

International Bestselling Author

Hope
Moore



Real Love'n
COWBOY

**Billionaire Cowboys of
LONE STAR, TEXAS**

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REAL LOVE'N COWBOY

Billionaire Cowboys of Lone Star, Texas,
Book Five

HOPE MOORE

Real Love'n Cowboy

Hunter Buckley meets the wedding cake baker Violet Kringle and feels jingles all the way to his heart... But can he let his heart feel what he's most scared of? Can he take the step forward that his brother and many of his cousins have taken? Can he seek love when it's the thing that hurts the most when it's gone?

Don't miss this delightful, touching story of a cowboy who locked his heart up—and the tiny woman who looks like a swirl of whip cream when she whirls into town, turns his world upside down, and puts his heart into an uproar.

Welcome back to Lone Star, Texas... the town full of wonderful, meddling people who now have a wedding about to happen and a new couple falling in love as they fight hard to feel nothing. Sometimes love opens its arms wide and sweeps away everything but sweet love... like icing on the cake Violet is baking for Hunter's cousin's wedding—like the cake, he's just too sweet to ignore.

Chapter One

Could this be where her future began?

Violet Kringle's excitement built as she drove her ancient but loved, cherry-toned Volkswagen van into the town of Lone Star, Texas.

She had longed to visit from the moment her friend Kelsy had left the suburbs of Houston and began telling her all the wonderful things going on each time they talked on the phone. Now, at last, she was here.

Delight danced through her as she pulled her van into the last parking space in front of the closed bakery. The bakery she was here to use for the next two weeks.

The owner was retiring, and that left no one in town to bake the wedding cake Kelsy's soon-to-be cousin-in-law, Jasmine, needed. So, she'd gotten the call from Kelsy to come and see her, bake the wedding cake and to see if this was the place she might want to settle down in. In need of a break and wanting to check the town out, she had instantly said yes to the invitation.

She already loved the little bakery from the welcoming outside as she turned off the ignition of her van. She was supposed to go to Kelsy's home first, but unable to stop herself, Violet had driven straight to the bakery. She *had* to look at the bakery on her own, get her reaction without any other voices inside her head—looking at it now, she smiled. And once again the words echoed in her head with just a little change to the words... *Could this be where my future begins?*

She was a baker, taught by the best baker ever, her granddad, and she loved that she'd inherited his gift. She had

been taught by the best. He'd taught her to do a job like it was the most important thing in all the world, even if she was leaving that job the next day.

He'd taught her to always finish strong. He'd taught her that, and it had come into play when he'd been hit by a car and thankfully lived, but was now in a wheelchair, strong but unable to walk. While he'd been in recovery and then rehabilitation learning how to get around, she'd stepped up and taken his place at the bakery for the owner and him. She'd kept it going, which made the owner happy, and she'd wanted to do that because of Mr. Simpson—Mr. Smarty-pants had been Kelsy's name for him—because he'd been arrogant and taken credit for her granddad's work. Then, Mr. Simpson had paid much of her granddad's bills, which helped them survive. She'd decided to only look at the bright side, how much he'd helped them and only that. The man had known money for them was tight because of the tragedy that had happened when she was a girl. That tragedy had taken everything from her and her granddad. Everything but their love for each other and their talent of baking. Mr. S had benefited well from Granddad's talent and he knew it. Now that they'd repaid him of his gracious debt, he knew they would be moving forward.

Yes, the moment she found the spot that called to her—like this place at first glance was doing.

It was quaint, with a white wooden door and a large glass front window in a light yellow painted wooden exterior. It reminded her of lemon pudding with a cherry on top since the name of the bakery was written in cherry red like her van, with the words *Arabella's Delights*. Arabella was the owner looking to sell, and she had a great reputation but had reached the age she was ready to sit more and enjoy life like she well deserved. Despite not having a buyer, she'd finally closed the doors.

Was this the door opening for Violet? So much had happened in her life that had put her life in others' hands until

now. She pushed her past back, not neglecting it, but this was her moment. Unable to stop herself, heart thundering, she pushed open the driver's door and stepped out... excitement filled her as she took a step forward.

It was a warm day, so she had on her favorite pair of old but well-worn flip-flops with slip-resistant soles—they had great arch support too—something she'd learned early standing on her feet so long in a day. If you stood on your feet for ten hours a day, support was something you had to have, no matter what your age, young or old. It was one of the many things Granddad had taught her. Although she'd had to convince him that her flip-flops could do the job, they weren't like many that had only a sponge bottom. No, these were cute, great arch support, and they let her toes be free while able to support her as she made cakes, cupcakes, and more each day.

She laughed just thinking about that. She might work all day, but she liked her flip-flops, her jeans that usually came right above her ankles, and her T-shirts. She wore her hair jaw length to keep it away from the food. The last thing she wanted was her curly blonde hair mixed in with her white or dark icings topping a beautiful cake, cupcake, pastries or frosty-topped cup of special coffee. She needed *nothing* stealing the beauty of her works of art, as she liked to call her creations. She loved what she did.

And her granddad had been the best teacher in all the world, and she was so thankful she'd inherited his talent. She cherished it and the man who'd raised her from an early age after they'd lost her mom and grandmother in the same car crash—pushing the thoughts away, she stepped forward then onto the wooden sidewalk. Her hair, since she wasn't working today, was free and her curls bobbed as the breeze tossed strings of it across her face. She swept it out of her way as she looked at this little bakery and everything about her suddenly felt set free...

Free.

Free to be me... the words sang on the breeze as she looked through the large window of the place that might hold her dreams.

She pushed the thought away. It wasn't time.

Her granddad... again, they didn't owe any money anymore, but they weren't ready—*were they?*

Her gaze swept the front room of the bakery—Arabella had kept this beautiful, quaint place perfect.

She was going to get to bake here for about two weeks preparing for the wedding.

Unable to help herself, she went to the alley. It was a long shot to the end, with nothing to stop her, so she started walking. Oh yes, she wanted to see the kitchen. Maybe it had a back door with a window.

She made her way around to the back and stepped up onto the wooden back porch. There was a window, way up high just above the door. For a short gal like her, it was a very long way off. But there was a large metal barrel sitting beside the door. It was cute, painted a bright pink with the name *Arabella's Delights* painted across it. Why was it back here—she wasn't sure, but if she climbed on top, she might be able to see in the window.

She bit her lip and studied the window. About half a foot tall and a little wider than the door, it looked like it was used to let air in or heat out. She automatically assumed that inside there would be a long pole that was used to reach up and unlatch it as needed.

Not one to stop herself when she was excited about something, despite being short, she lifted herself to the top of the barrel to sit and then stood up. Smiling, she raised to tiptoes as she grasped the edge of the window and peeked over

the edge. *Drats*—she could see only the far wall and the ceiling. She wasn't tall enough to see anything below that line. *Drats* and more *drats*.

If she were just a little taller she could see down. But at only five-foot-two, she claimed the two inches voraciously despite it actually barely being a touch over one inch. She stepped from one foot to the other and decided then and there that barrel was steady enough, strong enough to handle more weight on top of it. So, she hopped down, scanned the area and spotted some pieces of wooden two-by-fours that looked like they'd been used building something.

Bingo—there was also a cement block. She could stack them and then be just high enough to see more of the kitchen.

She could do this.

She wanted to do this, and so she did.

Within moments she had the short foot long two-by-fours stacked on top of the cement block sitting on top of the barrel. She knew that this could be a silly—even stupid idea, but if she were careful and held onto the window edge, she could lift up on tiptoe and look down at the inside of the bakery.

She just had to be steady. The last thing she needed to do was hurt herself. But life had shown her that sometimes things just happened, like her granddad being in a wheelchair. He'd been run over by an out-of-control truck that came onto the sidewalk and ran him over. He hadn't even been crossing the road, and yet he'd been the one hit. Nothing about what he'd done had been his fault.

But this, if she messed up, this would be her fault and then who would take care of the wedding and her granddad? She'd be fine. She was one steady gal, always had been. Without another thought, she eased herself to a sitting position on the edge of the barrel and then slowly stood. Feeling steady, she then reached up, grasping the edge of the window sill as she

placed one foot on top of the pile she'd built. Slowly she lifted up cautiously and smiled as she felt the wood hold her. Grasping tightly to the window sill, she looked through the glass—holy smokes—it was *amazing*.

A huge silver refrigerator and wheeled trays for bunches of cooling pastries and counters that were wide and waiting for her creation to begin.

Her gaze locked onto a wide wooden table that had been varnished and glowed even in the dim light. The wood she was standing on had probably been the leftovers from the building of the pretty, hand-built table. They had obviously been making improvements, making it even more attractive to a buyer. She loved it. She sighed, letting her gaze sweep the room, and feeling satisfied, she knew now it was time to head to Kelsey's.

Suddenly from behind her, she heard a noise, looked too quickly over her shoulder and there, standing at the corner of the building, was an amazing-looking man. Tall, broad-shouldered, with short brown hair peaking from beneath his cowboy hat. He had narrow jean-clad hips, emphasized by his wide hands that rested on those hips, his elbows sticking out. She yanked her gaze back to his face and his eyes—the most amazing blue-green sparkling eyes that had now widened with disbelief.

“What are you doing?” he demanded in clear dismay.

In the quick instant he made the demand, her suddenly tingling toes wobbled—*and down she flew*.

* * *

Hunter Buckley had been startled when he'd seen the tiny woman with curly blonde hair that looked like it was as thick

as whipped cream and almost as white. She was standing on her tiny tiptoes on top of Arabella's cupcake barrel—but that wasn't the worst. The worst was the concoction of things she was standing on with her flip-flop tiptoes. Standing and stretching up with her hands gripping the window sill as she peaked over the top. It freaked him out, so he'd rushed forward as he'd yelled his question. "*What are you doing?*"

That had been a huge mistake on his part!

Her face told him instantly how startled she was, and then her startled eyes met his and—and instant jingles rang thought him just as terror slapped him hard as everything toppled over, including her.

He dove forward as she screamed. Thank goodness he slid beneath her and at least caught her head as her short legs hit the ground. He'd sank to the ground, taking the slam with his knees but protecting her head with his palms and now he gently rested his palms on his thighs. Her shoulders were resting just barely on his bent knees and she stared up at him with amazing blueberry eyes.

"You caught me," she whispered.

He was engulfed with terror for her safety. "Don't move," he said, his words gruff. He'd barely caught her head and her body had slammed down. "I reacted wrong, startled you," his words were clipped. "Seeing you up there scared me, but there is no excuse for me yelling—"

She moved her arms. "I'm—"

"No, don't move. I need to call a doctor. We've got to make sure you can get up."

Those beautiful blue eyes blinked and a firm look came into them. A look of determination. "Thank you for grabbing my head, but I'm going to move. If something is wrong, I'll know it. You saved my head and brain, thank you very much.

My brain says my body can move. Thank goodness for the wooden porch instead of concrete. Now, I'm going to move my arms."

Then, she lifted both arms up, stretched them out as he watched, floored by her declaration, her determination, and the fact there were no more tears in those beautiful eyes. This was one tiny but strong, determined woman who should *never* have been standing on that pile.

He fought back any reaction, not wanting to make another mistake. "I need to make sure you're okay."

Without answering, she put her elbows beneath her, lifted up onto them, rolled her head slowly in a circle to make sure her neck was okay, then she stretched her legs, and then she sat up.

"All's good. I'll be one sore gal tomorrow, but everything feels fine right now. Could you help me up? With or without your help, I am getting up."

He let out an exasperated breath. She was going to do it, like she'd said, with or without him. He stood, then she lifted her tiny, dainty hand and placed it in his. Suddenly, like a night when all the sparkling white lights of the gigantic town Christmas tree and the buildings along the main street were turned on, he felt the tingling wave of electric illumination roll through him. Everything lit up inside of him the instant her fingers slid into his. Electric waves of illumination raced through him. He froze, looked at her hand, then back to her eyes, just as her startled, sparkling blueberry eyes shot from their hands to his gaze.

She felt it too.

The same electrical sparks traveling through him like a speedboat on a glassy ocean wave showed in her eyes—then, as if they'd hit the peak of the wave, everything came crashing down.

Her eyes flared, and she yanked her hand from his. “Never mind. I can get up on my own.”

And before he could do anything, she pushed herself up on her hands and knees and then went to stand. But when she put her weight on her legs, her left leg crumbled and down she tumbled—

Chapter Two

She was falling—Hunter didn't hesitate. He scooped her into his arms and saved her from slamming to the ground again. He held her close as neither one of them said anything for the first few seconds, just stared at each other.

She reacted terribly just by the way their hands touched moments before, now their hearts were almost touching, her shoulder was thin, really thin and not giving much padding from her heart to his.

Say something.

“No need to tell me to put you down, I know that's what you're about to say. Let me take you to a chair. You've obviously hurt your ankle, hopefully only that and not your leg. As much as you don't want it to be, that was a hard fall you took. That leg and ankle took the pressure of the hit. And though you're saying no, we need to see a doctor about that.”

Wary eyes snapped to him. “I'm fine.”

“No, you're not. Look, I'm a nice guy,” he said on impulse. “Everyone will tell you that. I don't know what man put that look in your eyes, but believe me, I'm not a bad guy. We just had a rough start. I'm going to make sure you're okay now. Miss Arabella had me working inside the bakery and I had come to finish cleaning up because Kelsy's friend is arriving today. I have a feeling that's you.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “I was supposed to go to Kelsy's first. But I couldn't help coming to the bakery first, and now look at the trouble I've gotten into.”

He grinned. “Relax. We're going inside and things are going to get better.” He headed to the door.

“Thank you. And yes, I’m actually at this very moment thankful that you are carrying me, that you have strength enough—I mean, yes, you’re strong, a very strong cowboy.” After stumbling over her words, it was clear she was not happy about what she’d said.

Obviously, blue-eyed Twinkle Toes sometimes said things she didn’t want to, but he liked what she said, and that startled him.

He stepped up onto the porch with the small lady in his arms. “Reach in my chest pocket for the key. We’re going to open the door and I’m going to take you inside of the room you were trying to see. I’ll sit you down and look at your ankle while you get a good view of the room. *Maybe*, if we’re lucky, we just need to apply an ice bag to your ankle.”

She reached into his pocket, pulled out the single key, then reached down and popped it into the keyhole. When the click sounded, she twisted the knob, pushed the door open, and he carried her straight to Miss Arabella’s long-legged, high-backed bar chair. Were all bakers short and tiny like this one and Miss Arabella?

“Miss Arabella used this bar stool chair for many years to help her as she aged. It enabled her to keep working without standing up for so long.”

“That’s good she did that. Standing on your feet all day can be harsh, so I’m glad she chose to sit when she could.”

He eased her onto the bar chair, yet to tell him her name, and all he knew was she was his sister-in-law’s friend... *Violet*—Violet Kringle, that was it. He remembered Kelsy telling him her name, her unusual name, but as he looked at her, Twinkle Toes—*pretty* Twinkle Toes won out. She had on pink flip-flops that freed her sparkly, pink-painted toenails. But there was more, the woman looked like a pastry too—or... well she just looked—he shut down his thoughts not needing

to think about anything other than icing down her ankle, *not thinking that she looked like delicious icing on a cake.*

“Okay, let’s put your leg up here on the bar and let’s take a look at it.” He settled her on the seat, then gently lifted her foot to the bar and she grimaced. It was better than grimacing when he’d sat her in the chair because, more than likely, it was just this one ankle that was hurt and not her hip or back. “Yep, it’s swelling. Let me get some ice.” *Cold ice to smack against his forehead.*

He strode to the big freezer where he knew there were a lot of already packed small bags of ice. Miss Arabella always kept ice in bags for when customers came in. In these Texas summers, they needed something to help keep the icing from melting in the heat while traveling to their destinations.

He plucked a thinly filled gallon-sized bag from the freezer, plopped it on the floor to bust up, then pulled open the drawer and took out a dishrag. He wrapped the bag, then turned to carry it over to the alert lady who was watching him with those blue eyes.

“You act like you know exactly what you’re doing,” she offered.

“Miss Arabella makes sure people can carry cakes and cupcakes with them iced down in bags, boxes or an ice chest melt-free.” He held the bag up. “She keeps them already bagged up and ready.”

Violet liked it. “Exactly. My Grampa say’s some bakerys don’t think about that added help. I can tell just by that little tidbit that Miss Arabella and my granddad would get along very well. He taught me that when I was just a girl sitting on a stool, this high with my short legs dangling as he taught me what I know. He told me never, *ever* bake something and expect the customer to have thought about what they might need. It was my responsibility to get my creation where it was

supposed to be—at least prepared for the trip as it went out the door.”

“Your granddad and Arabella sound like they’d get along well. That lady has run this business for years and I’ve never heard one complaint. She’s made wedding cakes, birthday cakes, and cupcakes. Frozen pies that make it wherever they’re meant to go with no problem. Yes, that little chef of a pastry baker is really going to be missed.” With that, he gently laid the rag-covered ice pack on her ankle. Then looked at her, his hand holding the pack where it was. “Can you move it?” he asked gently, not wanting her to be alarmed if she couldn’t. Needing to coax an answer from her clamped lips, so he’d know if he needed to take her to a doctor, he hitched a questioning brow urging her to answer.

“The ice is cold, but,” she said, easing the words out as she got used to the cold. He felt her move her ankle beneath the ice. “I can move it. Sideways. Up and down.” She smiled. “I’m going to be alright. Thank goodness, because I need to bake Jasmine’s wedding cake. When we spoke on the phone, she said she is marrying the man of her dreams, so the cake has to be wonderful. She said her cowboy is the most handsome and wonderful man in the world.” She smiled. “I love baking wedding cakes for couples. Life is perfect at that moment. She also said he was the man who had made her dreams come true—not *was* going to make them come true, but *had* made them come true. I love that. He’s a Buckley brother, Kelsy’s husband, Ace’s cousin,” she paused. “Speaking of names, I don’t even know yours.”

He grinned. “First, you haven’t told me yours. I’m assuming you’re Violet Kringle.”

A smile bloomed instantly. “Yes, I am. A Kringle at your service... not kin to Santa Claus Kringle, though I do deliver a lot of Christmas desserts.”

“Well, Miss Kringle, I’m Hunter. Hunter *Buckley*, Ace’s twin brother. Cousin to the Buckley brother you’re speaking of —” he said, then halted as her eyes grew wide. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re a Buckley? That Buckley?”

* * *

She couldn’t breathe. *This* was Hunter Buckley—Kelsy’s husband, Ace’s twin. *Twin*.

She’d seen a picture of him standing beside Ace at the wedding. Her memory rolled back to the wedding picture Kelsy sent her that had him in it, he’d looked different. The man in the picture had waves to his hair peeking out from beneath his hat. Now, his hair was cut close, short, with no waves sticking from beneath his hat. And he had a five o’clock shadow along his jaw.

Heart pounding one more time—it was becoming a common thing since first looking at this cowboy had knocked her feet out from under her—*literally*.

The good-looking cowboy had startled her, helped her, held her, and now those amazing eyes of his were looking at her like she had lost her mind or something.

Get a grip!

She let out a breath—hadn’t even realized she was holding her breath. “I didn’t mean that to sound bad. The Buckley meant you’re Ace’s twin. Look, I messed up, I shouldn’t have come here. Kelsy is expecting me and I’m making her wait. So, Hunter, thanks for saving me. Um... and I think my foot is going to be okay, so I’m going try to make it out to my Volkswagen and head to where I’m supposed to be.”

That grin of his spread across his face. He shifted from one boot to the other, his hip jutting out as his hand went to it. Instantly, her traitorous gaze followed that hand to his lean hip attached to his long, jean-clad legs. And his boots, which he immediately tapped the tip of one on the floor as if saying, “*Hey, I see you studying me—*” She yanked her gaze back to his—his twinkling eyes.

“Don’t grin like that. I messed up,” she warned.

Why hadn’t she realized who he was? He looked like his twin, but not exactly. His lack of shaving today had helped camouflage him. Amazing how that little touch of hair on his jaw and his lack of curly hair sticking from beneath his hat—what a big difference it made.

He chuckled as if seeing her mind working. “Come on, don’t look alarmed. I’m just an old cowboy out here rescuing a dainty little—well, honestly, you remind me of a little whip of whipping cream. Your hair, curling like it does and almost white—” he shut up, locking his lips firmly. “Ah, anyway, your name, Miss Kringle, goes with your hair. Kelsy didn’t say her best friend, the amazing dessert chef, looked like the topping of her desserts.”

Violet chuckled, couldn’t help it, and thankfully relaxed a touch. “Yes, I do. My granddaddy has a great sense of humor, and when I was born I came out with a big white, curly head of hair like this. Well, my name was already Kringle, but when my eyes opened up, and early on my blue-violet eyes were more purple. They eventually turned bluer toned than purple, but I got named right then and there. Violet Kringle at your service. It fits right in with my love of baking desserts, whipped meringue on top of pies, whipping cream on top of pudding, ice cream. You name it, my name fits it. Yes, there was a plan for my destiny. I’m very thankful to my granddad. He’s a great guy and a master at desserts.” She was rambling, and continued as his eyes dug deep.

“I might bring him out before the wedding because he would love this. I needed to come out and get things started first. I’m so glad his amazing talent with delightful, delicious desserts wore off on me. Because I owe him everything.” She clamped her mouth closed finally and took a deep breath as she met Hunter’s penetrating eyes.

Eyes that said he liked what she’d said.

“I’m glad your granddad knew what he was doing and passed his talent on to you.” His voice was slow and soothing, as if he were trying to calm her down. “I have to tell you our little town loves Miss Arabella. We’re all so sad she won’t be here, creating her masterpieces. We all hope this place will reopen and, who knows, her buyer might be sitting right here in front of me. With a talent like yours, I can already tell you the town ladies are putting their hopes on you opening it up again.” He hitched his brow. “I might not should have said that, but something tells me I might need to give you a little warning.”

They wanted her here.

Well, if they liked her baking they’d want her here. She wasn’t a braggart, but she knew she was good. *Why?* Because she’d inherited everything from her granddad and he was the best of the best.

“Thanks for the alert. Kelsy knows I have my heart set on opening my own bakery somewhere. And I know, just between you and me, she may open up and tell me the truth, but she wants me here. And I have to admit, after everything she’s told me about this wonderful town, I am drawn to it. But, *I* have to make that decision. It won’t depend on anyone else.”

“I get that. But why so unyielding?”

“I’ve had to be guided by a decision since my granddad got hurt. Decisions that helped him and I don’t regret it at all. I’ve worked where I’m working to pay back his boss, who put

out the money to pay any hospital bills that insurance didn't pay. I never look back or go against that because I'm grateful to him. Granddad has made huge progress and I have the debts paid off now, but I haven't made my decision yet on what—or where I want to go.”

“I get that. I'm glad you had help.”

“Yes, there was a lot to my past, a lot my granddad had to deal with, and I couldn't, can't, ever let him down. But this next step in my life is going to be all mine. I'll go wherever it feels right for him and for me. Wherever I feel comfortable... anyway, enough about me. It's nice to meet you, Hunter Buckley. Thank you for saving me, and now I need to get in my VW van and head out. It's time to go see Kelsy.” She clamped her mouth shut. She had to stop all this rattling she was doing.

He held his arm out to her like an escort. She knew she needed help, so without another thought, she picked up her icepack in one hand, slipped her free arm through his, and gently eased her foot to the floor between them. It was time to head out.

And definitely time to ignore the way touching this cowboy sent tingles from her head to her toes.

Chapter Three

Hunter smiled down at the beautiful piece of icing and grinned as she took her first step. The moment she faltered, which he'd been afraid she would, he was ready and slipped his arm beneath her knees and lifted her back into his arms.

Thank goodness her injured ankle was on the left, not the right, so when he got her to her van she would be able to drive. But for now, she was in his arms again. And as much as he didn't want to admit it, his heart was back to thundering.

She looked at him in shock and he grinned. "I was watching because I was worried about that. I'm going to carry you out through the front so you can see everything in the main room and then we'll go to your van."

"And I can drive," she declared.

"Yes, I know. Your right foot works just fine. But if you don't feel like it, I'll drive you—"

"No, I can drive. Thank you. Only thing I can say is you do observe things. My ankle isn't working and I do want to see the rest of the place better than peeking through the window. That's not saying I'm going to buy it, I just need to know what I have to work with. The kitchen is aged, but perfect. I love the mixture of old and new."

He tried to focus on her words and not on the feel of her in his arms again. "You're going to fit in here because Lone Star has a big mix of people who come from ancestors that settled here in wagons to people who just moved to town. I'm sure Kelsy told you that our monthly dance is a great success. You could probably bring things to that and get the word out on your baking, and you'll probably have a herd of cowboys

lining up.” At his words, her heart began thundering against his chest again, and there was no denying that he liked it.

Liked it a lot.

Her brows knitted together. “Um, well... that’s kind of a good idea, not that I’m saying I’m moving here but, there are a lot of companies who do a great online business. I might consider that, from where ever I end up.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Not what he’d meant, but still she was obviously not wanting to talk about moving here. Unable to stop himself, he added, “You could test the waters at the dance. Lots of people will show up.”

“So, I’ve heard. That dance is a big thing here. Seems lots of matches are made at the dance. I know that Jasmine came here because her mother asked about a dance and everyone got it going. And now she’s marrying your cousin. That’s cool. The dance is a great draw for the town businesses, so if I bought the bakery I’d make sure I made the most of the dances. Not that I’d be looking to get married, it’s a no to that. I’d just make sure everyone who came knew about my bakery and my wedding cake skills. I’m a driven gal who got sidetracked by the need to help my granddad. But that didn’t stop me from knowing one day I’d be seeking my way again. I refuse to let anything, or person, get in my way of finding my own success. I’m not talking about famous, I’m just talking about being able to support myself. And my sweet granddad. Nothing will ever get in the way of that goal.”

She’d made herself clear and while she was talking her direct, pure, and simple words, Hunter carried her into the front room of the bakery. He understood her focus. He wasn’t looking for marriage either. Since he’d lost his parents, he hadn’t thought about a happily ever after. Never planned on looking.

He'd lived through their deaths and loved them with all his heart and knew how much loss hurt. He couldn't and didn't want to think about falling in love and losing that woman... no he would never love a woman with all his heart. Never love a woman so much, he asked her to marry him, knowing that one day in an instant she could be gone.

Nope, not happening.

He wasn't going to be in that spot, lost in pain and agony one more time. He knew that losing a spouse would be even harder than what he'd already lived through.

"I might be carrying you through this bakery, this place that is known for wedding cakes and bright early morning delicious pastries, but I'm not looking for anything to do with that. You can rest assured that I'll be around to help out if you need anything, but you don't have to worry about me. Heck, even though I go to the town dances, I don't dance. So, you don't have to put the declaration out for me. I won't be the one asking you to dance. Or trying to get you out on the dance floor like I'm certain is going to happen when you show up on Saturday night. I'm just the guy who caused you to fall off that stack on the barrel out there. So now I'm carrying you around in my arms, trying to get you somewhere safe where you'll be comfortable."

She stared at him. "I'm not asking you for anything."

"I know that. You've made yourself clear and I'm doing the same thing. If you need anything, feel free to call me because I won't be asking for anything else. No matter how beautiful you are or how much you look like a sweet topping on desserts—sorry, but you do. Your mom and granddad knew exactly what to name you. It fits. But I can tell you, Miss Kringle, if you move here, if this place calls to you, you're going to make a lot of people happy. Then, one day, you may decide you're going to want to look for someone too. I can tell

you that you'll have a lot of cowboys coming to your door—this door. You'll be busy having cowboys traveling from all over to buy donuts from you. Sure, your desserts will be good, but they'll just want to see those sparkling blueberry eyes and that frosty whip cream hair move around when you tilt your head to the side, like now. Or flop out when you yank your head straight like you just did in shock.”

He laughed, couldn't help it. “But, remember, I saved you this time, my own fault, but if you need anything, feel free to call me because I'm not looking to be matched up, and everyone in town knows it. I'm just here to help.”

She stared at him, her beautiful mouth, that looked like a cherry that fell off the top of the whipped cream hair and landed on the side of the—he yanked his gaze off her lips. His thoughts off of thinking of her as a dessert.

He didn't know what his problem was, and obviously neither did she by the look in her flashing eyes.

“Believe me, I can take care of myself.”

He gave her a solemn nod. “I'm not kidding you about our little town of matchmakers. They already know that trying to match me up is going to be their missed shot. I'm not looking. I'm never going to hurt like I did when I lost my parents. I know how much love matters. I see my brother and cousins and their wives so happy. And I saw Kelsy and how much she was hurting after losing her husband. She and her adorable little girl were in pain. My brother helped her overcome that, but I'm not going to ever worry about going through that. I'm never putting my heart out there and having to worry about losing the love of my life like I lost my parents. Hurt? Yeah, that would have to be the worst hurt of all. And I have a happy life right now. I love my life the way it is. And I plan to make the most of it.” Why in the world was he rattling off these words? This declaration?

“I believe you and I get it. One, I’d love to be able to love the way you describe it, but not now. I’ve got the next few years of my life lined out, and once I decide where I’ll settle and put it into motion, nothing else is getting in the way. My granddad sent me here alone because he said that I had given up my life for him over the last few years and wants me to meet my destiny.” She shook her head, tore her gaze from his and looked about the room.

“My destiny,” she said after a pause. “Those were his words—‘*Now, go meet your destiny,*’ he said. So, he’s rooting for Lone Star to be my place to open my dreams up and let them fly. Obviously, others are too, but in the end it will be me who decides. Like you’re doing. We have that in common.”

There was a zap in his heart looking at her sparkling eyes. Words he didn’t want to acknowledge echoed through him... *meet your destiny.* “Here, I’m taking you out the door now. I’m sending you on your way because you have my new sister-in-law waiting to see you.” He needed her—no, wanted her out of his arms. He didn’t need anything.

With that, he opened the door and strode out onto the boardwalk and headed straight to her bright red Volkswagen van. Obviously, she took immaculate care of this historic beauty. He wondered how much of her own history was in the van?

It didn’t matter, all he knew was he needed to get this pretty lady out of his arms and that VW van would do the trick.

* * *

She wanted out of his arms and was filled with relief as he pushed the door opened and stepped out into the sunshine. But

there on the sidewalk stood a tall lady with short red hair. She was dressed in a bright red cowgirl shirt with long sleeves finished off with a polished silver snap. The blouse was tucked into jeans with a glistening three-inch gold and silver buckle, highlighting her lean waist. Violet's gaze was drawn down to western boots—the jeans were tucked inside, displaying the large red stipe, the white stripe, and the blue stripe, colors of the Texas flag. The white star on the blue finished it off.

The woman stood out, and Violet knew instantly who this was. Millie Watts. This was the champion barrel racer Kelsy had told her about, said she was unmistakable and she'd been right.

From what Kelsy said, Millie stood behind her table of drinks at the dances and, until recently, had never come out to dance herself. But was now enjoying dancing with her new partner, Kelsy's grandfather. Kelsy hoped her grandfather and Millie might fall in love with each other—not just love dancing together.

Violet smiled because if she did come to town to open this bakery as her own, she'd be the one now standing behind the drink table watching instead of participating. That was what the widowed cowgirl had been known for, supplying safety behind her drink table, herself included for those not looking for love. Only problem, love had found them and it might happen to Millie. Still, behind that table would be the place for Violet.

“Hello, I'm Millie,” Millie said, her voice warm. “When I spotted this cute little red VW, I knew instantly who you were. Kelsy told us about your van, said you loved it and had owned it most of your life. Even as a child, inherited it from your mom. If my mother had left it to me, I'd cherish it too. They don't make them like this anymore.”

Kelsy had told the ladies the story of her van, or at least part of the story. “You’re right, they don’t make them like this anymore. But even if they did, they wouldn’t mean what this one means to me.”

Millie’s eyes softened. “I understand that fully.”

And from what she’d heard about this cowgirl’s loss of love, Kelsy believed her. She felt Hunter’s gaze on her and met it. His arms had tightened on her, as if sensing something deep was being referred to. “That van belonged to my mother, who I lost. I was young but Gramps stored it for me so I’d have it when I was old enough to drive. There’s a long story that goes with it. But it’s mine now and I’ll always cherish it. I’ll drive it as long as it lets me.”

He nodded, taking in her words. “For its age, it looks great. Like it’s been redone.”

“Yes, it does,” Millie agreed.

She smiled, couldn’t help it. “There are two things I love: baking and keeping my VW in perfect shape.” And that was true. It was the one thing she had that her mother loved, and she’d drive it until it stopped running and then it would have a place to rest and shine, just like her mom’s memories did inside of her.

Memories her gramps told her from the day she was old enough to remember. “Darlin’,” he’d say, “Death takes their bodies away, but their memories and love live on.” And so, it was as if her grandmother and her mother lived on with them every day after they’d lost them together in a wreck in Grandma’s car.

She pushed the thoughts away, now was not the time. Yes, she’d never forget them and they lived on in her heart, but right now she was in the arms of a cowboy. A cowboy whose arms had tightened even more as she’d spoken. She’d looked

away from him, but her gaze was now drawn back to his eyes and she saw wonder... what was he wondering?

“I knew you must be checking out the bakery,” Millie broke in, thank goodness. “I came over to welcome you to town and see you’ve got an awesome cowboy carrying you around and an ice bag in your hand. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Hunter is carrying me because my snoopiness had me climbing on things to see inside the kitchen. My choice of stacking unsteady things on top of a barrel was a bad choice and so I fell—and this cowboy—”

“Helped her after *I* startled her and caused her to wobble. I caused all the trouble when I went around the corner to go inside and clean up my working area. If I hadn’t startled her, she’d probably made it down just fine.”

His words surprised Violet. He was taking the blame. “He saved me—”

“Maybe, anyway,” he said, then looked at Millie. “I’m carrying her to her van so she can head out to see Kelsy.”

Violet was stunned as she looked back at Millie and saw a flash in the lady’s eyes—was it a flash of hope that there could be something brewing between her and Hunter?

She moved in his arms, needing out of them.

She needed out now.

Thankfully, he’d made himself clear, so they were on the same wave length on that. And as if he took the hint from her movements, his grip tightened.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said to the smiling lady. “I’ve heard a lot of good things about you from Kelsy and I’m going to come to your store. I promise I can’t wait to roam through all the stores—if I have time.”

Millie grinned. “It was great to meet you, too. Now, Hunter, go on and carry this pretty lady to her van. We’ll meet again. If you want to test your good baking out in the mornings, I’m sure you’d have a lot of folks dropping by excited to help you test out anything you bake.”

Her heart thundered as she felt the strong arms of the cowboy tighten around her again. “I’ll see, I’ll let you know.”

“See you later, Millie.” Hunter walked to her van as Millie smiled, then walked away.

Violet liked the feel of Hunter’s chest, the solidness of him. As if he were protecting her from the big mistake she’d made climbing where she had no business. Everything today was a mistake, coming into town early, climbing on top of that makeshift death wish.

She reached for the door and pulled it open, and he smiled as he slipped her into the van’s long skinny front seat. She loved her VW but there was nothing luxurious about her ancient van, the front seat especially, it was more like a thin wooden bench seat with a slight padding wrapped around it.

“Be safe heading out to Ace and Kelsy’s place. I know I should be taking you, but I know by that look in those eyes of yours that you still want to drive yourself. Be safe.” He stepped back, grinned that amazing grin, then eased her van’s door shut.

She rolled the window down as quickly as the handle on the van would let her. “Thank you, and again, I’m sorry for all the chaos. Come out to your brother’s place whenever you want to. Kelsy already said she couldn’t wait to introduce us. I think she’s going to be stunned when I tell her I already did that myself.”

She gave a grin, feeling weird inside when his lips hitched up and he lifted his hand in goodbye. Not wasting any time, she backed out and headed down the street. She saw Millie

and a couple of other ladies talking in front of a store. They all waved and grinned as she drove by but took a second to return a wave to them.

What a day. More like what a crazy start to her time here in Lone Star.

Hopefully, it was uphill from here.

Chapter Four

“You fell off the *top* of the barrel!” Kelsy exclaimed from where she stood beside the van waiting for Violet to exit it after listening to her quick retelling of her town escapade. Mistake was a better word.

“Yes, I did.” Violet sat still and hadn’t told Kelsy yet that she couldn’t get out of the van alone. Instead, when her friend leaned in and hugged her the moment she got the door opened, she returned the hug then told her about the mishap. To explain why she was late, she’d rattled off the start of the story right after the greeting.

“It wasn’t the best introduction to your new brother-in-law,” Violet added. “But he’ll always remember it.” *As will I.*

Kelsy’s smile widened. “You do have a way of making entrances. It’s that excitement inside of you about doing things you want to do. It makes you the person you are and I can’t wait to introduce you to the town. I already knew you’d been to town because I got a call from Millie telling me she’d just met you. She said Hunter was with you at the van.”

“That’s the part I haven’t gotten to. When I fell behind the bakery he caught my head and protected me from a terrible injury. But my body hit the porch and my ankle is swollen because of the fall. He took me inside and got me ice and then was actually *carrying* me out to the van when I met Millie.”

Kelsy’s expression turned to shock and dismay. “Oh my goodness. Are you okay?”

“Thanks to him, yes. But I’ll need help to get inside.”

Millie obviously hadn’t said anything about Hunter carrying her in his arms.

“I figured she’d have told you all kinds of things.” Violet shut her mouth. Why had she said that?

“Oh, what things?” Her eyes lit with curiosity.

She groaned inside, this was not going the way she wanted it to go. She slowly turned her legs and eased herself to standing on her one good foot. “Nothing more, except I did that stupid stunt of standing on the pile I’d made on the big barrel so I could look in that little window. I fell off and thankfully, he caught my head at least, and saved me from a really bad injury.” She omitted that if he hadn’t startled her, she probably wouldn’t have fallen. “He took me in and got me the icepack and then carried me out to the van. And here I am.”

Kelsy took in her swollen ankle, the short-legged jeans exposed. “Oh, Violet, I’m so sorry. You’re going to need my help.”

Violet nodded, then reached behind her and pulled the icepack from the seat still wrapped in its cloth. “Yes, to get into the house and to a chair. Then I can put it up and let it get better.”

“Sure thing.” And so, her friend slipped her arm around her waist on the injured ankle’s side. Then Violet using her good foot hopped on it one step at a time as they made it to the steps and up them.

It was a pretty house, a ranch house, white with lots of flowers surrounding it and a red barn behind it. Cattle were hanging out near the fence, watching them. There were some horses in the distance, not as curious as the cows. Violet loved it. “This is wonderful. It fits you.”

Her friend looked at her. “I know it does. I love Ace with all my heart, but this place extends contentment and satisfaction to me that I would never have known if I hadn’t come looking for Grandpa—who can’t wait to meet you. He’s

heard lots of stories from me about you and your granddad. He wants to meet him, too.”

“I can’t wait to meet him and Gramps will love it. Does he live close?”

“Just down the road. Ace had a cute cabin on the ranch, but we decided to buy this place because it was halfway down this pretty road, between his huge family ranch and Gramps’ place. And also, because we both loved it when we came to look at it. We didn’t need a large ranch since he is already part of one—his family ranch is gigantic. We just needed a place to feel like home, to enjoy quiet evenings together and walks across the pasture. And, if you keep walking across that pasture, the place he loves the most is there. The crazy stream that leads to a lake he loves. It’s a wonderful place—be careful on these steps.” Holding her tight, Kelsy helped Violet up the steps.

“Did it hurt?”

“No—” She felt bad lying. “Okay, yes.” She sighed. “It did hurt, but it’ll get better. When we get inside, I’ll sit down, put it up and ice it again. Hopefully tomorrow I’ll be able to walk, maybe with some pain, but walk. That will be great. I’m ready to bake.”

They got inside the pretty home. It was soft-toned beige walls with leather furniture and colorful rugs on the hardwood floors. The dining room was to the side and the chair Kelsy helped her get to and sit down in sat at an angle, giving her a great view of the large open room. The chair had a leather ottoman and Kelsy moved it into position, then lifted Violet’s leg onto it.

“Now, rest that leg and I’m going to go get you something to drink. What would you like?”

“If you have cold water with lemon I’ll take that, but if you don’t have it, then anything will be great.”

Kelsy grinned. “I already have it in a pitcher full of ice and lemons. You and I still have the same love for lemon water.”

Then she was gone, swept quickly from the room on a mission. Violet totally relaxed for a second. She let every tense muscle in her body ease against the cushions of the chair. She was here. Got here in a crazy way, but she was here. Her gaze lifted to the picture on the wall across the room. It was a wonderful picture of the huge family, she assumed. Then there was a picture of Kelsy, Ace, and her granddad—they were standing close and fishing. And then Kelsy’s whole family together again.

“You’re looking at my pictures. The big one is of the whole family. Those two there are Ace and Hunter, and their mom and dad right before they took the plane flight they died on. The others are their cousins, and their parents, who travel a lot and it’s just a great picture. I had to have it. The original is on the main wall at the home of Genna and West. The one their grandparents left him because he wanted to make sure his grandmother’s love for goats lived on. You’ll see it when we go visit tomorrow evening for supper. Genna had a copy made from a photo I took and here it is. It’s not as good as the original, but I love it. Then all of us as a family again. We’re all getting along again. It’s all because I found that picture of Gramps and I had to come see him. I’m just going to tell you, sometimes when you get that feeling inside that things are right, it is. You just have to go look for it.”

She took a breath, took a sip of the lemon water Kelsy had handed her. Her thoughts were rolling. Something about this place felt right. Even with her crazy introduction to Hunter. But she had to keep her shields up. Just because it felt right didn’t mean she’d let her guard down. Didn’t mean this was where her future waited.

She was looking for the perfect place to open her own business. Nothing would halt that search. Nothing would cause

her to detour again... yes, her friend was here. But her future... she wasn't yet sure.

The shop was beautiful, the town was lovely, and Kelsy was here. What else did she need? That echoed through her brain and she ignored the instant vision of the cowboy with the strong arms... and the feel of them holding her protectively.

* * *

Hunter stared at the wooden wedding arch his cousin had built. It was made with three long tree limbs that Caleb cut, then sanded slightly, but let the notch of the small limbs he'd removed show. This gave the arch a natural beauty. All three pieces of wood were roped together for strong support.

Not huge, but each limb was probably about eight inches thick. "So, this is what you're going to get married beneath. It's beautiful."

His cousin, the "Happy Dance'n Cowboy" as everyone teased him with ever since the ladies had tagged him with the nickname, grinned. "Yep. Jasmine loved the idea and we're getting married out here in the pasture. I think it's perfect. I'm glad you like it."

"I do. I've enjoyed watching all of you lonesome cowboys getting married." He grinned.

Caleb looked across the limb he held. "I know you have. But you're the lead lonesome cowboy and don't know it. You're not planning on it yourself. So, tell me, which one of *us* was planning on it? None. But boy, are we all happy and you could be too if you'd just open your heart. Open it and see what happens."

Not the conversation he'd been planning. "Look, you know when me and Ace lost our parents, it was rough. But, thankfully, we had each other and all of you cousins *and* your wonderful mom and dad. Now, I'll be an uncle one day and looking forward to it. However, I'm not going any further than that. But I'm going to enjoy seeing you and Jasmine getting married. And I have a feeling the cakes are going to be great."

"Yeah, that's what we think. But look, not to keep backing up, but keep the door open and one day, Hunter, you can borrow this wedding arch." His grin spread wide, but the teasing was gone. "I mean it. Open up, dude."

"You need to get your mind back on that arch and your soon-to-be wife. Also, are you inviting your two matchmakers, Sargent Two Toes and Daisy Duke, to the wedding? That cute little donkey went to a lot of risk to bring you together in that quicksand." His lip hitched, little Daisy Duke donkey had started this wedding with a sink instead of a splash. "I know it could have been bad, but now we just have to look at it as a fun match made in—"

"Quicksand—okay, I'm pretty positive she'll want Two Toes and Daisy here, so instead of asking, we'll have them here to surprise her. We'll have them on the side on short leashes. I'm forever grateful to them. Jasmine went into that quicksand to save that sweet donkey and then Sargent Two Toes had done his duty, as if he were truly in the military on a mission to save them. He found me and led me to them. If he hadn't, then I wouldn't be standing here, the happiest man in the world. I'm just going to tell you. God works in mysterious ways—that's the way I look at it. I'm forever indebted that she tried to save that tiny donkey and that amazing old Billy goat came and got me. So yes, don't know what I was thinking, you're right, they've got to be there. So, let's do this."

Hunter nodded. It was a love story, started out in a swamp and ended here with a happily ever after. Just that thought sent

a load of heaviness to him. He didn't want to think about falling in love.

He pushed the thoughts away, grinned at his cousin, who was like a brother. "Alright, you tell me what you want me to do. It's going to be cool. And not that I know, but everyone says Violet Kringle is one amazing baker. So, dessert is going to be great too."

"That's a name, isn't it? Kringle. Does she look like a Kringle—not that I know what that means, but sounds like Santa Claus or a potato chip." He chuckled.

Violet's pretty face filled his thoughts. "She doesn't look like Santa Claus or a chip. She looks like... Christmas lights, whip cream, icing..." He snapped his lips together, realizing his cousin was watching him with a very strange look on his face. "Okay, alright, she's *beautiful*. She has curly, wispy blonde hair that's almost white. She's short with curves and looks like a dainty cupcake topped with white frosting. Just wait, you'll know what I'm talking about when you see her."

Caleb grinned because of Hunter's crazy words. "Then you better get to dinner, cousin. We'll take care of this tomorrow. You can tell me all about dinner at your brother's with Miss Kringle while we're at the wedding site."

"See you tomorrow." He'd opened his mouth and now Caleb knew he had eyes on Violet. He turned and headed for his truck.

Truth was, he was ready to see her again, but he wasn't telling anyone that piece of news.

Chapter Five

Violet got comfortable earlier as Kelsy took the icepack off her ankle and let it rest for a while, then put it back on to keep the swelling down. They'd had a nice relaxing time, and she'd been able to get her mind off her crazy thoughts of the cowboy.

The cowboy who'd planted himself in her mind holding her close in his arms.

Go away!

Thankfully, her friend had brought out coffee and for an afternoon snack, a piece of the pie Ruby from the Mulberry Diner had sent out to welcome her to town. She couldn't help smiling the moment the coconut dessert touched her lips. "This is amazing."

"Yes, Red can make everything. They aren't jealous about you moving to town—I mean they *wouldn't* be jealous *if* you moved to town and opened the bakery. Believe me, this might be a small town but Lone Star has enough business for both the bakery and the diner. Miss Arabella and Ruby are best buddies, along with Josie Jane across the street and cowgirl Millie. They're excited that you're here. I'll be honest, they'd love it if you moved here and reopened the bakery."

"I am drawn to that bakery and you knew I would be. But I won't say anything, I've got to make sure. When I open my place, it has to be a success. I've always dreamed of that and I can't help it. Yes, I know that being the best is not something I have to be, but my granddad is and will always be the best. He taught me everything. I was in that kitchen with him every moment possible after my mom and grandmother died. Me and granddaddy have that bond. We love that kitchen and then

when he got slammed by that truck—I have to do good. He did the best by me and I have to do the best by him. Thank goodness he had insurance, but you and I both know my gram was the one driving and crossed the line. We'll never know if it was from distraction or like Granddad said, something else might have happened but we will never know.”

“I'm so sorry,” Kelsy said.

“I hate it but the lawsuit took everything he had and some heart too. But he knew he had to survive and provide for me and so he did. That sweet man, the best thing he could provide was this wonderful love for baking. I want to make him proud. I want to show him that everything he did for me will pay off. And I have to tell you, even though I don't know if Lone Star is my destiny, I'm going to bring him here to visit. I believe he'll love it. Even though he can't go fishing. I haven't met your granddad yet, but I have a feeling they'll get along and he'll be really jealous of all that fishing that y'all do.”

Kelsy's smile widened across her face. “Well, girlfriend, I'm going to tell you my gramps is looking forward to taking your gramps fishing. He's a big man and very capable of taking him fishing. So, when are you going to bring him?”

“That's wonderful. If I have time, I'll go get him next week. He wanted me to come, settle in and see you and the ladies before I even thought about bringing him into the group. He said this was about Jasmine, not him. But he also said if there was room for him and his wheelchair in the kitchen, he would come and help bake.”

Kelsy grinned and tears glistened in her eyes. “You saw in your sneaky little way that there is room in that kitchen for you and him. You saw exactly what I saw the day I walked into that bakery kitchen. I saw you and your amazing Gramps there. And, Hunter, sweet guy that he is—really, he may be a cowboy but that dude can build anything. He built and

varnished that pretty wooden table you saw in the kitchen. He built it so a man in a wheelchair could easily roll up to it and be comfortable working. Your granddad can make and bake anything he wants to in that kitchen. Hunter also said anything else you need just ask he'll build it. He suggested a lower-to-the-ground sink could be put in at the end of the counter. A sink your granddaddy's wheelchair could pull up too and he could work at. He hadn't even met you yet, but he loves me and would do whatever I asked him to do."

Whoa, what a lot of info about a cowboy who took her breath away in so many more ways than that he was one handsome cowboy. "That's sweet," she managed to say.

"I have a feeling since your first greeting this morning, that he's looking forward to coming up to the kitchen and showing you he can do more than just catch you when you fall." Kelsy laughed, her eyes lighting up with mischief. "I'm very thankful he did catch you but let's just say he can do more than startle you into falling."

"Don't get any ideas."

Kelsy hitched a brow. "I just thought I'd put that out there. Anyway, Ace already said you just tell him when and he'll head out in that big truck of his and bring your granddad here."

"How can I say no to any of that? And, okay, so Hunter *is* a nice guy. It wasn't his fault I was standing on that tipsy-turvy stack I'd made, then came crashing down simply from hearing the disbelieving words of a man and looking over my shoulder. That wasn't his fault, it was mine. I'll have to thank him for all the things he's done to help the place look good. And the fact that y'all are already preparing it—"

"Don't think we're doing this just to get you to move here. When you decide to move here—*if* you decide to move here—it will be because you think it's right and only that. Okay, so I

need to tell you I'm cooking dinner and just for tonight it's going to be you, me, Ace, and his brother Hunter. Thought I better forewarn you and hope that's alright."

Her heart paused, like her brain scrambled and she sought hard to get her thoughts in order. But at the moment it wasn't happening.

Hunter Buckley had thrown her entire day into chaos and it wasn't over yet.

* * *

That evening Hunter sat at the dining room table on the far side of his brother's home with Violet Kringle sitting across from him. He'd arrived, said hello and took his seat at the table across from the pretty blonde. They'd said hello, and he'd managed to act like himself despite that the moment his gaze met those blueberry eyes again, he knew she wasn't sure how to act either.

That made two of them.

He had always fought hard to keep his emotions and thoughts out of his expression or his eyes.

Tried hard not to show her that the moment he looked into those eyes of hers again, his temperature shot straight up to high. She made his blood burn—he wiped that truth out of his brain. Or tried—it was clear the woman affected him.

That was it and he didn't know how to describe it. Or accept it.

He yanked his gaze off of her, determined not to focus on those tempting eyes or that whipped cream hair that made his stomach growl and his brain go berserk. Fighting all that she set in conflict inside of him, he'd yanked his gaze away only

to then lock gazes with Ace. His brother was watching him close.

Real close.

Ace's lip twitched up on one side and Hunter knew his twin understood something irrational was going on inside his head. He narrowed his eyes in warning. They might not be identical twins but they were close in looks and thoughts, not always, but sometimes they felt what the other was feeling if the feeling ran deep. And though he didn't want to admit it, this reaction to just looking at Violet sent him into deep chaos—uncommon ground for him.

“We're so glad you came,” Kelsy said, breaking into his disturbed thoughts as she came into the room carrying a bowl of fresh rolls. She set them on the table among the other food then leaned down and gave him a hug. “It's alright, relax,” she whispered in his ear.

So much for just his brother seeing his reaction to Violet.

He eased in a deep breath, fighting to barely let his chest move as he fought to look like it was just another day in the neighborhood. But it wasn't, and he knew it.

Didn't mean he wanted it.

Didn't mean he was going to act on it, but he knew he'd never reacted around any woman like he did around Violet.

“Thanks for inviting me,” he said, holding his voice strong, determined to be normal. “And it's good to see you again, Violet. How's your ankle?” There, he'd sounded pretty much regular.

“It's still swollen but I'm positive that tomorrow, thanks to you and Kelsy and the icepacks y'all provided me, it should be better. I'm ready to bake and to meet the bride and groom and everybody else tomorrow.”

“They are ready to meet you too,” Ace said. “I had to run to town to the feed store and went in the diner and saw Ruby, Josie Jane, and Millie while I was grabbing a burger to go. They said Jasmine’s mom, Audrey, is coming to town to meet you too.”

“That’s great. She probably wants to have some input on what I bake. The more the merrier,” Violet said, and Hunter liked the sound of her voice. It was easy to tell she really loved what she did.

Kelsy sat down at the table. “Audrey actually started our town having the dances. She came to town to shop at Genna’s famous store right after Genna opened it. And she asked Genna if Lone Star was having any social events like a dance. She had a daughter starting over and wanted to bring her to town in hopes she might want to get a job here and make a new life. She wanted her daughter to find a good cowboy, fall in love, and get married.”

“And she did,” Ace said, grinning. “As did all of my cousins and some of our friends too.”

Kelsy smiled at Ace then back at Violet. “Now you’re here to bake for Caleb and Jasmine’s wedding. Funny thing is we did not know Audrey knew that dancing would eventually bring Jasmine out of her internal hiding spot. She’d been a huge contest-winning dancer and none of us knew that or the pain it had caused her... until Caleb, our ‘dancing cowboy’ got her on the dance floor. Now, she’s marrying into our family. And you’re adding the special touch of perfect delights to help their special day be even more memorable.”

Light instantly sparked in Violet’s eyes. The worry Hunter had seen moments before disappeared. Obviously, setting her back on track to where she wanted to be.

“And that is why I came,” she said. “Making wedding cakes is my number one love and this is going to be fun.”

He liked the light now alive in her eyes. Like the fire shining in them as her gaze touched his but this time, there was no worry, no uncertainty. This time he saw clearly what her mission was and to show that she was on track, she smiled at him.

“Thanks for saving me, Hunter. Now, I’ll do my job, the job I love and this is going to be a great time. If you hadn’t caught me after my overzealous try to see the kitchen I’m going to create my happy cakes in, I’d be letting down this wonderful, in love couple. So...” She sighed and looking at them all, clearly on target and happy to be there. “This is going to be a wonderful time. It’s what I do. It’s what Gramps taught me and I can’t wait.”

His gaze hung on her as she reached for the rolls, plucked one from the bowl and took a bite. There was no uncertainty or worry in her now. This woman had a mission, and she was on it.

Him. Oh, he was in trouble.

Real trouble and he knew it.

Chapter Six

Kelsy had made it through the first day and had finally gotten back on target.

Now, the morning sun peeked through the edge of the curtain on her window and the gentle light woke her. She rolled over in bed and stared up at the ceiling and smiled. Dinner had gone well last night despite the impact of Hunter walking through the front door and taking her breath away.

Furious with her reactions, she'd been quiet, fighting the chaos inside herself. Then, she'd found her footing with the wedding talk and now she felt optimistic.

Everyone had been so welcoming. Then, before she turned in for the night Kelsy had shown her the extra guest room with plenty of room for Gramps and his wheelchair. Ace and Hunter were going to go pick him up on Monday and bring him to Lone Star, and he was going to love it.

Gramps had lost the use of his legs but he had some powerful arms and that he made sure of by lifting weights. He kept in shape in order to help him get in and out of his chair. For a man in his early sixties, and in a wheelchair, he made certain he could do whatever he could do to be independent.

Her smile spread wide thinking about that. He was going to love it here and he and Lumas were going to go *fishing*. Lumas had called and canceled coming to dinner last night, said something had come up and he apologized. She'd meet him today and couldn't wait. He'd told Kelsy he was going to enjoy taking her granddad fishing. And the guys, Hunter included, said they'd take him to the ranch to see the cattle and horses too. And goats. And so would she... she couldn't wait to see it all.

Now, she just had to get out of bed. Hoping her ankle cooperated, she sat up, then slowly rose to stand. She put her weight on it— *Yes!* She almost jumped for joy when the pain was low. She refrained from jumping since it might have put her back on ice packs.

Happily, she got dressed, looking forward to the day, getting to meet Jasmine, and the others and talk about the wedding and reception's desserts, which was the only part of the reception she was doing, no cooking for her, just baking. Now that she was thinking about it, she had a lot of people Kelsy had told her about that she wanted to meet. She already felt like she knew them. Similar to how it felt meeting Millie. It was going to be a great day—a great couple of weeks.

With a slight limp, she entered the kitchen smiling and found Kelsy at the stove. She was only walking with a slight limp, her ankle looked much better—thank goodness.

“You’re walking! Hallelujah,” Kelsy squealed and gave her a hug.

“I think it’s going to be fine. I’ll put it up when we get home tonight but tomorrow I’ll get to baking. I’ll be easy on it today, then we’re going to have fun.” She grinned. “Are you ready?”

Kelsy picked up a plate full of eggs and bacon and led the way to the table. “Have a seat and enjoy. And yes, I am so ready. Now, eat up. Coffee is on the way.”

“Thanks, and remember, black. I work in a bakery and there’s too much sugar in there already so I can drink all the coffee I want as long as it’s black, no sugar.”

Kelsy filled a red mug full and set it on the table for her. “I’m always amazed that you work in a bakery with all that wonderful food you bake and yet you are short and small. How do you do that?”

Violet hitched a brow. “I might not always be small, but I don’t let myself eat a lot. Testing is my good spot. But sometimes I’m tempted, and I promise you that I’m going to work diligently on everything I create for this wedding. We’ll have to set up a tasting. I was thinking the dance would be a good time. I’m going to work on cupcakes for that and everyone can test different flavors that way too. It’ll be fun testing things out tomorrow for the wedding while benefiting the dancers too. Will that work?”

“It’s going to be wonderful. We’ll set up a table over by the drinks and where the ladies sit and talk and some knit. Arabella will be sitting there along with a lot of the older ladies. It’s going to be great. You’ll get to visit and get the feel of our town. And I’m hoping you’ll dance some too.”

“I don’t know about that—”

“Hey, come on, if Hunter asks you to dance, please say yes. Like I said, Hunter would be taking a huge step forward if he asks you to dance. So, remember that if he does it.”

She held her breath and the want to grumble, “not dancing with the cowboy.” The pleading in Kelsy’s gaze had Violet locking her lips together.

Finally, she gave in. “I’ll do it if he asks and I’m not busy doing something else.” There it was, a way to have an excuse to say no.

Kelsy sank into the chair across from Violet and her expression was somber. “This isn’t just about you. Ace and I talked about it last night. Ever since they lost their mom and dad, they both have struggled, more internally than outward. Ace made it to moving forward and dancing some but never twice. I was the first person he danced with since losing his mother. He danced with me because my granddad, his friend, asked him to. He asked Ace to dance with me because he trusted him. And Ace showed my Granddad how much he

meant to him by asking me to dance. I wasn't the first person he danced with, he danced some but not much. But with me it was different."

Violet felt both sadness and then happiness that her friend had found love. "It was meant to be."

"Yes, it was. They were young when they lost their parents, and their mother taught them to dance. They know every western dance there is. She taught them all of them and more. She loved dancing and their dad loved dancing with her. They loved dancing together. But," she paused, her eyes digging deep, "since she died, Hunter hasn't danced at all. He comes to the dances and watches but he's not getting out there. So just the fact that he said he would take you on the dance floor if you wanted to, that was huge. We all know what that statement meant to him."

Instantly the foot of her uninjured leg began tapping automatically on the floor as the knowledge of what she was being told rang clear. "I'm touched. I hope all of you aren't trying to get him to do something he really doesn't want to do. My ankle just might not feel like getting out there on the dance floor. In my heart, and you should understand, you thought you'd lost your granddad then you got him back. Me, I lost the two most important women in my life in the same instant. It was the hardest thing I've ever been through."

"I know." Kelsy's eyes spoke volumes in agreement with her words.

Violet gave an encouraging lift to her lips, just enough to say she accepted her words. "You also know I never had a dad in my life, that my mom made a mistake at a young age but always told me she would make the same mistake again because it gave her me, and I was the best gift she'd ever gotten. She loved me so much. On that day when Gram drove across that center line and in an instant they were gone... I

was barely eight. But thank goodness, I was old enough to remember their smiles... their hugs.” Her words trembled with emotion.

“Kelsy, it lives inside my heart. So, I do understand where he’s coming from, but I don’t understand, if he loved to dance with his mom, why isn’t he out there dancing in memory of her? She loved it. If something happened to my granddad, I’d never stop baking. I’d bake in celebration of him and his love for me.”

Kelsy placed a hand over hers. “You keep that in your thoughts. Maybe, the time will be right and you can share that with Hunter. You understand him in many ways.”

Her throat clogged in emotion as she stared at her friend. This was across the line. Panic roared through her and she fought for her voice. “Don’t get your hopes up. I can’t stick myself out there like that.”

“I know, so don’t let yourself get carried away with that thought. We were talking, and it just came out. So, now, eat breakfast, then head to town and have some fun checking things out. We’ve got a slew of people waiting to meet you.”

Violet took a sip of coffee, hoping the heat calmed her down or burned the tension out of her.

“We’re going to Miss Josie Jane’s first and everyone who can will meet us there to talk, and then we can either go to Genna’s Classy Sassy Boutique and meet Genna and Jasmine so y’all can talk about the wedding cake. Oh, we have to go down and meet my gramps, he’s waiting. Then we can have lunch with everyone. You’re going to love it. We’ve got a great day planned and then tonight we’ll go out to the ranch for dinner with all of the family.”

She laughed. “Wow, we’re having a day, that’s for certain.”

“I told you I was going to let you see how wonderful Lone Star is and that means squeezing a lot into your short time here. You’ll love the town folks and the old ranch. Knowing their history and seeing it is all there, where it started—goats, cows, horses, and a love story that combined them all.”

“Don’t forget about what you and your granddad added to the story.” She loved her friend’s love story.

Kelsy chuckled. “Yes, me and Ace added fish to the list of loved animals when I came to find Gramps. So, it’s goats, cows, horses, and fish.”

They both laughed at the vision. Thankfully, the laughing helped relieve the panic that was building inside of Violet. This was going to be a great day, no doubt about it. But she knew that could change, just because the thought of dinner tonight had her knowing that she was going to be around Hunter again and she wasn’t sure how she would react.

The thought alone sent quivers of anticipation through her. But it wasn’t just seeing him tonight, it was tomorrow night that really caused the new sensations to intrude into her thoughts... she might have to dance with him tomorrow night.

Focus. The word sounded in her thoughts, loud and clear and she listened. She would as always focus on baking things that made people smile.

And nothing else was going to get in the way of that. Her desserts were her magic element. Her path to the future she was driven to achieve.

And no matter how good looking, caring or intriguing Hunter Buckley was, this was not the time to let herself get distracted.

Chapter Seven

They went to Josie Jane's, and she was introduced to the ladies who were sitting in the group of chairs in the center of the store. They were all crocheting or knitting and looking up at her with smiles on their faces.

Josie Jane was a small woman with a beaming smile, and she hugged her in welcome at the front door. Then she'd taken her to introduce to the ladies. The tiny lady in the chair that had a view of the front door had dropped her knitting project in her lap and beamed at her, holding her tiny hands clasped together against her chest. "I'm Arabella and so glad you've come," she breathed out in pure happiness.

Violet was small too, so she could see Arabella in the kitchen that seemed made just for Violet. Now she completely understood. She grinned, excitement rampaging through her as she moved as quickly as her ankle would let her to the lady's side. "It's so nice to meet you. I love your bakery. It's perfect."

That made Arabella's smile widen. "I had no idea until you walked in the door that we are about the same size. You notice how I have everything within a comfort zone."

She laughed, grinning inside and out. "I noticed. Except as you've all heard I'm sure, the top window, the only window on the back side of the bakery."

That gave everyone a good laugh. "Okay, so I know y'all aren't laughing because I hurt myself from my own silliness."

"Oh, no, we're not," Arabella said.

"Not at all," another lady agreed. "We know you got saved by that handsome Hunter and we're all jealous."

She was taken by surprise. “Y’all got me on that. Thank goodness he was there.” She didn’t go into that she’d been fine if he hadn’t startled her, she was just glad he’d been there. It also gave her something to enjoy with these sweet ladies.

They all talked for a moment, and Arabella told her she hoped everything went great for her. “And if you happen to be interested in it for more than a temporary stop, please let me know. You’d fit in here perfectly.”

She was beginning to think they were right. Moments later, she, Kelsy and Josie Jane crossed to the dress store leaving Josie Jane’s Wash and Repeat and crossing over to Genna’s Classy-Sassy Boutique. She loved it all. She knew the Mulberry Diner was next door, and further down the street was Kelsy and her granddad’s place, New and Antique Field and Steam Supplies, and around the corner within straight view of the fishing store was Millie’s Place, and at the end of it all was where she would be tomorrow, Arabella’s Delights—and she was looking forward to it.

Lone Star was like a light in the sky beckoning her. But she wouldn’t jump into anything too fast. This had to be perfect, the right choice, and not made on the spur of the moment—*and she’d only been here a day and a half.*

As soon as they entered Genna’s store, she was introduced to Jasmine and Genna, who came to meet them at the entrance of the store.

“I just know this is going to be perfect,” Jasmine said right away. “Miss Arabella hated so much not to do mine and Caleb’s wedding, and it was so touching, and I totally understood. But, the minute she told me she wasn’t baking any longer, Kelsy delivered her instant thought of you. I loved it. We’re all excited about you being here. Now, we’re going to go have lunch and you can tell me all the wonderful things we could have at my wedding.”

Genna gave her a wink. “I can’t wait to hear all the good things you’re going to bake for the wedding. But from what I hear you’re going to bake test cakes for the dance tomorrow night.”

“Yes, I am. I thought I’ll rest my leg today, it’s much better than it was since I had the escapade I’m sure you’ve all heard about. But tomorrow I’ll get in there and do what I love, which is bake. I’m going to test out my cakes and icing using cupcakes. That way everyone can test the taste. But if needed we’ll still have a cake testing day for you, if you want to decide that way, Jasmine. And if anyone wants to come to the bakery tomorrow and get in on baking cupcakes, you’re welcome.”

Josie Jane and Kelsy instantly began talking about how they still had a lot to do tomorrow getting ready for the dance. That’s when she realized it took more than she thought to get the town dance set up. Yet, she was relieved that she would be able to get used to the kitchen all by herself. And next week her sweet granddad would be in there with her—or out fishing. And as much as she enjoyed cooking with him she wanted him to experience a little relaxation and something new. She had Ace and Hunter to thank for this because they were going to pick him up on Monday. It had been decided last night before Hunter had headed home.

“Let’s head over to the diner, it’s a bit early but,” Josie Jane said, “I know Ruby is probably eager for us to get there so she can meet Violet. And, I see a bunch of big trucks out there meaning the cowboys are in. You’re about to meet a lot of people.”

They walked out the door and Genna locked it, then they headed the short few steps to the diner. And in front of them, heading straight to the diner too, was the long, tall Texas cowgirl, and she was walking next to a large man Violet instantly recognized from a photo Kelsy had sent her.

“Gramps,” Kelsy said as he and Millie stopped at the door to the diner.

“Mornin’ sweetie. I’m here to meet your friend. That’d be you,” he said, looking at Violet with sparkling eyes and a grin.

“Yes, I’m Violet and so glad to meet you, Mr—”

“Nope, Lumas or Gramps whichever you’re comfortable with but the Mr. can be dropped.” Then he leaned in and gave her a hug. A careful hug. “Not wanting to hurt your ankle again. I’m glad to see you getting around. Millie told me what happened. Well, Kelsy did too, after Millie came back by the shop and told me.”

These two were talking a lot it seemed. She knew Kelsy was glad about that. “Yes, I’m better and planning on working tomorrow in the bakery. Not falling off a stack of *disaster-waiting-to-happen*.”

That got laughs from all around her.

“I have to admit,” Millie said. “If I was excited about something, I’d have climbed up there too. I climbed on the back of many horses not knowing what to expect. Only thing is for peeking in a window, I’m so tall I’d have barely needed the barrel, much less the stack of *disaster-waiting-to-happen*.”

Everybody hooted with laughter at Millie’s words. Violet felt relieved, they weren’t all out laughing at her but the pressure Millie took off the situation. She smiled. “Believe me, I learned my lesson.”

Josie Jane dipped her chin. “*And* thank goodness our *sweet* Hunter was there to catch you—well, at least keep your head from slamming to the ground.”

She suddenly saw the glow of expectation in all of their gazes as the words were spoken.

“Oh, yes, he helped me.” What else could she say? Thankfully the diner’s door opened in perfect timing.

“Well, y’all don’t just stand out there blocking the door. Come on in and. Let me meet this pretty new baker we have in town.”

She instantly knew this was Ruby. She wore a beautiful peach-toned flowing blouse that hung to the top of her thighs, ankle-length cream slacks with sparkling sandals Violet noticed were full of support—she wasn’t the only stand-on-her-feet-all-day lady who knew support was important, and it could be pretty if allowed.

“I’m Ruby,” she said as she led Violet into the diner and everyone followed them in and then surrounded them. “I’m so excited you’re here. Arabella is too. She has a beautiful bakery and we hope you will love it. We love to cook desserts and have many, but the bakery and our diner don’t compete. We meet different needs. My husband, and the chef is Red, he’s not red just named Red,” she said with a grin. “I like the sound of an ad we could run, *Red, Ruby, and Violet will bring your food cravings to life*—okay, maybe I’m not a poet.” She and everyone laughed.

Violet did too. How could she not? This was delightful. “That’s cute, you’re a natural creator. And actually, from what I’ve heard about this diner, I think you will get the highest vote of love.”

“You too, from all Kelsy has told us. Now, come on, let’s get y’all seated so this wedding talk can begin.”

It was then that Violet took in the diner, several tables were taken even at eleven o’clock. Her gaze froze when it came to the table in the middle that was packed with seven broad-shouldered cowboys. The table was slanted and all of the cowboys had a clear view of the front door and her gaze

locked with the blue-green eyes of Hunter. His had already been resting on her.

The moment their gazes connected, he stood, and all of his cousins, she presumed, and his brother did the same. There was one thing for certain, he and Ace were twins but looked different in their eyes and build so they had their own look. But this was *all* the Buckley men and this was her first time seeing them together in person—*wow*.

* * *

Hunter had waited until Violet's gaze met his before he stood, but when it did he instantly shot up and tipped his hat. "Hello, ladies. Violet, you look good. You're walking better and that's great. You might even get to play with some goats when you come out to West and Genna's ranch house tonight for dinner."

She fought to keep her crazy voice steady, "I hope so, I've heard a lot about them. And yes, I am much better."

"Good, I'm sure all their wives would introduce you to these cowboys by my side, but I'll start, these are my cousins." He waved his arm at the group and named them as they stood in line down the length of the table, starting across from him and then those on the same side. "Dustin, Caleb, Ryder, and then West, Zack, and my brother Ace who you've already met."

Each cowboy tipped his hat as their wives each went and gave the man a brief kiss of hello. She looked at each couple; Genna and West, Sydney and Dustin, Kelsy and Ace, and soon-to-be Jasmine and Caleb. They looked great together as each got his kiss of hello. Violet couldn't help thinking once more how amazing a Buckley man looked, especially when each was looking into the eyes of the woman he loved. It was

touching, enticing—and as unwanted at this moment in her life could be. Against her will, her gaze went back to Hunter.

He stood out like a golden star in the center of an amazing galaxy. She yanked her gaze off of him and back on target. “It’s great to meet all of you. I’m really looking forward to dinner tonight. We can talk about the other pastries or desserts you want for the evening before the wedding and to go along with the cakes. I like that I’ll get to visit with all of you together. But yes, I’m looking forward to seeing the famous goats I’ve heard so much about. And Sargent Two Toes—will he be there tonight? And Daisy Duke?”

Genna grinned. “Sargent Two Toes runs free. Fences can’t hold him in so if he’s there you’ll get to say hello. As you’ve heard he sometimes goes all the way across the large acreage to get to Jasmine’s. Thank goodness there is no quicksand in that spot he found that ended up saving Jasmine and Daisy Duke. The guys overpowered that area with huge boulders and rocks. It would be tough for anything to get stuck there ever again. And Daisy now lives at Jasmine’s place so you’ll have to take a trip out there.”

Jasmine smiled and hitched a brow. “My place will soon be vacant as me and Daisy Duke are moving to Caleb’s. Are you interested? It’s where Genna started, then me, a perfect place for a new start.”

“Oh, I’m not sure if I’ll need a place but thanks for the offer.” Her gaze shifted to the brother at the end of the table, Ryder. He was the tallest and looked a little older than everyone else and walked to stand beside Hunter.

“It’s nice to meet you at last, we’ve heard a lot about you from Kelsy. I have to say that I’m interested in testing out those cupcakes tomorrow at the dance. And I’ll have to warn you that I love to dance, so save a dance for me.”

Her gaze shot to the ground. *Another one* asking her to dance...

“She might not want to dance,” Hunter said, bringing her gaze to his. He was looking at his cousin and Ryder was grinning widely.

He winked at her. “I was just testing the water. You know I like to dance and if you don’t get asked to the dance floor, I’ll be there.” He looked at Hunter then back to her.

Was he giving that message to Hunter? “Well... thank you but I’m not sure yet that I’m going to dance. I’m going to be passing out cupcakes and watching for reactions from everyone. So, I’ll probably be over behind the refreshment tables I’ve been hearing a lot about.”

The other still single brother, Zack, moved to stand on the other side of Ryder. “I’ll just tell you, I’m one of the last bachelor Buckleys and that dancing tends to get people doing things they’re not planning to do.” He grinned when suddenly all of his married brothers or soon-to-be married brother, whipped their hats off and slapped him on the back. He hunched his shoulder and laughed really hard. Then he grinned at her. “Yeah, I like to get the reactions of these newlyweds. All of them have met their sweet loves since these dances started, but me and these two standing beside me haven’t done it. And I’m not ready.”

“You never know,” Ryder said, grinning, probably enjoying her startled look.

Zack continued, “Anyway, we’ll see you tonight and look forward to it. But I have a herd to get in to the corral so I’m heading out. Y’all, it’s now or we’re going to be late for dinner. I’m hitting the road, y’all coming?”

All the Buckley men grinned, tipped their hats to her and everyone else then strode out the door. It was a sight to see. Hunter held back, looked around at the other ladies. “Y’all

have a good meeting and if you need any help setting up for tomorrow, just let us know. We'll be around." He tipped his hat and strode after his brother and cousins.

And Violet watched, transfixed on the way he strode out, his broad shoulders and arms—that she knew were strong and solid, swung by his side as he left in a determined stride. And she was suddenly thinking about being held in his arms again.

Not—what she should be thinking.

* * *

Hunter sat on the horse and rode across the pasture, helping move the cattle into the pen. It had been a short gathering but a big herd. Just him and three of his cousins doing this part of the job while the others were inside branding. While West had to head home to start getting dinner ready for the family welcoming they were throwing Violet.

His brain hadn't dropped her when he walked out of the diner. She stuck with him and when he climbed into his cousin's truck, Ryder gave him a look. His oldest cousin could always pick things out. He hadn't asked anything in the truck, but instead drove them to the horses. Now, they were near, each directing the cattle to head into the open gate of the corral. That done, Ryder came riding over to Hunter just like Hunter had expected.

He rested his wrist over the saddle horn and gave him a sideways look from beneath the brim of his straw Stetson. Here it came.

"So, you like her." It wasn't a question, it was a fact. Ryder was good at seeing things.

Hunter didn't feel pressure from it. One thing Ryder always made clear was that he liked dating and wasn't looking for anything permanent to interrupt his life as he loved it now. He could herd horses and cattle as late or often as he wanted to. Take off to Las Vegas and watch the rodeo finals or wherever he wanted to go. The only attachment he had was them, his brothers and cousins and making sure their ranch produced a great product in the cattle and horses they raised.

And he was good, there was no denying that. His cousin had a way of seeing what they needed and knowing it, then making it better. It would be great to be that good at something and live life with his carefree ease.

Hunter knew horses and cattle too but not like Ryder. Ryder had a talent, or a gift from God for ranching and knowing what was going on in his brothers' and cousins' brains, like right now.

He gave in. "Yeah, I'm attracted to Violet. Everyone is picking up on that. It doesn't mean I want to be."

"And why not? Yeah, I'm not lookin', haven't been, but I've been watching all our family marrying off and I have to say that they're all extremely happy. You've been watching and see it too. Even though I'm not lookin' there is no denying that their lives have changed in a good way since they've found the women of their hearts. You on the other hand aren't lookin' and it's for all the wrong reasons. We all know it. Hunter, you've got to let go."

He knew this was coming one day. Knew and met it. "I don't have to do anything."

"You can say that but you've got to move forward. Your mom and your dad, man they lived life and would want you to do the same. Yes, they died early but before that they lived, they didn't look in the valley, they looked up and ahead and lived great lives giving and loving and helping everyone."

“Ryder—”

“Hold on. Tonight, we’re having dinner and tomorrow we’re going to a dance. I get out there and I dance and I love it. I dance with as many ladies as I want to or that want to dance with me. I have a fun time. I have no strings attached, I have nothing that cuts me off from the world and keeps me from having the life I love. I’m open. One day, as much as I love this ranch, I may be like Mom and Dad and decide to travel the world. That’s one thing Dad did when it came down to it. He let go of this ranch and started traveling with Mom, giving her what her heart desires like she’d done in giving him all of us boys and standing by his side while he helped build this ranch.”

“You do what you want,” he said, feeling exasperated.

“I am, but, like your dad did and my dad did, they knew that life has more to offer than just the work. They found their hearts with the two very special ladies in our lives. And one day, I’m going to look for that woman that’s meant for me. And I’m going to work hard to give her what she wants like Dad is giving Mom—while waiting for grandchildren to start turning up. Yours and Ace’s kids will be hers too. She’ll love them like your mom and dad would have and be there for them.”

“Where are you going with this?” He knew but needed something to say, to get his held breath out of his lungs.

“It’s time for you to move forward. Time to find a woman you can dance with like you loved to dance with your mom. Let go of the sadness that holds you back. The fear—let go of it. You used to be, even as young as you were, an awesome dancer. We’d go to weddings of people, friends of our parents, and you’d get out there on that dance floor with your mom and you could dance the night away. She taught you everything she

knew, and she was one talented woman. And yet all these years, you haven't danced again."

"I don't want to."

"You need to move forward and stop mourning your life away. Hunter, I've had to push everyone with just a touch, and now I'm going to give you a shove. That woman is pretty but that's not the important part. You two connect. Yeah, I saw the way her face looked when she saw you sitting there. The way her eyes flashed when your gazes locked. Yes, I was studying it. There is interest. A natural attraction. There is no reason not to test it. It's time, dude, you're not a chicken. I've seen you wrestle cattle and race into the river to pull calves out. You're not afraid so just buckle up, hop on that back and ride that bull. Wear it down. It's time, cowboy. Get up and ride."

His cousin gave him that look, the one that hit hard and meant business. Then his lips hitched into a grin as he rode away. Leaving Hunter sitting there knowing without a doubt that if his cousin was watching him that close others were too. Would they have as much vision as Ryder? Maybe not.

He was in the danger zone and he'd barely known her for two days.

Two days.

Chapter Eight

When they drove down the road toward the giant red barn she'd heard so much about Violet couldn't help smiling. This was where this ranch had begun. Where a cattle lover and a goat lover had combined their lives.

“Look right there,” Kelsy said, pointing from her front seat out the open window. “See that pile of rock over there, that's Sargent Two Toes standing on top at alert.”

She saw the Billy goat, his beard and long horns visible from where he stood on the top of the rocks. He didn't move, just watched as they drove by and then as they passed him he slowly turned, he looked like he was participating in a military drill turning at attention. He looked like a Billy goat in charge as they crossed the cattle guard.

“He's something, isn't he.” She smiled, looking over her shoulder as he turned back to watch the road again.

Ace looked over his shoulder at her. “Oh yeah, that is one goat that is always in control. He's a good ole goat.”

“But here, these little kids you're going to love,” Kelsy said, pointing out the window at the yard of large and baby goats—or kids as they were called.

They'd crossed the cattle guard and the fence that led from the red barn to the fence separating the house from where they were parking. The house was spread out with a wide porch and steps leading up to it. In the yard there were goats romping and running, it was amazing. Then she realized she'd been focused on the big kids and the adult goats and not the herd of baby kids racing full blast toward them.

“They're adorable just like you said.”

Kelsy already had her door open and grinned at her. “Come on, get out. You’re going to love this. They’re going to jump up and put their little cloven hooves—or two toes as we sometimes call them—on your knees wanting you to pet them. They love getting attention.”

“Will their moms mind?” she asked, stepping out of the truck, excitement filling her. They were all so cute and adorable. All different colors and sizes were just waiting for attention.

“The sweet moms just stand to the side, excited to see their babies getting some love’n. So, just have fun. Oh, look there comes Sydney’s sweet daughter Hazel carrying one across the yard.”

There was the little girl Kelsy had told her about on one of their many phone conversations. The little girl who’d lost her daddy, and her mother Sydney had needed a new start. So, when her granddad had left them his huge home they’d moved here and opened the inn. Some would call it a B&B but it had a lot of rooms making it easier to call an inn and not confuse people wanting a smaller place. What they’d found was a new life with Dustin Buckley who loved them both with all of his heart. Kelsy had told her all of this, so she knew instantly this sweet girl was Hazel.

“Hi,” she said, and Hazel grinned. “I’m Violet.”

“I’m Hazel. That pretty lady over there watching me talk to you is my mama,” she grinned as she pointed to the smiling lady standing on the porch. She waved at them and Violet waved back as Hazel grinned. “She lets me love on the goats all I want. They’ll give you some love—but they *really* want you to give them some love by rubbing their foreheads.” She grinned, gently rubbing the head of the kid she carried. “You’re going to have to come to our place and see my goats too. I love them.”

“Thank you for the invitation, I’ll have to do that. They are adorable and so are you.”

“Thanks, I’m not fluffy though,” Hazel giggled, snuggling the almost completely white goat.

Baby goats—the kids, romped and played and gurgled as they circled them all then propped their hooves on any leg near them. She reached down and gently touched each little face looking up at her. There were white kids, black kids, gold kids, there were golden tan tangled with cream and brown and they were all beautiful. A cinnamon friskily romping kid bounded up, kicked his hind legs out then did a flip. She laughed as did everyone gathered around. Then a caramel mixed with cream joined in on the escapade flipping jumping.

She was in heaven, it was so delightful. “They’re amazing.”

“Yes, they are,” the deep familiar voice said, with a hint of humor and understanding. Knowing what she was doing, she looked up and met the eyes that studied her. “Our grandma loved them and thank goodness Genna loves them too, since she fell in love with West. He followed in Grandma’s shoes making sure they are always a part of our heritage. We all would have stepped up, but West knew this was where he wanted to be. Genna came along and joined him full throttle. It’s a heritage we all love. Yes, I’m more into cattle but every time we come here for dinner, I remember that this is part of where I come from. It digs deep.” He grinned at her and then at the gleaming eyes of Hazel.

“Uncle Hunter comes and plays with my goats too. Maybe *he* can bring you to see them.”

Violet was in trouble, oh yes, big trouble because sadly only two days in and this amazing cowboy had just struck a nerve... no not a nerve, he’d struck a lightning bolt and it went all the way to her heart. To have this sweet little girl look up at

him with clear love in her eyes, see his gentle love exposed as he chuckled and rubbed the tiny white goat in her arms. And then to watch Hazel skip off singing... goodness it made Violet see what a sweet daddy he would be.

And *why, oh, why* had her thoughts gone there?

* * *

Hunter had walked up, drawn to stand by her side and he found no way to keep himself away. Now, thankfully Hazel giggled and drew Violet's attention away from him. He knew he didn't need to push any limits, and he needed to figure out what he was doing. Thankfully, West stood on the porch and called them in for dinner. As he turned and saw West grin, Hunter was in over his head and West jumped in to help him.

Was it that apparent to everybody?

They went inside; he let Violet and Hazel, Kelsy and his grinning brother go ahead of him. Inside, the scent of roast beef filled the house. His nerves eased as he looked around what was where his grandparents had lived their life together. It had been updated nicely but the happy memories would always be here.

It was a great legacy they'd left and his cousin and his amazing wife enjoyed keeping it alive in their home. The key factor was on the wall behind the wooden dining table. Hunter's parents looked out from the huge family photo that would always hold that place on the wall. As he took a seat at the table, he felt for a minute that his parents were joining in on the meal, watching him as he took the seat across the table from Violet. He tried not to seem so intent on claiming that position but he got what he wanted as he looked across the table at her. It seemed everyone already knew he had an

interest in the charming lady but he wasn't ready to take a step out and maybe chance running her off. He wasn't ready to claim the seat beside her either.

As usual West said a prayer for the food and their family and for Violet answering the call to help Jasmine and Caleb. When he said amen, Hunter opened his eyes and nearly jumped when he caught Violet's gaze on him.

Before he could react, she looked away. What was he doing?

Everyone started passing the food around, talking and laughing, and then they started eating. He enjoyed it immensely as he silently listened to her plans after the conversation went from planning for the wedding to Violet's plans of one day opening her own bakery. She clearly deserved a great store and a huge bulk of customers who would reward her with many visits like the town did for the Mulberry Diner.

He heard love in her voice when she talked about her granddad, the accident that put him in a wheelchair. Kelsy brought up how she admired her for giving up her dream and choosing to stay at the bakery where her gramps worked and helping pay off debt before continuing on with her own dream.

He could tell by the flash of her eyes that him and Ace going to get her granddad and bringing him to Lone Star meant a lot to her.

"People are looking forward to trying your cupcakes tomorrow," he finally said, suddenly driven to enter the conversation.

"I hope so. I want their feedback. Thanks for the table, when Gramps sees it he'll love it."

"Yes, he will love it," Kelsy added, as she pushed her empty plate a little away from her. "I loved supper but I'm excited to try some of your cupcakes tomorrow night too, and

see you enjoy everyone's reactions as they taste your wonders for the first time. In case y'all don't know, Violet's sweets hit home to everyone."

They had with Hunter and he hadn't even eaten one yet.

* * *

Saturday morning Violet walked into the bakery. Her heart pounded, she'd been here three days. A mere three days and she knew she loved it in this town. She also felt like the Buckleys were her family.

She and her granddad had each other. That was it, just the two of them. It had been that way almost all of her life. But the short few years she'd had her mom and Granny, she'd loved it and missed them. Gramps had to miss them far more than her because he'd enjoyed life with them. He told her wonderful stories about her mom growing up. And how she'd loved to help him in his own bakery. They'd owned their own bakery but then he'd decided to work less and have less stress by just being the baker instead of the owner. He'd started that job and was loving it when their lives had changed on that terrible day.

But this was a new start—could be. If this was her bakery, this could be her future. But, right now she was here to do a job. She'd ordered supplies, and they'd been delivered and were in the supply room—which she should have looked at the day Hunter had carried her inside. Her supplies were there, but now Hunter had made it back through the revolving door of her loony brain and her thoughts snagged on him. *No—work is calling.*

Thank goodness, she threw herself into baking the cupcakes. Getting the pans ready, and there were plenty of cupcake pans for cupcakes or muffins. She couldn't wait to

bake her favorite muffins, blueberry and cinnamon surprise, but today it was cupcakes only. She got things going and was smiling as she poured the last of the milky chocolate cake batter into the pan.

She was just about to pick the pan up and put it in the oven when there was a light knock on the back door. As she headed to the back door, she glanced at the pan of muffins and let them wait. Hesitating at the door, she wished there was a window so she could see who was out there. But this was Lone Star and there didn't seem to be anything to worry about. She'd been on the outskirts of Dallas and you had to have a way to see who was out there in the alley.

“Who's there?” she asked.

“Hunter.”

Her heart erupted in spasms that made her dizzy—yes, she tried to make an excuse that she'd skipped breakfast but she knew that wasn't why. She'd had trouble going to sleep last night because this cowboy had been on her mind and she couldn't figure out how to get him out of it.

She opened the door, prayed for steadiness, and smiled—it was impossible not to smile at the cowboy. He smiled, and his blue-green eyes totally took her breath away as they met hers. He had his straw Stetson in his hands and his short wavy hair was finally showing. She could see that if his hair was longer, he'd look like the man in the wedding pictures with the wavy hair and an intriguing expression on his face as the camera made the shot.

“Good morning,” she managed.

His brows dipped and his lips hitched more. “Good morning to you. How is everything going for you this morning?”

She stepped aside and waved her arm. “Come in. It’s all good. I love baking and that’s what I’m doing.” He passed her, and she hadn’t moved back far enough and his arm rubbed hers—electric sparks lit through her like an explosion on the Fourth of July.

It had happened the day he’d saved her, but they hadn’t touched since yet she hadn’t stopped thinking about it many times. She was not thinking straight. She turned and walked to the counter. She wanted her mind clear, her decisions based on her job, not being interrupted by something she hadn’t even known she longed for until this man picked her up from the ground and carried her in his arms. Against his heart—stop, she couldn’t get distracted—could she?

“It looks like you have everything started.” He moved toward the counter. Putting him back in near contact. Mind reeling, she just stood there looking at him.

He saw the conflict in her eyes she was certain because he gave a gentle smile. “I came by to see if you needed any help. That’s what me and my family do on the Saturdays of the dances. We help out wherever we’re needed. And, well, you’re cooking a lot of cupcakes and I’m certain I can’t do them like you, but I have a feeling you’re as good at instructions as you are baking.” His lip hitched, his eyes danced.

Her heart somersaulted and she laughed. How could she not laugh? “I hope I am.” *Turn him away*, her voice yelled inside her head. “Sure, I would love some help.”

Yes, she’d lost her mind but she couldn’t help it.

Chapter Nine

Hunter had told himself not to come by, but he'd had her on his mind and couldn't get away from her. So, when he pulled into town, it was like his truck took charge and went straight to her bakery.

“This place fits you. I mean that as a compliment. I don't know what the other bakery you run looks like but—” He snapped his lips shut. She'd probably take those words to mean she looked small and... he didn't know what she'd think. The place was welcoming and pretty and so was she —“Okay, you just tell me what you need me to do. Do I need to put an apron on?”

She grinned. “Sure, if I have to wear an apron you should too. Let's see what we have in here.”

She pulled open a deep drawer, and he saw it was full of colorful aprons. Red, blue, and pink aprons. Thankfully, she pulled out a red one.

She turned toward him, her eyes sparkling. “We'll match, how's that?”

Oh yeah. “I think that's a great idea. Not that we match in size. You're a lot shorter than me, but you have a lot of sparkle and I don't.”

“I think that's a compliment. I know that I'm not very big but I really try to not be dull.”

He couldn't help it, his grin spread wide. “Believe me, you haven't been boring, not one moment since I met you—or caught you.”

She chuckled and opened the apron, walked behind him and then wrapped her arms around him as she got both hands

on the apron, her body was near as she did so and he had to fight not to spin around and wrap his arms around her... or to at least lay his hands over hers as they were both right above his belt buckle at the same time. Just being near her put him on alert.

* * *

She hesitated when her arms were around him, taking hold of the apron with both hands. Why did he affect her this way? Pushing herself to get a grip, she finished pulling the apron around him and quickly tied it and then stepped around to look at him. We don't look like twins but a team. I'll get you a large bowl then tell you the ingredients and will have them all mixed up. Let me put this batch in the oven first. He moved to open the oven door as she picked up the large pan of twenty-four muffins then slid it inside. When it was in he closed the door and she set the timer.

Then she set another muffin pan down and together they placed the muffin paper in each opening.

"You do enjoy this," he said as they placed the last two in the empty spots.

They were standing side by side as she set up his mixing bowl, so they would be working beside each other at the counter. She filled her cup with flour and he filled his up exactly the same then they poured their flour into their bowls.

"First step done," he said, giving her that smile.

"Just a few more steps to go," she added and they added the rest of the ingredients and turned on their mixers.

"Is this a certain flavor?" Hunter asked after a few moments of just letting the mixers do their jobs.

“White cake,” she said, feeling his nearness as the mixers buzzed on the counter next to them. “Wedding cakes I’m asked to make are usually traditional white, but I tweak them to make them have slightly different tastes. People, couples can pick their favorite... but then, they have the choices of different flavors too.” They were standing close as she answered and she lifted her head to look up and at the same time he tilted his head to look down at her. And for some unknown reason he lifted his hand and brushed a piece of hair from her face.

His long, strong fingers brushed her cheek and she felt his touch race through her. Her gaze locked on his. His eyes, the green and blue, intensified and his hand then tucked behind her ear slid to cup her neck. And in the next instant she stepped to him and his lips covered her. Not exactly the icing she’d planned but, whoa, nothing she had ever dreamed she could feel pulsed through her as his lips moved on hers. And his arms tightened.

Her arms had automatically gone around his waist. And she clutched his back hard as if she could never imagine letting him go. She’d known him all of two and a half days. She shifted, trying to get control of her emotions that were tangled in the feel of his lips on hers. He shifted too, then they both stepped back. Reality slammed into her and by the look on his face it was the same for him. One hand that had gone around her back let go of her and then the hand that cupped her at the neck. Gently he slid it back out of her hair, his thumb traced down her jawline to her chin as they stared at each other in the moment as time seemed to stop. She could barely breathe, couldn’t move, just stood there locked by the touch of his fingertips and the depth of his eyes.

* * *

Hunter stared into Violet's beautiful eyes, saw her shocked expression, her soft lips moist from his kiss. What had he been thinking—*not* thinking?

But he wouldn't, couldn't ever take back the kiss and didn't want to. The woman did something to him, it was as if she reached inside of him and tugged him closer each time they were near. As if there was nothing that would keep them apart. Yet, he had stepped across a line, maybe? Yes, her line and he knew it as her dazed eyes blinked, and she stepped back, leaving his hand in the air.

He tucked it against his side. "I should say I'm sorry, but I'm an honest man, and Violet, ever since I saw you falling off the pileup on the barrel, I think about you. I know you aren't thinking about anything, but again, I have to be honest, I have never felt what I felt holding you in my arms. Kissing those lips of yours and feeling your heart once again pounding against my chest like I did the day I carried you into this very room. This bakery, where things are baked that make people happy. And for the first time in a very long time, I can say I honestly feel something I've never felt before—"

"I understand," she said, her eyes tearing up. "Honestly, I've never been kissed like that before. I've only ever been kissed once. And it was by a sixteen-year-old who came into the bakery all the time after school pretending he wanted a cupcake when he really just wanted to kiss me. We met behind the bakery one day and that's when it happened—my first and only kiss until this one."

They stood, both of them knowing that something had happened between them, but he knew she wasn't ready. He wasn't either. She hadn't yet baked the wedding cake that had brought her here in the first place. And he wasn't looking to ever need a wedding cake.

He pulled his shoulders back, he'd been slightly leaning toward her, whether he wanted to or not. "Look, you're here to bake a wedding cake, and I'm not going to mess this up for you by causing you any stress. We're going to get your granddad on Monday, and tonight you're going to present these cupcakes to everyone. I'm just a sidekick right now." He needed to just back away and not look back.

"You helped," she said, her voice low.

"Not really. But just so you know, I'm not going to kiss you again. That was out of line. This was not a normal action on my part. I've never kissed anyone like that before, and in all honesty not sure I want it to happen again. If there is a chance that you and I could—" He raked his hand through his hair, knocking his hat off because he wasn't clear-headed. He reached down and snatched it up and slapped it against his leg. This was all out of order.

"I didn't mean to come in here and cause problems. Get everybody off track. I think I'm going to head out now. You've got this under control. But if you need anything, you know where to find me. I'm heading back out to the ranch." He needed space.

She didn't say no, didn't say anything at all. Instead, as he untied his apron and held it out to her, she carefully accepted it without touching his fingers.

He backed to the door. "I'll see you tonight. And I'll take pressure off of you because I won't be dancing." Then he turned and walked out the door.

He walked down the alley and to his truck, thankful there was no one there to talk to. Everyone was in the middle of town decorating. He didn't need to push his dancing like everyone wanted him to. He knew there was a high chance he could fall in love with the pretty baker... and falling in love was the main thing he was never going to let himself do.

He'd climbed into his truck and cranked it with a harder than needed twist. He backed out and headed out of town. He knew one thing: he never wanted to hurt like he'd hurt when his parents went down in that plane.

And losing the woman you love would hurt deeper.

Not going there.

He knew if he fell in love and he lost her, it would hurt even worse than losing anyone else in the world.

He couldn't take that chance.

* * *

"These look luscious," Josie Jane said as she and Ruby came to the table Violet had set up.

Ruby picked up one of the cupcakes that was decorated with a fluffy swirl of white icing and topped with a tiny, pale pink rose. "This is beautiful. Let me guess, this is just an example of everything. Flowers and colors that can go on a white cake. Is that for show or for some other reason?"

She'd put the icing on in different styles and in groups, each group had the same flower telling her the hint of added flavor she'd added to the mix. "These are taste test cupcakes and each color of flower lets you know the cake has a slightly different additive to it. Then there are the three other cakes that are popular, my Chocolate Cream, my Sweet Lemon and my Caramel Love Song."

"*Caramel Love Song*," Josie Jane cooed.

Ruby chuckled. "I *want* that and don't even know what's in it."

She loved their reactions, got it a lot when she explained what it was but from these two it was great. “That is actually most of my grooms’ favorite choice. It’s chocolate and caramel mingled together in the cake, delicious, and then in the icing is a delight like the topping on a caramel and nuts ice cream topping, leaves a smile on your face with the first taste.”

Ruby set the white cupcake down and picked up the Caramel Love Song. She took a bite and started laughing as she chewed. “Great,” she said as she swallowed. “Delicious, you are amazing.”

That made Violet smile, she loved it. She loved seeing their reactions to the white cakes also.

“Each colored flower on the white cakes signifies the slight change of taste.”

“Yes, I’ll watch for results as people are taking their first bites tonight.”

“That’s wonderful,” Ruby said as she picked up the white iced cupcake with the pink flower on top that she’d set down. She pulled back the paper then took a bite.

Violet felt wonderful as she watched the smile, a big closed-mouth smile spread across Ruby’s face with each chew. “I’m hoping that means you like it or you smile about everything you eat.”

Ruby swallowed, then licked her lips for leftover icing. “Believe me, it was scrumptious. I see what you mean, that’s not just a white cake, you’ve added something special in there, I taste it. I’m just trying to figure out what the little bit of taste is.”

“Yes, and do you have it yet?” she asked as a curious Josie Jane picked the same one up and took a bite. Her eyes widened, and she chewed fast as Ruby looked at her with a thoughtful look.

Then she held up her hand just as Josie Jane swallowed. “Cherry. Just slight, but gives it an edge mixed with the normal white vanilla taste.”

“Yes,” Josie Jane agreed. “It’s barely there, but it’s there and delightful.”

She chuckled, delighted that they got it. “Correct. Just a hint. Sometimes people don’t know what the difference is, they just know they loved it.”

“This has to be the favorite,” Ruby said, taking another bite as Josie Jane did the same.

Arabella walked up, set her knitting in a chair that had already been set up for her by one of the Buckley men. Watching the two ladies, she grinned, picked up a cupcake with a violet-colored flower, peeled back the liner and took a small bite. Instantly she smiled as she chewed, her eyes bright.

All of them were watching her because, like Violet, they knew she might understand instantly. “Doubled up on vanilla,” she said. “This is always my favorite.”

“Yes, mine too. But coconut is wonderful. And lemon is special too.”

“You’re going to do wonderful,” Arabella said, then taking her cupcake with her, she walked over and sat down in her chair and took her time enjoying the cupcake as Ruby and Josie Jane finished theirs.

“So, traditional, adventurous, and tangy,” Josie Jane said. “I get it. Now I’m going to have to make myself not try every one of these tasty offerings.”

“You can try as many as you want and give me your opinion, just don’t get sick and make people think it was my baking and not just that you ate too many.”

They all laughed.

“But really, I want this cake to be perfect. This is an important moment in Jasmine’s and Caleb’s lives and mine too. I want to see her smile and I know he will if he sees her smile. And if Grampa comes here smiling and loves it like I think he will, this could be where my future is. Everything is tied together right now.”

Ruby nodded. “Yes, my dear, it is. And I hope you stay. You fit in here.” Her gaze moved from her to over her shoulder and she smiled. “In more ways than you know. I’m heading back to the diner to help Red. I hope you get out there and dance.”

She walked away and then Josie Jane patted her arm. “I’m done for now, I’ve got to see where else I’m needed. The band is setting up and there’s Millie strutting toward us with her herd of Buckleys carrying ice chests full of drinks.” With those words, she was gone.

Violet spun to see what they’d seen and there, walking beside Millie, were seven Buckley cowboys, each carrying an ice chest coming her way. One of them was Hunter.

Her pulse shot to high alert as his gaze met hers and sparks she was sure everyone could see ignited between them. He instantly threw his gaze to the ice chest as he set it on the ground. “Let me know if you need anything else, Millie,” he said. Then looked at her. “Hope you have a fun evening. The cupcakes look great.” He gave her a smile, a friendship smile and then he headed off across the street with his cousins and brother trailing him. Each gave her a tip of their hat and Ryder looked from her then to his cousin and she knew he knew something was up.

She just stood there watching him.

“Can I try a cupcake,” Millie asked, coming to stand by her side and putting her back on track.

Right. She was here to bake.

Chapter Ten

The dance had been going well for everyone except Hunter. But that wasn't unusual. He leaned against one of the posts from the sidewalk to the roof of Josie Jane's and he watched the dance, but really he was watching Violet's cake table directly across the street from where he stood.

Violet. Yes, he was watching Violet, who just happened to be standing behind her table. He enjoyed the view, though he wasn't going over there. She didn't want him, he knew this because she hadn't even looked his way. Since he'd signaled that he wasn't going to get in her way.

The kiss didn't matter, they'd both been taken in by that moment. His reaction had been one of shock then elation as they'd in the same moment reached for each other. She'd felt right in his arms.

So perfect and right. The instant they'd started the kiss, she'd fallen against him and he'd done the same. They both joined in eagerly when the kiss started. Then his brain left him and only the emotions and the sense of how perfect she felt in his arms. And how right her lips responded to his, it was mind-blowing—*heart*-blowing.

And it blew him away. He'd never known he could feel that surge of elation. Was that how true love was, a lifting up of every feeling inside of you?

Now, she was smiling as a couple each picked up a cupcake and bit into them. He could tell by the smile on their faces they were enjoying it. Mostly he enjoyed the way her eyes lit up and her smile grew watching them. He knew they loved it just by her expression. The woman was amazing and delighted everyone who tried her treats. He told himself he

should move, not stand here watching something he couldn't have.

No, something he didn't want... he didn't want to love someone and lose them.

Never again could he take the chance.

His heart ached and he suddenly wished she would look at him. But her gaze never met his and he had a feeling she knew where he was standing and wasn't looking on purpose. Why should she? He had barely acknowledged her earlier when he sat the ice chest of drinks beside her table. He felt bad about that, but he was trying to stand back and let her have what she wanted, a free mind to move her business where she wanted it. A free mind to focus on what she was here for, to bake the perfect cake for the bride and groom.

Not to get a mixed-up mind because he'd caused her confusion or anxiety. Not that he knew he'd done that. He'd just given that to himself, and that he knew without a doubt.

"You going to just stand there or go ask her to dance?"
Ryder said, walking up from behind him, he stopped beside Hunter, his gaze full of challenge. "What—are you afraid?"

"Look, don't start this."

"What—pushing you to make a move, to do your mom an honor by doing what she loved—teaching you and Ace how to dance? Because she loved that more than dancing herself. She loved you, loving it. I could always see it in her sparkling eyes. I was young then too, but when I think about it now, I know what I was seeing. She's talking through me right now, she gave me a push to get over here and tell you to make a move."

He glared at his cousin. But then he smiled, a flash of his mother's humor in Ryder's words hit him. Words he could

actually hear his mom saying. She'd had a wonderful sense of humor and loved making them all laugh.

“You heard it too, didn't you? Those weren't my words, they were your mom's. I'm not talking to a ghost, but just feel her being as tired as I am of seeing you stand on the sidelines. I didn't get out on the dance floor with that gorgeous redhead I was dancing with on the last dance because I saw you and felt your mom giving me a shove to get over here. Come on, man, make my day and your mom's too. Ask her to dance.”

Standing there on alert and hearing his mom's fun, encouraging words from many years ago, urging him to try something new. To take the plunge in the lake his first time swimming, but she was there to teach him. To climb a tree, grab a rope and swing out into the air, then let go so he could fly freely for a moment, then land with a splash in the lake. She'd done it first, and he'd followed after her. He'd just been a kid looking for adventure.

He was a grown man now and holding back—*because you're afraid.*

The words slapped him in the face as he stared at Ryder.

“This dance isn't going to last all night, and neither is life. Go on, start living like your mom is rooting for you to do. You know good and well she wants you to be happy. So, step out and give life a good shot.”

A good shot. Those were the words of his dad, teaching him how to shoot a gun and how to throw a rope and catch a cow. He sighed, tonight they were both talking to him and suddenly he smiled at Ryder, their messenger.

“You are one cowboy with open eyes and ears, those are exactly the things my parents would be saying if they were standing here in front of me.”

Ryder's lips hitched up in his crooked smile and his eyes dug deep. "Get goin', cowboy, the night's flying past and I want to get back out there on that dance floor, too. Only this time I'll be watching for you to swing past me like you used to all those years ago."

Hunter, thoughts spinning, stepped off the sidewalk, then he stopped. His gaze went to the dance floor and he saw his brother and Kelsy as he spun her, then dipped her in his arms and kissed her smiling lips. Then he lifted her to standing and twirled her out, then back to his waiting arms. Their eyes glowed even from this distance and in that moment Hunter pictured himself. He could do that same thing, only he'd been too young to dip his mom but he knew the move. He'd watched the joy on his dad's face when he'd dipped her, saw the love there shining between them as they'd looked into each other's eyes, as they'd loved each other in those moves.

Suddenly he wanted to hold Violet in his arms, dip her and kiss her again. Those moves were fun for some and meaningful for others. They meant the world of love between his mom and dad. And his mom had been showing him her love but for her and him it had been for fun. Now, as he stood there in the road, he longed for what his mom and dad had when they'd danced. What his brother had with Kelsy.

A strong hit of want slammed him in the heart. He wanted to dance for the first time since he was eight. He wanted to dance right now.

He wanted to dance with Violet.

* * *

Violet knew exactly what cake everyone loved the most. As usual it was the double vanilla with the touch of coconut. The

coconut added just a little spring to the vanilla and she never mentioned that the secret ingredient was in the cupcake with the bright yellow sunflower on top. That flower was her favorite to create when holding the piping bag full of icing in her hand and letting it flow into a work of art. She looked at that sunflower and it was one filled with hope and love and a little uplifting spice of delight that was the coconut.

She had worked really hard to keep her gaze off of the unbelievably handsome cowboy who stood across the road leaning against the pole. Oh she'd glimpsed him when she'd turned from the table behind hers where the cooler was holding her extra cupcakes. She never lifted her head so he could know she knew where he was. She had no idea if he was watching her or the dance. The one time that she did know, he was clearly watching the dancers and his expression, goodness his expression changed in an instant, and he straightened from the post with alarm on his face. What? Curiosity she tried not to want but was undeniable, what made him react like that? Stand up and stare at that dance floor with... longing. Yes, that was what it was.

She looked away, suddenly fearful he might look her way and see her expression but she knew without a doubt that in that moment her expression mimicked his. She longed to be in his arms on that dance floor, in his life... forever.

Her heart thundered and her head spun as clarity slammed into her. Her hands trembled as she tried to straighten the cupcakes. She was thankful no one was at her table in that moment, then she glanced over and saw Millie. Long, tall Millie with a look of knowing on her face. Sweet lady that she was, she sidestepped to stand beside Violet.

She lifted her gaze and met Millie's knowing eyes. "I know what you're thinking. Believe me, I don't know how deep your not-wanting-to-be-out-there is, but mine was huge. After losing my sweet, bull-riding champion husband to a bull,

I couldn't go back even though I wanted to. Couldn't get out on the dance floor either, because we shared the joy of dancing together as much as we loved rodeoing together. And though I tried to ignore it, standing back here behind this table, I watched each of the women join me back here and each one became a Buckley wife or soon-to-be.

“You notice I danced tonight with sweet loving Lumas. When Kelsy and Ace started falling in love, almost instantly it was hard on her granddad. He was worried for her but somehow or other I was put there to help him get through it. And he helped me get back out there on that dance floor.” She smiled. “And we're still dancing.”

Violet listened, her heart still racing but Millie's words were important so she tried to focus on Millie and not her raging emotions.

“I don't know if you noticed when I wasn't at the table, I was dancing because you hardly looked up from this table tonight. Avoiding the gaze of the cowboy who hasn't been able to take his eyes off of you tonight is what I think, or did you not realize that.”

She was stunned. “Millie, you see everything and I'm so happy you've found your way with Lumas. But I have to get my career going. I have to decide my life before I let anything take me away from it again. My life, for the first time is mine to do as I want to do. And I want to keep it that way but there is just something about Hunter that keeps drawing my attention away.”

“I don't know if you saw what I saw but I think since you've come to town, I saw it when he was carrying you out of that store. Something about that cowboy has changed. Something he very much needed to change.”

“I don't want to do anything that will give him the wrong ideas.”

That kiss slammed her in the heart.

That time in his arms there was no denying they'd both acted on impulse at the same moment. The very same moment. How could that be? She couldn't blame him and he couldn't blame her. They'd done it together.

In the same instant.

“Yep, I think something has happened behind the scenes that no one else knows about. Between the two of you to be blunt.”

“I can't...”

“Don't do what you can't do but don't shut your mind to it if it's something good. I can tell you that life holds a lot of darkness, terrible pain, heartache you think you'll never overcome,” her words trembled and tears glistened in her eyes cutting deep into Violet. “And if you've not overcome what is holding you back, maybe you need to step out and try. I know you're opening a business somewhere, just not sure where. But I can tell you a business is important, it gives you the satisfaction of achieving, but it's the behind the scenes on how it affects the rest of your life that is important. Me, I stood behind this table after the dances started. They got me out of my store where I'd hidden since losing my love. But then this table was my next barrier as I watched the others dance. And my gaze would constantly shift over so I could see that handsome cowboy Lumas. And I'd feel a pull to step out and toward him. Something I never thought I'd feel again.”

Violet was startled, heard the love in Millie's voice. Saw it in her eyes.

“Lumas and I both were fighting the draw that was between us and sweet Kelsy coming to town was the line that connected up and drew us together. We've found out that we can love again. That our loving each other doesn't steal from the love we had before, that we're blessed to know it and open

our hearts again. We haven't shared this with anyone else yet. I think Kelsy knows it and is hoping for it for her grandpa. And when the time is right he'll let everyone in on our secret. But you need to know now, that love and dreams can work together. I've lived it twice in my life. I'm not telling you to do something you're not ready for. Just don't turn away because you think you can't have both. For me, as much as it hurts to lose the man I loved, I have no idea why his time on earth was shorter than mine. But I know that while I was blessed to have a wonderful life with him, I was there and nothing can ever take that away. And I know that now, I have it again, and believe me, this isn't a halfway love, a man who leads me on and then isn't worth the dirt under my feet. Believe me there are those deceivers out there looking to con a woman looking for love. That's where caution comes in. And for me, slammed doors along the way letting no one in while my heart was struggling. But don't think the man meant for you isn't out there. And don't walk away if you know you want the one you love."

Stunned, Violet's heart ached with longing to feel what Millie had felt twice. In her thoughts there stood tall, masculine, *hurting* Hunter.

Hurting—that word slammed into her suddenly.

Kelsy told her the first day that Hunter was closed up. But he'd shown her a different side. "I heard that Hunter and his mom were great dancers and when he lost her he closed up. That he hasn't stepped out and taken a chance on getting hurt—slammed by life again."

Millie's smile curved and her eyes shined. "Yes, but you know, the right people are sent at the *right* time. That's what I've figured out. Me, I've helped some overcome things holding them back and others my words didn't reach at all. But, I've learned that I can plant a seed and someone else can help it grow to fill the need. See, our timing isn't always the

same and we have to be patient. For Hunter, patience has been long, very long. Sometimes, like for me, waiting for the right person happens only when the time is right.”

Timing. She stared into the eyes of this amazing woman and felt her heart cinch tight. Was the timing right now? Heart thundering, she looked across the street and her gaze slammed into Hunter’s. He stood still on the street looking her way. He stood frozen, unmoving but in his eyes, even at the distance she saw emotion that sent her heart thundering. Then he suddenly spun away, said something to Ryder then walked away, down the road away from her.

Millie placed her hand on her shoulder and gave a soothing squeeze. “When it’s time, you’ll know. He’s had a long hard journey and so have you, don’t rush it. You’ve got a lot going on right now and a wedding to help bring to life. I felt driven to talk to you but my timing isn’t the one that matters. It’s a much mightier source whose timing is always right. If meant to be, you and Hunter’s timing will meet.

“Me, I have no regrets and no looking back that holds me back. My life has been blessed but the timing between blessings has sometimes felt long. But I’m thankful that when it was right, I saw it and stepped to the light... or in my case the dance floor.” She smiled, her gaze shifted to the man standing down the street beside his fishing buddies.

Lumas had won the love of a wonderful, insightful, and helpful woman. And her sweet friend Kelsy had been right in hoping her grampa opened his heart again. When Lumas looked up and his gaze met the wonderful woman standing beside her, light lit through his gaze.

Violet sighed, oh to feel that... her own timing was hindered by her wants. And now, she struggled with that—what did she want from life? Her thoughts spun out of control,

but again, Millie was right, she had a wedding to get ready for and she knew that Hunter needed space.

And so did she.

Chapter Eleven

On Sunday, Violet went to church with Kelsy and Ace but there was no sign of Hunter, disappointment filled her but she forced herself to remember it wasn't her timing that mattered.

His timing, she had to keep that in her head for now.

On Monday, she still hadn't seen him but he went, as planned, with Ace to pick up her grandpa so she thought she'd see him when they brought Grampa to the house. Wrong, they'd already dropped Hunter off in town at his truck so she didn't see him but thank goodness she had Grampa by her side now.

Lumas was there to greet him too and they hit it off. The next day she took him to town, showed him the bakery which he loved but then asked to go see the fishing store. Smiling at that, they'd gone down the sidewalk and thankfully there was already wheelchair access made into the walks, and her Grampa wheeled down it and across the street and into the store. And stayed there, telling her he'd be back to the bakery later.

Thrown off a little by his enthusiastic embrace of the place and his and Lumas's quick friendship, she'd smiled as she headed back to the bakery, it was now getting time to really focus on the wedding.

Today, her thoughts were busy, it had been three days since her Grampa had arrived in town and he'd come in to help her in the bakery—none. She chuckled, the very idea made her smile and she loved it. Her grandpa already went fishing and when he wasn't with Lumas fishing, he was over at the store with a herd of fishermen *talking* about fishing.

She grinned just thinking about it as she worked on the last bits of getting the cake decorations ready to go on the cake. They were stored in the walk-in freezer, waiting the next couple days before she actually decorated the cake she would bake later. Her brain was lined out on her timing of production and also making townsfolk happy by baking pastries and donuts for anyone who stopped by in the mornings. She was tickled about how many cowboys dropped by, and moms on their way to work before dropping their children off at daycare or school. She loved being able to give them a quick delight to everyone that way.

Today, it was Wednesday morning and on Thursday her heavy-duty baking would begin. She had everything lined up for what she'd supply at the rehearsal dinner and everything she'd supply for the day of joy for Jasmine and Caleb.

Those two had been so easy to please, loving everything she offered them and then just giving her total control of choice on everything. She'd seen it in their eyes and sighed, the wedding decorations and food was second on the list, becoming husband and wife was the icing on their cake and nothing else could compete.

And so, Violet had let her heart soar as she'd created the plan she hoped would meet their love for each other. Thing was, she couldn't help pausing along the way and thinking about Hunter. Oh, how the man who'd made sure and stayed away as much as possible since their eyes locked the night of the dance and then he'd walked away filled her mind to near explosion. Sometimes at night he was all she thought about and was glad to get to work the next day to be busy.

But today everything but the wedding was what mattered and the next few days no morning pastries would be made, no folks dropping by to visit. Her mind would be fully focused on everything she had ready to create for the wedding of her dreams... and she smiled thinking of the groom's cake she was

creating decorations for. In the refrigerator were the tiny little goats, the donkey and the form of Sargent Two Toes who would stand on the rocks she'd created to make the cake topping to symbolize the event that had brought Caleb to Jasmine's rescue and the two of them to love. It was going to be a huge surprise but it was right. Love, one never knew how it would happen, what would initiate it, make the sparks fly and the heart open up—

Her mind whirled suddenly with the thought as she stood on the front sidewalk at eleven in the morning, and with suddenly not the bride and groom looking at the cake in her mind but Hunter. Her insides twirled, and she was toppling from the position standing on tiptoes on top of shaky ground.

Her hand went to her stomach and her nerves rattled. Customers were now gone, and starting early tomorrow she officially began work on the wedding. But now, standing here, her mind whirling, she couldn't breathe. She was standing where it had all started, her looking in the window of *Arabella's Delights* and moment later she met Hunter. Her heart thundered and her mind wouldn't shut down thinking about the cowboy who'd rescued her that day.

On top of thoughts of him, she had an urge to take her van and explore—needed to get out and away for a little while.

If this was her place to settle down—and her heart was leaning that way, then there were things she'd need. A place to live, because she and Grampa couldn't continue living at Kelsy and Ace's. They were after all nearly newlyweds themselves and though they didn't show it, she knew time alone was important. Besides that, she craved exploring suddenly, needed it.

Needed to get out and about and get her thoughts off where they kept going—Hunter. So, different from that first day, she

hurried from the sidewalk on her own two feet and hopped into her VW van. Yes, all on her own, she drove.

Drove out of town not sure where she was going just drove, enjoying the land that stretched out around her. Beautiful pastures, some with flowers filling the land, some with hay stacks set out to feed the cattle. All with a beautiful sunny midday spark that drew her.

She drove and then she was driving along the road leading toward Kelsy's but kept going past her friend's home and soon found a dirt road that looked interesting. Something new to see, something off the beaten path through a sun-sparkled mass of tree limbs making a long tunnel through which the road took her, tiny sparkles of light danced through the touching tree limbs in a beautiful way leading toward the light at the end. She smiled, feeling good to be exploring.

When she left the trees behind, the road narrowed, running along wide open rolling pastureland. And there the cattle were grazing. Further down in another pasture, separated by barbed wire, she spotted a herd of Longhorns.

Gorgeous multi-colored Longhorns and she gasped at the beauty even in the distance between her and the back of the pasture's edge where they grazed. At the corner of the fence line a smaller dirt road waited, with a cattle guard to cross. The road she was on continued but her mind was on the Longhorns and she instantly turned and crossed the cattle guard, following the road along the fence line in the direction of the pasture. She was going for a close up of the Longhorn cattle grazing in the pasture surrounded by beautiful bright yellow flowers.

Goodness their horns were truly long. From one tip of one horn to the tip of the other the length looked taller than her—yes, she was not the tallest gal in the world but she would *not* want to carry something her length attached to her head

sideways. The very idea had her head wobbling from one side to the other from the weight of thinking about it. She laughed suddenly.

She was smiling. It felt good. And sure enough the thin dirt road she was on led right to the pasture where the... twenty, she estimated, Longhorns grazed.

Intrigued and unable to look away she suddenly hit rough ground, her van's front slammed into something and rose up as she stomped the brakes. *What*—she stared at a group of large rocks she hadn't seen because she'd been looking the other direction. In this area of Texas, piles of large rocks were common but she hadn't been paying attention.

What wasn't common was a red and white Volkswagen's front end looking as if was trying to climb the rocks. She closed her eyes and laid her forehead against her hands, now gripping the steering wheel.

She'd goofed up. "Now what?" she muttered, staring down at the floor of the van. *Make a call.* To who?

One man on her mind and determined not to call Hunter, she climbed out and her attention was instantly drawn back to the steers. She automatically walked along the thin red dirt road following the fence line toward them. They were awesome. And exactly what she needed.

Some were white and black spots, others were golden bronze mingled with black, red, and gold. Amazing artistry had been made when these cattle had been created. The long horns just topped off the beautiful creation and her artistic mind began to work on the animals she now knew she had to add to the groomsman's cake.

It was perfect too, because she'd chosen the people's choice and hers too the night of the dance and the groom's cake was the *Caramel Love Song* cake. Perfect, delicious, and decorated with the animals that had brought Jasmine and

Caleb together. Her thought rolled through the cute goats in mind and Sargent Two Toes of course and the adorable little donkey she'd already made and the way all of them were connected in the most unlikely way. Despite the fact that she'd run her van up onto rocks, she smiled thinking about how the cake was going to look. It was going to be amazing.

And now she knew what was missing, a Texas Longhorn and she would have fun designing it and creating it. This was going to be something.

She pulled out her phone and was planning to take a picture of a particular one that had the colors of cinnamon toast, reddish brown head and shoulders, and the soft cream body sprinkled with cinnamon spots and sugar leading to his cinnamon legs and tail. He sparkled in the sunlight, and his horns—they stretched from his head in a slightly curved way that was beautiful.

He had very long horns and they drew her. She noticed that there were others that looked similar and she wondered in a moment of realization that they were all young. Not fully grown—suddenly she heard a bellow and then a grunt.

What?

She turned and looked down the road to her van and laughed out loud. There on the top of her red and white van stood Sargent Two Toes. The Billy goat stood alert, watching her and below him, standing beside her van stood a pretty white mother goat, feeding her baby.

“Oh,” Violet gasped with happy surprise, what a picture that would make. She lifted her phone that was already on camera mode and instantly snapped some shots. Then she spun back and quickly took pictures of the bull, then she moved back toward her van, her attention drawn to the baby goat's mother—suddenly Sargent Two Twos let out a bellow, jumped in the air on top of her van and let out another—*alarm?* That

was exactly how it sounded and then from behind her van *charged* a gigantic Texas Longhorn.

She froze, stunned and breathless—this was the biggest bull, Longhorn, anything she'd seen. He was stunning—*and stampeding her way*.

Her way! She gasped, panicked not knowing what to do, then suddenly Sargent Two Twos leapt from the top of her van, letting out a loud yell—like a raging alert that sounded like “*Wurunan*” followed by a spitting sound as he charged her way racing after the stampeding Longhorn bull... and Violet... *finally* she spun and ran. Because it clicked in her brain that what Sargent Two Twos was saying was *Run* with a capital W tagged on the front in a long drawn out bunch of n's at the end—*Wrunnnn! The spit* at the end—meant don't waste time.

He was the Sargent and she took his command—she ran and kept running as fast as she could with no idea what was about to happen...

* * *

Hunter had come to the back country looking for Sargent Two Toes and a missing mother goat and baby. Who knew if Sargent had led them off or was trying to find them. What he did know was his Longhorns were just over the ridge and he hadn't ridden this way in a while and it would be nice to check on them. Especially since, Bull Horn, their cranky Longhorn steer, was in the pasture beside the herd of ladies and wasn't too happy they'd put a new bull in with the ladies. But, unlike humans, in the production of cattle, especially with prized Longhorns, variety was needed in colors and tone and Bull Horn was just having to deal with it. Kind of in a way—not exactly the same but emotionally how he was having to deal with staying away from Violet.

Thoughts back on the Sargent Two Toes and the goats that he thought might be exploring. He hoped they didn't have a run-in with the angry bull.

Suddenly he heard the raging blowout bellow—angry bull for certain. Instantly, Hunter spurred his stallion and they charged up the hill. At the top he looked down in the valley below as a flash of frilly white blonde curls bounced across the yellow pasture of flowers. *Violet on the run!*

And behind her at a small distance was an angry, giant Bull Horn—and behind him—thank the good Lord was an angry charging Sargent Two Toes.

Sargent was bleating angrily, wildly while racing as fast as Hunter had ever seen the old goat charge. In the instant that Hunter had been watching Sargent blasted around the mass of muscled bull—dodging the over eighty inches of long horns and then in a flash he passed the bull. The old goat was quick and when he passed the bull he spun lowered his Billy goat horns and charged the Longhorn.

He couldn't help Two Toes but Hunter was on the move, racing to help the running cake top as his stallion charged down the hill, across the pasture just as he heard a cry of anguish, shot a glance over his shoulder and saw Toe Toes flying through the air... and the bull charging again even angrier than before.

He spurred his horse to move faster and thank goodness he was one of their fastest stallions and since their distance to Violet was a longer distance caused from the angle they were at, he feared that the bull would beat them since he had a straight shot and the bull had his pretty target in focus.

Thankfully Violet's ankle was holding up and she was heading toward the woods. She could possibly make it but he doubted it. Hunter had a choice, he could sweep her up or charge the bull like Two Toes had done. He chose to scoop her

up—it was a great excuse to pull her close once more, and his heart pounded with worry that the bull would beat him. However, he missed the feel of her in his arms, cherished her and there was no way the angry bull was going to stop him now.

He spurred his stallion and like he'd supercharged the horse they made it, just a few feet ahead of the bull. Hunter holding the saddle horn with one hand leaned to the side and yelled to get her attention, "It's me, Violet, reach for me." His voice drew her attention, she looked up at him just as he reached her side. Instantly seeing his outstretched arm she lifted her arms and let him sweep his arm around her and sweep her up and against him. The instant her body touched his, she locked her arms around his neck and *nothing* had *ever* felt better or right.

Her legs dangled as the horse continued racing to the trees but his grip was tight and so was hers. As they reached the trees Hunter pulled on the reins and the horse slowed as trees became their guard rail between them and the irritable bull. He looked over his shoulder as Bull Horn was forced to stop or beat himself crazy with his long horns knocking into trees on one side and then the others. In the trees, he'd beat himself up trying to maneuver his head and horns through them.

Relief raced through him as he let go of the reins, reached and scooped Violet up to sit in his lap. One hip was resting on the saddle horn so he eased back and slipped her into his lap, while keeping his eyes locked on her as she stared at him. Their breathing was hard and all he could do was stare into those dazzling blueberry eyes—they pulled him, called him and he answered. Unable to stop himself he reached up, cupped her face and then he kissed her.

He kissed her like there was no tomorrow, like she was the meaning of life. And in his heart of hearts she was and he suddenly knew that for him there was no going back. He *loved*

this wonderful lady. If she'd have been trampled by that bull he'd have never forgiven himself for not admitting he loved her.

She wrapped her arms around him, her fingers clutching his waist as she returned the kiss with as much enthusiasm—or relief as he felt kissing her.

In a moment he pulled his lips away, rested his forehead against hers. His fingertips still cupping her face. “I almost lost you, Violet. I can’t.” That was all he could say as his heart ached, his stomach churned at the thought. Then sweet Violet’s hands slipped up his back to hug him closer.

Her palms unclenched and lay sweetly against his shoulder blades and then in a soft caress. “It’s the same for me,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion. “I know you don’t want this. But, all week I’ve cooked the most beautiful wedding cake and every other sweet to celebrate their wedded bliss to go along with the cakes. They’re the best I’ve ever made in all of my life. And it was you in my mind that I saw as I baked. I love my dream, but as I was racing from that bull all I could see was what I had left behind. And it was you. And only you. My bakery wasn’t there.”

His heart raced, widened, and with everything he had, he pulled her closer. “Same for me so that’s the way it’s got to be. The next wedding cake we stand beside will be ours.”

He felt her lips lift into a smile—couldn’t see them because he’d gone back to kissing her as soon as his words were out. The smile was of agreement as she rewarded him with the kiss of a lifetime. His heart filled full, like nothing he’d ever felt before. And suddenly, completely, he understood what had happened between his brother and his cousins and the women they’d found. He knew nothing else mattered. Everything else would fall into place.

Everything else like Sargent Two Toes, who came limping near them, let out a happy cry that was joined by the grunt of the now sulky bull still standing past the trees.

Hunter lifted his lips from hers and smiled. “I now understand that Sargent Two Toes is one great fella. You didn’t see him but he raced to get in front of that bull and then he put his short horns down and he went for it. And then he flew through the air, giving me time to get to you.”

She smiled, tears in her eyes. “Then at our wedding he’s going to have to be standing beside us too, just like he’s going to be on Saturday at Jasmine and Caleb’s wedding.”

“See there, we’re already on an agreement about everything—though I know it won’t always be easy. We might have some disagreements because disagreements mean we each have our own way, but we love each other and we’re always going to come to meet in the middle like this.”

She grinned, threw her head of fluffy whipping cream hair back and laughed as he held onto her. Then she looked at him, cupped his face with tender hands, her eyes glistening like sapphires, not blueberries but strong everlasting sapphire that sun shined in and took his breath away as they called to him for forever. “I’ll meet you always for this.”

And then she kissed him.

And forever was his new beginning of knowing what never-ending love felt like...

Epilogue

Dreams do come true, Violet let out a sigh of happiness. Four months ago she and Hunter had watched Jasmine and Caleb marry. It had been a wonderful wedding, and everyone had loved the cakes and the desserts she'd made for it. And the cake with all the animals had been a hit. She'd been happy and so proud to have given them exactly what they'd wanted.

Now, it was her turn. The wedding was wonderful as she stood in her beautiful white dress. Genna had helped her find—it had actually been in the back of the store, not yet out on display. When Violet and Hunter had announced they were getting married, it had been the first dress Genna showed her, and Violet instantly knew it was meant for her. The soft flowing white film layered over the silk dress below, it was perfect and fit with her fluffy hair like icing on a white cake. She'd immediately known that Hunter would love it since he called her the icing of his life.

Her wedding day—the day she hadn't expected when she'd driven into this amazing town and ended up in the arms of Hunter. Like a gift, everything had literally fallen into place. She smiled as she looked into the eyes of the man she loved. He smiled back, his lips hitched upward, his blue-green eyes sparkled, and as always, her heart thundered—oh, how she loved this man. And over the last few months he'd shown her his world. Hunter had taken her horseback riding and shown her around the ranch. He showed her where he wanted to build their dream home, and it was a beautiful spot overlooking a pasture that was covered in bluebonnets in the spring—and not near the bull, though he'd calmed down now that he was back in the pastures with the cow family where he wanted to be.

She'd loved it all and when they got home from their honeymoon, they would begin building.

Her grampa was running the bakery while she was gone, he loved it. And he loved hanging out with his new fishing buddy too. The two were fishing when they weren't working. He had also gotten a small place of his own that she stayed in with him until the wedding day. The Buckley men had built ramps on the front and back porch, then he'd topped everything off by finally getting a new van for himself—not hers—but a special one. A van built to accommodate a man with a wheelchair, built with special gears for a man who didn't have use of his legs and feet. The independence was amazing for him.

Everything about Lone Star worked—even her VW van after having it repaired from her rock climbing event.

Most important of all, love worked for her and Hunter. And as he smiled at her, she did the same while looking up at her one true love—the man of her dreams. Her heart swelled with joy as the preacher began the ceremony. Everyone was quiet as they exchanged vows with each other...

Her gaze held Hunter's, and she was so very grateful that Jasmine and Caleb had needed a baker, and Kelsy had instantly thought of her. Violet would always be grateful.

In the next few moments they stood there, her eyes were only for Hunter. Those eyes of his illuminating a beautiful man inside. He was strong and handsome, but mostly inside the man was beautiful in spirit and love. Exactly what she needed. Yes, her bakery was alive and well and she was exactly where she wanted to be, but he was her main reason for wanting to stay.

In that moment the preacher looked at her and asked her if she took Hunter as her husband, and she joyously said, "I do," and then the preacher looked at her man and asked him if he

took her as his and he smiled that dazzling, heart-raging smile. “I do.”

Instantly the preacher grinned and pronounced them husband and wife. In that moment, together, they turned toward the wonderful gathering of townsfolk, and all were friends who were cheering them on with clapping and smiles.

Grampa sat straight in the front row in his wheelchair, as happy as could be watching her find love. Beside him stood Kelsy arm in arm with Ace, both smiling, then there stood Lumas, Grampa’s new fishing buddy. And beside him stood the woman he loved, the woman Violet loved, sweet Millie—the woman whose words had opened Violet’s eyes. The tallest, strongest visual woman who knew what to hang on to, what to value and what not to value and shared her knowledge in her gentle way when the time was right. Violet owed her for opening her eyes.

Now, Violet looked up at her husband once again. Oh, how she loved the sound of that—her *husband* who instantly swept her up into his arms and kissed her, as his wife.

Cheers erupted, and Hunter smiled against her lips, and Violet knew without a doubt that she was where she was supposed to be. And up above, in the sky so high, her mother and grandmother were happy knowing she’d found her husband, hero, and the everlasting man to enjoy the gift of life with as he continued kissing her, and she smiled against his lips. Life was good.

Behind them, there was the sound of the fully recovered Sargent Two Toes—yes, he was back standing alert at the same spot he’d been at for Jasmine and Caleb’s wedding, but strong once again after his fight with the bull. And now, he let a strong bellow making it known loud and clear that he was on guard and happy.

Wow, her lips smiled against Hunter's again. "And now," he said, pulling his lips from hers, "It's time to dance with the woman I love."

Oh, they'd danced since getting engaged but now it was as man and wife. But an unbelievable thrill raced through her as he gently set her on her feet, then arm in arm they headed for the dance area. Their dance of life began now the moment he swept her into his arms and they began to move to the music.

As she'd learned the first time he'd finally stepped onto the dance floor with her, she'd seen exactly how wonderful her man could dance. Now, like nothing she'd ever imagined, he spun her, then dipped her in his arms, then spun her again but this time, as husband and wife they danced the night away...

Her heart told her without a doubt that from here on in her life, *not* just her hair was going to be as fluffy and wonderful as whipped cream and icing on a cake...

But no matter what, even if mishaps happened, she now had this cowboy to dance with and to catch her if she fell...

Love, oh what a gift, nothing was sweeter... Not even the sweets in the bakery could beat being loved by her cowboy, and as if sensing her thoughts, Hunter dipped her in his arms and topped it off with a kiss...

Yes indeed, *he* was the icing on her cake and hers forever.

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About the Author

Hope Moore is the pen name of an award-winning author who lives deep in the heart of Texas surrounded by Christian cowboys who give her inspiration for all of her inspirational sweet romances. She loves writing clean & wholesome, swoon worthy romances for all of her fans to enjoy and share with everyone. Her heartwarming, feel good romances are full of humor and heart, and gorgeous cowboys and heroes to love. And the spunky women they fall in love with and live happily-ever-after.

When she isn't writing, she's trying very hard not to cook, since she could live on peanut butter sandwiches, shredded wheat, coffee...and cheesecake why should she cook? She loves writing though and creating new stories is her passion. Though she does love shoes, she's admitted she has an addiction and tries really hard to stay out of shoe stores. She, however, is not addicted to social media and chooses to write instead of surf FB - but she LOVES her readers so she's working on a free novella just for you and if you sign up for her newsletter she will send it to you as soon as its ready! You'll also receive snippets of her adventures, along with special deals, sneak peaks of soon-to-be released books and of course any sales she might be having.

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Hope Moore~

Always hoping for more love, laughter and reading for you every day of your life!

Real Love'n Cowboy

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