava's shoulder, left all but bare by the spaghetti strap holding up her dress—a miniature version of her mother's outfit. Audrey's getup was the same, except blue.

"Your daddy," Cheryl told the child sweetly, "doesn't want you and Audrey to compete in the Pixie Pageant. I was trying to change his mind."

Good luck with that, Tate thought, forcibly relaxing the muscles in his jaws. He tried for a smile, for Ava's sake, but the effort was a bust.

"That stuff is dumb anyway," Ava said.

Audrey appeared on the scene, as though magnetized by an opinion at variance with her own. "No, it *isn't*," she protested, with her customary spirit. "Pageants are good for building self-confidence and making friends, and if you win, you get a banner and a trophy *and* a tiara."

"I see you've been coaching them to take the party line," Tate told Cheryl.

Cheryl's smile was dazzling. He'd spent a fortune on those pearly whites of hers. Through them, she said, "Shut up, Tate."

Ava, always sensitive to the changing moods of the parental unit, started to cry, making a soft, sniffly sound that tore at Tate's heart. "We're only going to be six *once*" she said. "And everybody's looking!"

"Thank heaven we're only going to be six once," Audrey interjected sagely, folding her arms Cheryl-style. "I'd rather be forty."

Tate bent his knees, scooped up Ava in the crook of one arm and tugged lightly at Audrey's long braid with his free hand. Ava buried her face in his shoulder, bumping her glasses askew. He felt tears and mucus moisten the fabric of his pale blue shirt.

"Forty?" she said, voice muffled. "Even *Daddy* isn't that old!"

"You're such a baby," Audrey replied.

"Enough," Tate told both children, but he was looking at Cheryl as he spoke. "When is this shindig supposed to be over?"

They'd opened presents, devoured everything but the cakes and competed for prizes a person would expect to see on a TV game show. What else was there to do?

"Why can't you just stop fighting?" Ava blurted.

"We're *not* fighting, darling," Cheryl pointed out quietly, before turning to sweep her watchful friends and the nannies up in a benign smile. "And stop carrying on, Ava. It isn't becoming—or ladylike."

"Can we go out to the ranch, Daddy?" Ava asked him plaintively, ignoring her mother's comment. "I like it better there, because nobody fights."

"Me, too," Tate agreed. It was his turn to take the kids, and he'd been looking forward to it since their last visit. Giving them back was always a wrench.

"Nobody fights at the ranch?" Audrey argued, sounding way too bored and way too sophisticated for a six-year-old. Yeah, she was a prime candidate for the Pixie Pageant, all right, Tate thought bitterly—bring on the mascara and enough hairspray to rip a new hole in the ozone layer, and don't forget the feather boas and the fishnet stockings.

Audrey drew a breath and went right on talking. "I guess you don't remember the day Uncle Austin came home from the hospital after that bull hurt him so bad, before he started rehab in Dallas, and how he told Daddy and Uncle Garrett to stay out of his part of the house unless they wanted a belly full of buckshot."

Cheryl arched one eyebrow, triumphant. For all their land, cattle, oil shares and cold, hard cash, the McKetricks were just a bunch of Texas rednecks, as far as she was concerned. She'd grown up in a Park Avenue high-rise, a cherished only child, after all, her mother an heiress to a legendary but rapidly dwindling fortune, her father a famous novelist, of the literary variety.

But, please, nobody mention that dear old Mom snorted coke and would sleep with anything in pants, and Dad ran through the last of his wife's money and then his surprisingly modest earnings as the new Ernest Hemingway.

Cheryl had never gotten over the humiliation of having to wait tables and take out student loans to put herself through college and law school.

"I wonder what my attorney would say," Cheryl intoned, "if I told him the children are exposed to *guns*, out there on the wild and wooly Silver Spur."

While Tate couldn't argue that there weren't firearms on the ranch—between the snakes and all the other dangers inherent to the land, firepower might well prove to be a necessity at any time—it was a stretch to say the girls were "exposed" to them. Every weapon was locked up in one of several safes, and the combinations changed regularly.

"I wonder what *mine* would say," Tate retorted evenly, the fake smile aching on his face, "if he knew about your plans for this week."

"Stop," Ava begged.

Tate sighed, kissed his daughter smartly on the forehead, and set her on her feet again. "Sorry, sweetheart," he said. "Say goodbye and thanks to your friends. The party's over."

"They haven't even sung the song I taught them," Cheryl said.

Ava leaned against Tate's hip. "We're not good singers at all," she confided.

Somewhat to Tate's surprise, it was Audrey, the performer in the family, who turned on one sandaled heel, faced the assemblage and announced cheerfully, "You can all go home now—my dad says the party's over."

Cheryl winced.

The kids—and the pony—seemed relieved. So did the nannies, though the proper term, according to Cheryl, was *au pairs*. The mothers, many of whom Tate had known since kindergarten and dated in high school between all-too-frequent breakups with Libby Remington, the great love of his youth, if not his entire life, hid bitchy little smiles with varying degrees of success.

"The girls are a little tired," Cheryl explained, with convincing sincerity. "All this excitement—"

"Can we ride horses when we get to the ranch?" Audrey called, from halfway across the yard. "Can we swim in the pool?"

Tate made damn sure he didn't smile at this indication of how "tired" his daughters were, but it was hard.

Ava remained at his side, both arms clenched around his waist now.

"Their suitcases," Cheryl said tightly, "are in the hall."

"Let's load Bamboozle in the trailer," Tate told Ava, gently easing out of her embrace. "Then we'll get your stuff and head for the ranch."

Ava peeled herself away from Tate, walked over and took Bamboozle by the bridle strap, patiently waiting to lead the elderly animal to the trailer hitched to the back of Tate's truck. Audrey had disappeared into the house, on some mission all her own.

"Don't help," Cheryl snapped, out of one side of her mouth. "You've already done enough, Tate McKettrick."

"I live to delight you in every possible way, Cheryl."

Audrey poked her head out between the French doors standing a little ajar between the living room and the patio. "Can we stop at the Perk Up on the way out of town, Dad?" she wanted to know, as calmly as if the backyard weren't full of dismissed guests. "Get some of those orange smoothie things, like before?"

Tate grinned. "Sure," he told his daughter, even though the thought of stopping at Libby's coffee shop made the pit of his stomach tighten. He'd only gone in there the last time because he'd known Libby was out of town, and her sister, Julie, was running the show.

Which was ridiculous. They'd managed to avoid each other for years now, no mean trick in such a small town, but it was getting to be too damn much work.

"Just what they need—more sugar," Cheryl muttered, shaking her head as she walked away, her arms still crossed in front of her chest, only more tightly now.

Tate held his tongue. *He* hadn't been the one to serve cake and ice cream and fruit punch by the wheelbarrow

load all afternoon.

Cheryl kept walking.

Tate and Ava led the pony into the horse trailer, which, along with his truck, took up at least three parking spaces on the shady street in front of Cheryl's house. He'd bought the place for her as a part—a *small* part—of their divorce settlement.

"Boozle might get lonely riding in this big trailer all by himself," Ava fretted, standing beside the pony while he slurped up water from a bucket. "Maybe I should ride back here with him, so he'd have some company."

"Not a chance," Tate said affably, dumping a flake of hay into the feeder for the pony to munch on, going home. "Too dangerous."

Ava adjusted her glasses. "Audrey really wants to be in that Pixie Pageant," she said, her voice small. "She's going to nag you three ways from Sunday about it, too."

Tate bit back a grin. "I think I can handle a little nagging," he said lightly. "Let's go get your stuff and hit the road, Shortstop."

"I probably wouldn't win anyway," Ava mused wistfully, stopping her father cold.

"Win what?" Tate asked.

Ava giggled, but it was a strained sound, like she was forcing it. "The *Pixie Pageant*, Dad. Keep up, will you?"

Tate's throat went tight, but he managed a chuckle. "Sure, you'd win," he said. "And that's another reason I won't let you enter in the first place. Just think how bad all those other little girls would feel."

"Audrey could be Miss Pixie," Ava speculated thoughtfully, a small, light-rimmed shadow standing there in the horse trailer. "She can twirl a baton and everything. I keep on dropping mine."

"Audrey isn't entering," Tate said. Bamboozle was between them; he removed the pony's saddle and blanket, ran a hand along his sweaty back. "She'll just have to content herself with being Miss *McKettrick*, at least for the foreseeable future."

Ava mulled that over for a few moments, chewing her lower lip. "Do you think I'll be pretty when I grow up, Dad?"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Janie Ross:

A lot of people always spent all their free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them family members or their friend. Did you know? Many a lot of people spent that they free time just watching TV, as well as playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity that's look different you can

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