

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANNA HATFIELD

Savoring Christmas

A
SWEET WESTERN HOLIDAY
ROMANCE



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Savoring Christmas

Rodeo Romance Book 10

A Sweet Contemporary Holiday Western Romance

by

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

SHANNA HATFIELD

Wholesome Hearts



PUBLISHING

Savoring Christmas

Rodeo Romance Book 10

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*To the quiet souls
who care so deeply...*

Chapter One



“Like this, Mr. Lucas?” An eager child with blonde braids fastened her adoring blueberry-hued gaze upward, seeking approval.

Troy Lucas smiled and nodded as his young charge practiced showing her 4-H beef project. “Yep. You’re doing that exactly right, Bethany. Good job.”

When Troy’s grandmother had roused him out of bed before four that morning, he’d been worried something disastrous had struck the ranch or her. Instead, she’d told him to hustle through his morning chores because she had things for him to do.

Unfortunately, her to-do list had included him and his cousin, Truitt, volunteering at the Umatilla County fairgrounds in the Eastern Oregon town of Hermiston. Not that Troy minded. He enjoyed working with the children and animals. But Grammy didn’t need to know that.

Longing for a strong cup of coffee, Troy knew it would be another hour before any of the vendor booths opened for business.

He and Truitt had already drained the thermos of java their grandmother had handed to them when she'd shoed them out the door at six, not even letting them sit down for a breakfast. She'd given them each two breakfast burritos while telling them to have a fun day, like they were still twelve instead of in their mid-twenties.

When they'd reported for duty at the fairgrounds, Grammy's friend Doris had sent them to help 4-H students get their animals ready for the first day of the fair.

Troy's glance drifted to Truitt as he guided a boy and girl who looked like twins in the best way to hold the heads of their sheep while they were in the show ring.

Truitt had always liked showing sheep better than beef, saying they were easier to handle. Troy had never been that fond of sheep, preferring his market steers that generally earned top dollar in the sale held on the last day of the fair. He'd used his fair winnings to buy his first run-down pickup when he'd turned sixteen so he and Truitt could drive themselves to school.

He well remembered the excitement and fun of staying at the fair to show animals and hang out with friends. Only the fair he and Truitt had attended was almost an hour away in Kennewick, Washington. The fair had been one of the rare times when he and Truitt were allowed to run wild and free without any responsibilities hanging over their shoulders.

Mentally slamming the lid on his memories, he realized something was amiss when he heard frantic shouts and loud banging from the far end of the beef barn.

"Stop, Bucky! Stop!"

Troy's head whipped around and caught sight of two teenage boys in blue FFA jackets chasing after an enormous steer that looked intent on making a mad getaway. The steer jumped a wheelbarrow, upending it, then took off in the direction of the carnival.

Without a moment of hesitation, Troy ran after the boys, knowing Truitt would join him.

On his way through the barn, he snagged a coil of rope hanging on a stall door and continued outside without slowing his pace, hoping to catch the steer before it caused any damage or injured anyone.

Women screamed, and people jumped out of the way of the animal determined to escape as it bucked and kicked, while the two boys raced behind it, shouting for the steer to stop.

A jogger yelped and dove over a garbage can to avoid being trampled, while a woman pushing a cart full of vegetables spun around and loped the other direction like she was practicing for an Olympic track event, spilling zucchini and tomatoes in her wake.

“Think we can hold it when we rope it?” Truitt asked as he caught up to Troy and shook out a length of rope.

Troy grinned at his cousin who was closer than any brother might have been. “I guess we’ll find out.”

The steer poured on more speed as it ran through the carnival area and headed toward the parking lot. If they didn’t stop the animal soon, he’d be out on the open road, where the possibility of catching him would involve a lot more work as well as danger to the steer and anyone driving near the fairgrounds.

Troy looked ahead and saw a young woman directly in the steer’s path. She had a phone pressed between her ear and shoulder, and three boxes stacked on a big cooler emblazoned with the Tundra logo.

Thick red hair looked like the sun had set it aflame as springy curls bounced around her shoulders, framing a lovely, fresh face.

“Hey, you!” he yelled, hoping to snag her attention, but she was looking down at the load she carried, appearing engrossed in a conversation that left her thoroughly distracted. “Lady! Hey, you!”

As though it happened in slow motion, he watched the steer kick his back feet as he charged past the woman, connecting with the cooler in her hands. The force of the kick

knocked her off her feet, while the cooler as well as the boxes she carried landed on top of her.

“Sorry, ma’am!” one of the boys yelled as he dashed after the bovine. The steer took time to charge into a straw bale, scattering it in every direction before making a beeline toward a gate.

Without a second to spare, Troy jumped over a fence and came at the steer from the direction of the gate. He swung the rope over his head, tossed the loop, and caught the steer around the neck. Troy veered around a nearby power pole, ducking beneath the rope to wrap it around the pole, then looped the rope behind his thighs for better leverage. He braced his feet and leaned back, preparing for the impact when the steer realized he was caught.

Troy grunted as the animal hit the end of the rope and jerked. The force of it made him feel like he was about to have both arms pulled out of their sockets, but he held fast. The animal had to weigh at least fourteen hundred pounds and used every ounce of it to tug against the rope.

Truitt grabbed onto the rope and helped tug out the slack while the two FFA boys worked to get a halter on the steer.

“Tru, will you escort Bucky back to the barn?” Troy asked as he handed the rope to the FFA advisor when he reached for it.

Truitt nodded as more help arrived in the form of livestock judges and concerned parents. The FFA boys wouldn’t have any trouble getting the animal back where he belonged.

Troy retraced his steps to the red-headed woman the steer had bowled over. She remained sprawled on her back in the grass. Although it had seemed far longer, it couldn’t have been a full minute since the steer had knocked her down.

From the way she drew in a gulp of air, Troy figured she’d had the wind knocked out of her.

He lifted the cooler off her legs, set it aside, and shoved the boxes onto the grass. He gave her prone form a quick

glance, checking for injuries. No gaping wounds could be seen, so he studied her face.

Pale green eyes, the color of frosted moss, stared up at him. Mesmerized by the color and the soft hint of her fragrance, he looked her over a second time, taking in the fact she was a shapely woman.

When his gaze connected with hers, he saw a hint of humor twinkle in the depths of those incredible peepers and couldn't hold back a smile. It seemed the damsel in distress possessed a sense of humor. A feeling of relief swept through him to discover she wasn't a female who erupted into hysterics as a default setting. He released the breath he'd been holding as he waited for her to dissolve into tears.

Troy studied the freckles that sprinkled her nose, then allowed his gaze to momentarily linger on rosy lips that were purely made for kissing. Thoughts of kissing her made Troy want to lean down and see if her mouth tasted as sweet as it looked.

Lest the urge overtake his good sense, he forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. "Get the wind knocked out of you?" he asked.

She nodded, drawing in another big breath, as though starved for air.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, hunkering down beside her, not wanting her to feel rushed to move. He'd had the air knocked out of him often enough to know it was an uncomfortable, unsettling feeling.

When she didn't answer, only inhaled a third breath, he started to worry. "Should I find a medic?"

She shook her head, sending that mane of finger-tempting hair into a lively dance. Troy kept his hands pressed to his thighs when he experienced a sudden, inexplicable need to brush the hair away from her face. With the verdant grass providing a sharp contrast to her red hair, it was all Troy could do not to snap a picture of her to make him smile on a lonely gray day. The woman could be her own festive decoration with

her alabaster skin and red hair standing out in stark contrast against the green background.

Despite comparing her to holiday décor, he could see she really was a beauty, even with her hair in a tangle and no makeup on her face.

“Just take your time. No need to get in a hurry to move. If you need assistance, I’ll go find someone.” Troy wasn’t certain if her pale skin was natural because of her red hair or if she was injured and trying to make light of it.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position. “That won’t be necessary, even if that was an exciting way to start the day,” she said in a mellow voice that flowed over him like rich honey warmed by the sun.

“Are you sure you aren’t hurt?” he asked, rising to his feet, then offering her his hands.

“Just my pride.” She latched onto his hands, and Troy almost jumped back, feeling something charged, like a current of electricity, shoot up both of his arms. It was like grabbing onto an electrified wire. Instead of letting go, though, he tightened his fingers around hers and hauled her upright.

The woman appeared of average height for a female, not too tall or too short. She had a nice figure he tried not to ogle as he observed her bright blue T-shirt and a pair of dark gray cotton shorts with pockets on the legs. His gaze slid down the length of her to her blue sneakers, then started back up when he noticed blood trickling down her leg and over her knee.

“You’re hurt,” he said, reaching for the cuff of her shorts that fell just above her knee, hiding her injury from his view. He stopped before his fingers connected with the cloth and dropped his hand to his side. Touching a stranger that way seemed rather inappropriate. He certainly didn’t want her to wrongly assume he was a pervert who preyed on women who’d been bowled over by belligerent bovine running amok.

She winced as she opened one of the pockets on the side of her shorts and pulled out a sharp paring knife. The blade

glinted in the sunlight before she tucked it back into the pocket.

“Occupational hazard,” she said, as though she regularly fell on knives she kept in her pockets.

Confused, he merely nodded his head, uncertain what he could do to help her. “Can I get something for that cut?”

“I have a first-aid kit.” She started to pick up the heavy cooler, but Troy lifted it before she could.

“I’ll carry this for you. Why don’t you pile the boxes on top?”

She shook her head, causing the curls to dance around her face again. “I can get them. Are you sure you don’t mind packing the cooler?”

“My pleasure, miss.” He glanced to where she’d been prone in the grass and tipped his head in that direction. “You might want to grab your phone.”

“Oh, thanks. I’d be lost without it.” She snatched up the phone, dropped it into one of her pockets, and gathered the boxes. “My food truck isn’t far.”

“Food truck?” Troy always looked forward to sampling the variety of food available at the fair. He wasn’t into all the deep-fried crazy stuff, like candy bars that had been dipped in goo and soaked in grease, but he did enjoy good barbecue and burgers, even the occasional corn dog. “Is this your first year here in Hermiston?”

“It is. I opened my food truck last summer, but I was too late to sign up for this event. The first six months I was open, I view as a learning experience. I found out a hundred things you should never do if you want to run a successful food truck business.”

Troy nodded, not knowing what to say. Truitt was the gregarious one who could talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Troy preferred to be the silent one on the sidelines, observing and listening more than talking. He and his cousin were both a little hard to ignore, though, since they stood on the other side of six-three and were brawny men with muscles honed by hard

labor on the ranch they helped Grammy run, not to mention Troy's farrier business and their many hours of roping practice to compete in local rodeos.

"I couldn't see all the action, but did I assume correctly that you roped the steer?" the woman asked as they walked toward the food vendors.

"I did. I'm just sorry I didn't catch that critter before he knocked you down."

She shrugged as though it was something commonplace. "Not the first time I've had a steer take me out. Probably not the last."

Curious, he stared at her, hoping she'd say more about herself. He realized he probably should ask a question if he wanted to continue to hear her voice. "Did you show steers when you were younger?"

"No. I was more into the 4-H and FFA projects that kept me inside and out of the scorching sun. My fair skin burns so fast, it is ridiculous. My brother showed steers, though. His first year in FFA, he had a steer that was way too big and wild for him to handle. He hadn't even made it into the arena to show it when the steer took off running, dragging Jay behind him through the dirt and manure. It was hilarious and scary. I shouldn't have, but I laughed the whole time I helped him get the steer back under control."

She glanced over at him, and Troy felt his heart skip a beat. Man alive, that smile of hers was something.

He gave his brain a mental kick to keep the conversation going. "I take it he recovered enough to show again the next year."

"Sure did. Jay took first place two years running." Her honeyed voice held a note of pride.

Troy scrambled through his thoughts for something else to keep her talking. "Are you close to your brother? Does he live around here?"

"Yes, and yes. At least for now. He's home from college for the summer. He'll return to Washington State University

for his senior year in a few weeks. Jay and his girlfriend have been working for me, so I'll miss having them around."

"That's great, that you're close, I mean. Does your husband help with your food truck?"

"Nope. Never been married, and I don't have time for dating. My one and only focus right now is my food truck and saving money to open a restaurant in Portland. According to my older sister, I'm going to die alone with a house full of kitchen equipment."

Troy grinned. "How many siblings do you have?"

"Just the two. Robin is the oldest and thinks she knows everything about everything. She never hesitates to express her opinions on any given topic. In fact, she was the one I was talking to when the steer caught me by surprise. He saved me from having to hang up on her." She blew out a long breath. "Sorry. I sometimes say things that are better kept to myself."

"Don't give it another thought. My cousin is the same way about saying whatever pops into his head. In fact, my grandmother is constantly telling him he needs a filter."

The woman laughed, and the sound rang in his ears like Christmas bells—a joyous sound that seemed both precious and wondrous.

Disturbed by his thoughts and his interest in the fascinating female, especially when he didn't have time for the nonsense of dating, Troy tried not to inhale her enticing scent or notice the way she seemed to exude spunk as they neared the food trucks.

"This is me," she said, motioning with her elbow to a food truck that bore a retro-appearing logo that read "Bud's Spuds." The restored vintage truck with its pale blue and white color scheme, red wheels, and offset headlights looked like something that might have once delivered milk or bread way back in the 1950s.

"No way. You're the tater tot lady?" Troy blurted as his mouth watered, thinking of the delicious food he'd eaten from her truck at the Kennewick fair last year.

She grinned at him as she set the boxes on an upended milk crate and unlocked the door. “That’s me. Have you eaten at my food truck before?”

“Yeah, I have,” Troy said, wondering who had waited on him the previous year. It certainly hadn’t been this gorgeous woman with the unforgettable smile. “Last year, in Kennewick. The thing you made with chocolate ice cream and candy was out of this world.”

She grabbed the boxes and slid them inside the truck, then stepped back so he could set the cooler on the floor. “Thanks. I’m glad you enjoyed it. I should warn you, it’s not on my menu this year. That was one of my dozens of mistakes. It was far too labor-intensive to make and hard to serve, and I only made a few pennies of profit on it. I’ve totally revamped my menu.”

“So, no ice cream?” Troy tried not to sound disappointed, although he’d hoped to come across the food truck with the outrageous ice cream treat again this summer.

She gave him a long look, then grinned. “I do have ice cream, just not that dish. Come back this afternoon, and I’ll give you a sample on the house as a thank you for helping me.”

“You don’t have to do that, miss. It was my pleasure.” Troy took a step back, but the woman grabbed onto his hand and held it between both of hers.

The electrical shock was still there, leaving him pondering what was happening to him. Maybe he was coming down with something, although he was never sick. Maybe he was having a heat stroke, although it was still early and not even yet up to eighty degrees.

“Please come back later. By the way, I’m Lark. Lark Gibson.”

Lark. Somehow, the name fit her to perfection. She looked like a free spirit—one who could fly circles around him.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Gibson. I’m Troy Lucas, although I often answer to ‘hey you’ too. If you need help, just ask around. Most of the fair volunteers over by the animals know me.”

“I’ll be fine, but thank you. Please, call me Lark. I’ll look forward to seeing you later, Troy.”

He tipped his hat to her and strode away, wondering how his world could shift off-kilter in just a matter of minutes. If he closed his eyes, would it right itself?

Somehow, he instinctively knew meeting Lark Gibson had changed everything.

Chapter Two



Lark watched the cowboy walk away from her food truck. Her gaze fastened to the blue jeans molded to his impressive physique. He was a big guy—tall, muscled, and brawny—but there was a gentleness about him, a kindness, that his quiet demeanor failed to hide.

Troy Lucas. A good, strong name for a man who appeared to be good and strong.

The way he'd hefted her cooler like it weighed nothing confirmed her assumption that the muscles bulging and bunching beneath the cotton sleeves of his western shirt weren't just for show.

He didn't strike her as a cowboy wanna-be type. He wore his hat and boots with too much familiarity and ease for them to be anything other than an extension of the man himself.

Despite the warning bells loudly proclaiming her need to stay away from men, particularly good-looking virile cowboys, something about the reserved stranger piqued her interest and made her look forward to seeing him that afternoon.

She leaned against her food truck and watched another cowboy jog up to Troy and thump him on the back as the two of them headed toward the beef barn.

Lark blew out a long breath, wishing she had the time and interest for simple things like dating. At the rate she was going, she might make something of herself a year or two before it was time to retire.

This morning was a prime example of how badly she needed to get her act together. She had forgotten to set her alarm and had already been running late when she'd dashed by the store to get more ice and napkins. She'd been halfway to Hermiston when she'd realized she'd forgotten her bank bag and had to run back to her rental in Richmond, Washington, to pick it up.

She'd arrived at the fairgrounds far later than intended and felt a sense of urgency to reach her food truck to get ready for the lunch crowd. Lark had known she should have made two if not three trips out to her SUV to carry in her supplies, but she'd convinced herself she could pack it all in one trip. By the time she'd stacked the boxes on the cooler, she'd thought she might stagger under the weight of it all, but she'd managed to pick up the load and carry it while listening to her big-mouth sister warn her, again, how her "silly little food business" was doomed to fail.

Robin was only three years older than Lark but had deemed herself queen of Gibson Farms, a potato farm that had been in their family since 1963. While Robin thought everyone should listen to every word she said, she annoyed their parents nearly as much as she did Lark and their brother, Jay. The only person who seemed to be able to put up with Robin was her husband, Danny. Lark adored her brother-in-law, considering him a genuinely nice guy, but she thought he might be striving for sainthood to put up with Robin.

Lark had been absently listening to her sister complain about the latest daycare where she took her two young sons as she'd rushed across the parking lot and into the fairgrounds. Since Robin had insisted on working in the Gibson Farms office instead of caring for her boys a year ago, there had been

an endless string of daycares and babysitters that didn't live up to her unreasonable expectations.

Lark had been insulted when Robin had tried to force her into taking over babysitting duties upon her return to her family's home near Pasco a year and a half ago. She loved her little nephews with all her heart, but potty training and watching endless episodes of educational cartoons was not how she envisioned her future.

"Like what you see?" a male voice asked from behind Lark, startling her so badly she screeched in surprise and jumped a foot in the air.

Jay laughed as he carried a huge bag of red and white paper food trays shaped like little boats into the food truck. "Caught you watching that cowboy, sis. Who is he?"

Lark shrugged, feigning disinterest as she stepped into the food truck. "He came to my rescue when a steer got loose and plowed into me. I was flat on the ground with the wind knocked out of me and the stupid cooler holding me down. I cut my leg in the process."

Jay swiveled around and gave her a concerned glance. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine. I was carrying everything at once and listening to our dear, sweet sister chatter away on the phone. You know how frustrating and distracting she can be. Anyway, I looked up in time to see a pair of hooves coming at me. I ducked, but the steer hit the cooler and knocked it out of my hands. I fell backward, and everything landed on top of me. I had an extra paring knife in my pocket since I forgot to pack it in the truck yesterday." She took the knife out of her pocket and set it in the sink, then hiked up the leg of her shorts. The cut wasn't deep. She wet a paper towel and wiped away the blood, then treated it with antibiotic cream and bandaged it.

Jay started putting away the supplies she'd brought and glanced over his shoulder at her. "Tell me more, Lark."

"More? About what? I told you all there is to know about the runaway steer."

Jay shook his head as he filled the napkin dispensers. “I don’t care about that. Tell me about this cowboy who caught your eye.”

“He didn’t catch my eye,” she huffed. Her protest seemed a little rushed and forced even to her.

When her brother chuckled, she knew he was aware of her interest in her cowboy-hat-wearing hero.

“Fine,” she admitted. “He may have earned a second glance.”

“Or fourth, from the way you were studying him.” Jay looked over his shoulder at her. “Admit it, you like him.”

Lark shot a hair band at her brother. “I’m not admitting anything, bro. I just met him. I don’t know enough about him to like or dislike him.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Jay muttered.

“What time will Rachel be here?” Lark asked, changing the subject.

“Rach said she’d be here a few minutes before eleven and will stay until we close tonight.”

Rachel and Jay had been dating since their senior year of high school. The two college students had agreed to help Lark all summer for a percentage of the profits. It had worked out well for all three of them. Lark was going to have to hire replacements for them to finish out the food truck season, but she hadn’t even started looking for anyone. New hires were one more thing to add to her ever-expanding list of things to take care of soon.

However, she had enough on her already full plate to keep her mind occupied without worrying about hiring two new staff members.

Lark picked up the hair band and stepped back outside, quickly French braiding her hair to keep it contained before she reentered the food truck.

After washing her hands, she turned her attention to prepping food. Their truck wouldn’t get busy until later in the

morning. Since she had access to all the potatoes she wanted and they were quality spuds raised by her family, her food truck featured tater tots. Rather than fry them in grease, she air-fried the tots that she made by hand. With her own special blend of seasoning, they had a unique flavor and tasted far fresher than anything purchased in the freezer section of a grocery store.

People could order their tater tots plain or with a variety of toppings. Lark liked to think she offered a hint of international flair since the toppings included everything from Italian, Cuban, Mexican, German, and Hawaiian to Texas-inspired options as well as her version of a patty melt.

For sweets, she offered two selections. Spuddy Bites were a candy made from coconut and shaped to look like tater tots before being rolled in cocoa powder. The second dessert, the Arctic Spud, was a ball of vanilla ice cream that was shaped to look like a baked potato before it was also rolled in cocoa powder and topped with whipped cream. A small shortbread cookie served as a faux pat of butter. If people wanted a loaded Arctic Spud, she added a sprinkling of fresh mint cut into tiny pieces and candied orange peel to mimic the appearance of chives and cheddar cheese. Candied bacon crumbles were sprinkled on top. The ice cream “potato” was served in a pool of chocolate syrup.

Every single day the two desserts had been on the menu, they’d sold out of them, regardless of how many she prepared. Once a week, she rented a commercial kitchen for half a day, paying by the hour. She worked at a frantic pace to prepare the tater tots and desserts along with the meats used in toppings. Preparing the food ahead of time was the only way she was able to keep up with customer orders.

Jay and Lark fell into the comfortable rhythm they’d developed over the summer of working together. They had a few early customers who wanted a bottle of water or a soda, and two who ordered bacon-wrapped tots to carry them through until lunch.

Rachel arrived in a rush a few minutes before eleven, and Lark settled into the routine of cooking tater tots as fast as she

could in the commercial air fryers she'd installed in the food truck.

A lull finally arrived at half past two. Lark sent Jay and Rachel to the bank to make a deposit and bring back smaller bills, giving them a break before the evening rush. While they were gone, she prepped toppings and ate the salad she'd made for her lunch between helping customers.

She sat on a stool with her mouth full of spinach, grilled chicken, and juicy strawberries when a masculine voice made her senses snap to attention.

“How's it going?”

Chewing furiously with a napkin held in front of her mouth, she hopped off the stool, swallowed, and hoped she didn't have anything stuck in her teeth as she greeted Troy Lucas.

He looked overheated and dusty as he offered her a tentative smile, as though he wasn't sure if he was welcome. Despite the fact he'd obviously been working hard, she caught a whiff of a pleasant, woodsy aroma and inhaled deeply before she realized what she was doing.

Snatching her composure together, she offered him a friendly smile. “Hey, you. It's going well. How are things over with the 4-H and FFA kids? Any more animals decide to plot an escape route and break free?”

He chuckled and tipped the hat back on his head. Lark caught a glimpse of dark brown hair. His blue eyes sparkled with mirth as he shook his head. “Nope. No more escapees, at least not that I'm aware of. I only helped over there until one.”

“What did you do after that?”

“Put shoes on a horse that somehow lost one this morning. I work part-time as a farrier. It helps pay the bills.”

Lark smiled at him. “That's so cool. Dad has used the same farrier for as long as I can remember. I used to like to watch him when he'd come to shoe the horses. It's hard work.”

“I don’t mind it,” he said with a shrug she thought made him seem humble.

“Did you have lunch?” she asked, hoping the topic of food would help him relax and feel more at ease around her. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” He glanced at her menu board and pointed to one of her popular items. “If it’s not any trouble, could I get a patty melt and a large Dr Pepper?”

“You bet you can.” Lark smiled at Troy, then set about making his order. While she cooked two hamburger patties on a hot griddle, she smashed tater tots beside them. When the meat was ready, she layered cheese over the tots, added the hamburger patties, and more cheese, then topped it all off with a second smashed layer of tots. She slid the gooey entrée into a paper tray, then added a dollop of sour cream, a generous helping of bacon crumbles, and a sprinkling of chopped parsley for color.

“Here you go,” she said, handing Troy the tray. Their fingers connected, and Lark fought to ignore the tingle generated by the innocent touch.

When he’d first held out his hands to help her up earlier, she’d felt like something forceful had jolted through her when their fingers touched. It had happened again when she’d shaken his hand in introduction, and now as their fingers brushed. She’d never experienced that with anyone else, and the fact that this cowboy had that effect on her left her rattled.

She filled a large cup with ice and his soda, trying not to let his impact on her sensory system throw her off. “If you aren’t in a rush, come sit for a minute,” she said, walking to the back of the food truck.

Troy appeared outside the door when she opened it but didn’t look like he planned to stay. “I don’t want to keep you, Lark,” he said, taking a step back.

“I could use some fresh air. If anyone comes to place an order, we’ll hear them.” She pointed to the cooler that rested

near the steps in the grass. “Have a seat. I’ll get some napkins and my lunch.”

She ducked back inside and grabbed her half-eaten salad along with a handful of napkins. When she returned outside, Troy stood exactly where she’d left him. She handed him all but one of the napkins, then settled onto the truck steps, using them as a seat.

Only after she’d taken a seat did Troy sink onto the cooler and stretch out his long legs. He removed his hat and bowed his head, offering a silent word of thanks for his meal, leaving her both shocked and impressed. At first glance, she envisioned him more as a guy who would sit at a corner table in a bar and drink alone until the place shut down on a Saturday night than warming a church pew on Sunday morning.

“So, tell me about you. I think you mentioned a cousin and a ranch.” She took a bite of her salad and waited for him to speak. The way he studied her made her question if he thought she had arrived on earth from an alien species. He forked a bite of his food and slowly chewed, like he needed time to gather his words.

He cleared his throat, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and toyed with the plastic fork in his hand before he cast a glance her way. “Not much to tell, Miss Lark. I’m just a cowboy doing his best to make a living and help my grandmother keep our family ranch running. It’s on the Washington side of the border, thirty-some miles from here. Grammy volunteered me and my cousin to lend a hand to the kids with their critters this morning.”

Lark felt her eyebrows hike upward. “I can tell at a glance there is much more to you than that, cowboy.” She grinned at him. “From what little I’ve observed, you are a nice person, Troy Lucas. You care about people, or you wouldn’t have been here so early helping the kids with their animals. You also respect your grandmother, or you wouldn’t have been here so early helping the kids with their animals.” She smirked at him, hoping he caught her bad attempt at a joke.

“Grammy has earned my respect many times over,” he said solemnly, then grinned. “Besides, Truitt and I would have come even if she hadn’t insisted. It’s fun to help the kids figure things out, and I was planning on being here anyway. My cousin and I are also team ropers, and we’ll be competing today.”

“So, you rodeo, ranch, do farrier work, lend a hand to 4-H kids, and rescue women too dumb to get out of the way of a charging steer. Do you get much time for sleep?”

“Nah. Sleep is overrated, isn’t it?” He smiled, and Lark felt utterly charmed. The warmth of it—the boyishness in it—turned Lark’s limbs into limp noodles.

She took in his deep blue eyes, a short nose with a bump on the bridge like it had been broken, and a full masculine chin covered by a growth of scruff. She hadn’t just imagined Troy Lucas was an entirely good-looking man when he’d helped her earlier. If anything, he was even more handsome than she’d recalled. In fact, with those broad shoulders and wide chest, he looked like the kind of man who could carry any load with ease.

The attraction to this cowboy she felt simmering beneath the surface was exactly the reason why she needed to remain aloof and keep her distance from him. Men were a distraction she had no time for now. Not during her busy summer season. After her last disastrous relationship, maybe not ever. She wasn’t certain her heart could withstand more abuse from a guy who seemed nice and turned out to be a low-down skunk instead.

However, Troy didn’t seem anything like Mylan Dumas. In the two years since things had ended so badly with Mylan, she’d gained skills in reading people and their motives. Or at least she liked to think she had. It was still hard to trust her judgment when it came to men, especially those who laid on the charm.

However, Troy didn’t strike her as the type to have a hidden agenda. He simply seemed happy to enjoy the food she’d prepared.

Mindful that men like Troy Lucas were a rarity, she concluded she'd probably have better odds of winning the lottery than running into someone exactly like him again.

In spite of her unwanted curiosity about the man, or perhaps because of it, she would enjoy this meal with him, then send him on his way. She doubted she'd see him again, anyway. Not with all the people milling around the fair and the variety of food booths available. Surely, he wouldn't eat tater tots every day that he was in attendance. He might not even return tomorrow.

The thought of not seeing him again created an ache in her chest, one she purposely ignored as she forked another bite of salad and watched as Troy enjoyed his patty melt.

"You make the best food, Lark. I've never tasted tater tots like these."

"That's because I use only the finest quality potatoes, make the tots from scratch, and mix them with my own special blend of seasoning."

Troy gave her a glance as he took another bite. "Where do you get the potatoes?"

"My family raises potatoes. They've been potato growers forever, I think, but in 1963 they moved to this area. Ever hear of Gibson Farms?"

Troy wiped his mouth on a napkin and nodded. "Sure have. You're one of *those* Gibsons?"

The way he stressed "those" made her wonder what he'd heard about her family. The local newspaper and television stations had covered their fiftieth-anniversary celebration and the grand opening of a new packing warehouse three summers ago. Gibson potatoes were in every grocery store within a hundred-mile radius, and in many throughout the Pacific Northwest.

"By *those*, if you mean the Gibson family who raises potatoes, then yes, I'm one of them," she said in a cool tone. Did he infer there was something wrong with being a Gibson?

If that was his intention, her cowboy hero was teetering on the edge of the pedestal where she'd placed him that morning.

He nodded slowly. "I didn't mean anything by my comment. It's just that everyone around here has heard of Gibson Farms. Grammy only buys Gibson potatoes, claiming they are far superior to the others carried in the grocery store. It's cool you come from such a successful farm family. Is the food truck part of the farm publicity or something?"

"No. Bud's Spuds is all me. If you ask my mother, she'll tell you I inherited my dad's stubbornness. My father would tell you I inherited my mother's independent streak. The combination means I do my own thing, make my own way, instead of working for my parents."

He offered her an approving look. "I can understand and respect that. Is Bud your dad's name?"

"My grandpa's name was Bud. He taught me everything he knew about potatoes, and my grandmother was an amazing cook. She taught me how to make tater tots, although the seasonings were something I came up with later. Anyway, when I decided to open a food truck, I wanted to honor them, so I dubbed it Bud's Spuds and used Grandma's recipe for the base of most everything I sell."

"I'm glad you opened the truck. The food really is amazing." Troy stood and tossed his empty tray into the garbage can located between Lark's truck and the one parked next to it that sold giant cookies and fruit-infused lemonade. "What do I owe you for that?"

"Nothing. I told you it's in thanks for helping me this morning, but I have something else to give you before you go. Don't run off." Lark hopped up and hastened inside the truck. She quickly assembled one of her ice cream desserts, adding an extra squirt of whipped cream to the top. Troy didn't strike her as the type of guy to appreciate mint and orange peel, so she also left off the candied bacon. She returned to the back door of her truck and handed him the tray. "Let me know what you think of that."

“I think it looks fantastic. Is that vanilla ice cream in there?” he asked, using the spoon in the tray to nudge the split in the fake potato open wider.

“Sure is. Vanilla ice cream rolled in cocoa powder, whipped cream, chocolate sauce, oh, and a shortbread cookie to look like a pat of butter.”

When he grinned at her, she felt slightly lightheaded and grabbed onto the door frame for support. What was this cowboy doing to her? Maybe she’d worked too hard and just needed a little more fresh air.

“What do you call this?” he asked, digging his spoon into the ice cream for a bite.

“The Arctic Spud. The next time you stop by, you’ll have to try Spuddy Bites. They’re made of coconut candy rolled in cocoa powder.”

He touched his finger to his hat brim, then started backing away. “I’ll look forward to it, Lark. Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for helping me this morning.”

He looked like he wanted to say something more, but he turned around and strode off, disappearing into the jostling crowd.

Before Jay caught her gawking after Troy again, Lark hustled back inside the food truck, letting her thoughts linger on the sweet cowboy who’d been nothing at all like she’d anticipated.

Chapter Three



“Who’s ready for the watermelon seed-spitting showdown?” Cooper James’ mic carried his question across the rodeo arena. The rodeo barrelman could always be counted on to bring a high level of energy, excitement, and a healthy dash of crazy to every rodeo performance.

Troy and Truitt stood with several friends behind the chutes, waiting for their turn to rope. The saddle bronc riding had yet to begin, and they’d rope after that. Cooper seemed to find innovative ways to fill the gap between events and keep the crowd engaged.

“This ought to be good,” Truitt said, leaning his elbows on a gate. “Who do you suppose he talked into his nonsense today?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad it isn’t us.” Troy had been dragged into Cooper’s shenanigans more times than he wanted to count.

“Cooper! What goofball goings-on are you planning now?” the rodeo announcer’s voice boomed over the crowd.

“Nothing goofball about it,” Cooper said, shaking a finger toward the announcer. “It’s as easy as can be. My son is gonna come out here and demonstrate.”

Troy watched as Alex Cooper ran out into the arena with a slice of watermelon held in his hands. The little boy wasn’t yet four, but he seemed to idolize his daddy, dressed in the same athletic bull fighter outfit as Cooper, with his face painted in the same pattern.

“Howdy, Alex,” the announcer said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

The child nodded to the announcer, took a bite of the melon, then spit out a seed. It fell a few feet away in the arena dirt.

“Good job, Alex!” the announcer encouraged. “Give that little clown a hand, folks!”

The crowd clapped and cheered as Alex removed his cowboy hat and waved it in the air.

“See, easy as anything,” Cooper said, motioning toward a gate where a woman appeared holding a tray full of watermelon slices. “Now, my gorgeous assistant will give our contestants a piece of melon and we’ll see how far they can spit a seed. The one who spits the farthest wins a fifty-dollar gift certificate for Lasso Eight clothing purchased at any Sinclair store location.”

“Since when did you talk your wife into working as your assistant, Coop? For those of you who don’t know, that pretty lady down there is Cooper’s wife, Paige,” the announcer said.

Paige smiled but didn’t look particularly pleased with the attention. From what Troy had observed over the years, she preferred to stay out of the limelight, even if she was a beautiful woman. Paige and Ashley Nash, who was married to one of the world-champion tie-down ropers competing at the rodeo, were business partners in an advertising and promotions company. Sinclair Industries was their biggest client, and the owner of the business, Jon Sinclair, was a big rodeo fan. The

man sponsored several competitors, including a few of Troy's friends.

"Here come our contestants," Cooper said, motioning for a dozen children to run into the arena. Troy recognized the Morgan and McGraw children, along with Livy Nash, Ashley's niece, but he had no idea to whom the rest of the youngsters belonged.

Paige handed all the kids a slice of watermelon, then Cooper and Alex moved back out of spitting distance.

"On your mark," Cooper called, "get set, and spit!"

The crowd laughed as one little girl spit out the mouth full of melon she'd taken, then stomped out of the arena with the big purple bow on top of her head bobbing with each step. The others were spitting seeds as fast as they could.

"And stop!" Cooper said, taking Alex's hand in his as the two of them ran along the area where the seeds landed. "We have a winner! The best seed spitter here today is Gideon Morgan! Congrats, Gid!"

The crowd cheered and the boy ran over to Cooper to shake his hand. Cooper handed him an envelope with the gift certificate, and Gideon raced out of the arena. Tate Morgan looked like he was about to pop the snaps right off his shirt as he congratulated his son.

When Gideon pointed to one of the younger children who'd competed, one who looked like he could use some new clothes, Troy wasn't at all surprised to see the boy hand over the gift certificate with a shrug, then run off with his sister and the McGraw youngsters.

"They're nice kids," Truitt observed beside him.

"They are," Troy agreed. "But then, they have nice parents."

Truitt nodded. "That they do." He pushed away from the fence. "It's about time for us to go warm up, isn't it?"

"Yep." Troy fell into step with Truitt. Their horses were saddled and ready, but Troy checked everything, including the

cinch twice before he swung onto the back of Indy. He'd raised the American quarter horse from a colt and trained the animal himself. Because of that, he felt a special connection to Indy he'd never experienced with his other mounts.

Truitt rode Gunner, a brother to Indy. They'd gotten him when Gunner was a year old, but he was nearly as good a horse as Indy, although Truitt would claim he was better. Indy was taller and heavier than Gunner, having the extra power needed to turn the steer after it was roped. Gunner was quick and agile, able to follow the steer and react to its moves, even when it turned on a dime.

They walked the horses over to a practice arena to warm up. Before long, they could hear the announcer getting the crowd excited for the team roping event.

Troy had started team roping in high school, and his dream had been to become a world champion roper. His first team roping partner had been someone he'd met through FFA when they were both in their senior years of high school. Roger Hamilton had a rare talent for roping and Troy had been flattered when Roger had suggested they work as a team. It hadn't taken long for them to qualify for their Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association cards, and once they'd earned them, they'd never looked back.

They had competed together for a few years, with Roger as the header and Troy as the heeler and were close to making it to the rodeo finals. Then Troy's grandfather had been diagnosed with cancer, and Troy had dropped out of the rodeo circuit to return to the ranch. Although he'd been hurt by how quickly Roger had taken on a new partner, Troy had understood.

He missed life on the rodeo circuit and the thrill of competing, but he knew his place was at the ranch with his family. One day, he and Truitt had decided to rope just for fun. Troy had shifted from a heeler to a header. The first time he and Truitt had practiced, everything had clicked between the two of them and their horses. It didn't take long for them to qualify for their PRCA cards, and they'd been competing

together for the past three years at all PRCA-sanctioned rodeos in their area.

Between ranching and his farrier business, Troy didn't have time to be gone for weeks at a time. But because he'd given up his dreams to come home to Dusty Hills Ranch, Troy's grandmother did her best to make sure he and Truitt had time in August and September to compete in regional rodeos. Troy knew it was a gift given in love that allowed him to recapture the excitement he'd once felt on a weekly basis.

By planning ahead, Troy and Truitt had entered nearly every rodeo taking place within a two-hundred-mile radius of the ranch after the wheat harvest was in, driving home between rodeos to help Grammy.

He and Truitt didn't compete just because they enjoyed it, which they admittedly did. They also competed in the hope of earning a little extra money to put toward improvements at the ranch that would make life easier for all of them, but especially their grandmother.

A deep-seated fear lingered in the recesses of Troy's mind and heart that his grandmother was going to work herself to death and he'd one day find her collapsed in the barn or out in her garden.

Neither Troy nor Truitt could bear the thought of life without Grammy in it. She'd been the one who raised them, loved them, guided them, encouraged them, and taught them what they needed to know to be good men.

Troy couldn't think about that now. He needed to focus on making a solid catch. With intention, he shoved away thoughts of the ranch and his grandmother, of winnings, even the vision of Lark Gibson with her flaming red hair contrasting against the grass this morning. He turned his attention to feeling the rope in his hand, calming his breath, and winning tonight's team roping event.

Truitt gave him a questioning look as they rode up to the arena.

“Everything okay?” Truitt asked as they waited for their turn to compete.

“Everything’s fine, Tru.”

His cousin grinned at him. “Don’t suppose that grin you’ve worn all day has anything to do with the red-headed tater tot queen you met this morning?”

Troy scowled at Truitt. “No, it doesn’t. And I haven’t been grinning all day.”

Truitt laughed. “You sure have. Doris asked if you had indigestion or were coming down with something. She wasn’t sure what was wrong with your face.”

A few of the cowboys around them chuckled, making Troy’s scowl deepen.

“Head in the game, man,” Truitt said as they moved into the box, ready to compete.

Troy settled a little deeper into the saddle, tugged down his hat, and glanced over at Truitt. His cousin appeared ready to go, so Troy nodded his head. The chute opened, and the steer raced out. Troy watched as the steer reached the end of the rope that would fall away, then zoomed forward, making it past the first obstacle of not breaking the barrier and getting a ten-second penalty.

Troy could catch the steer around the horns or the neck, or with the rope around the neck and one horn and stay within rodeo regulations. He swung the loop and released it, watching it fly through the air and land in a perfect catch around the steer’s horns.

With rapid movements borne from hours and hours of practice, he dallied the rope around the horn of the saddle and turned Indy to the left, glancing back to see the steer following as it ran.

Truitt tossed his loop and caught the steer around the hind legs, then dallied tight. Troy turned Indy to face the steer as they pulled out the slack, and the clock stopped. The official waved the flag, and they waited for their time to be announced after releasing the steer.

“Look at that score, folks!” the announcer said. “If you think you’re seeing double, it’s just the Lucas boys come out to play. Would you believe those two are cousins and not twins? It’s true! Let’s give Troy and Truitt a big hand for taking the top score so far tonight!”

Troy grinned at Truitt and gave him a fist bump before he glanced into the stands. Their grandmother sat next to Doris and waved at them, wearing a proud smile. Truitt blew her a kiss, causing Cooper James to offer commentary about who was on the receiving end of his affections.

“There are plenty of single ladies closer to your age, Truitt,” Cooper teased as he spoke into his mic for the whole crowd to hear. “I know for a fact Miss Doris is a happily married woman.”

The crowd laughed, and so did Truitt as he waved his hat and rode out of the arena. Troy would have died of embarrassment if it had been him, but his cousin always seemed to take things like that in stride.

“Great job out there, Tru. We might even win tonight.” Troy grinned at his cousin as they waited to see who won the event. When the winners were announced, they happily accepted their second-place prize for the evening.

As they rode toward their horse trailer, they gave each other a high five.

“You did good, man,” Troy said, thumping Truitt on the shoulder as they dismounted.

“You, too.” Truitt loosened his cinch. “We’ve got to make the next five weeks really count if we want to take home some prize money. What time do you want to head home?”

Aware of how much his cousin wanted to linger and be in the thick of the excitement with their friends after the rodeo, Troy tipped his head toward the arena. “Why don’t you see if Grammy wants to ride with me? You can drive her rig home whenever you’re ready if she’s agreeable.”

Truitt grinned. “Thanks, bro. I’ll call her right now.”

Troy loaded the horses while Truitt talked to their grandmother. Much preferring the quiet of the ranch to a rowdy atmosphere, Troy was more than willing to drive the horses and his grandmother home, allowing Truitt to stay out as late as he wanted.

“Well, what did she say?” Troy asked as he closed the back of the horse trailer.

“She wants to finish watching the bull riding, then she’ll be ready to go. I think there are only three riders left.” Truitt offered Troy a knowing grin. “You ought to see if you can find that cute redhead you ran into earlier. Do you think she came to the rodeo?”

“How would I know her evening plans? Do I look like her secretary?” Troy glowered at his cousin. “Now, get out of here before I change my mind and sleep while you drive us home.”

“I’m going. Thanks, Troy.”

Troy gave Truitt a playful shove toward the arena. “Yeah, yeah. Just make sure you’re home to help with the chores in the morning.”

Truitt turned to him with an appalled look as he backed up a few steps. “Have I ever stayed out that late?”

Troy rolled his eyes. “Only a dozen or so times.”

Truitt smirked, then raced off. Troy started for the bleachers, but people began swarming out of them, signaling the end of the rodeo. Rather than try to force his way through them like a fish swimming against the current, he leaned against a post and waited until he spied his grandmother with Doris, then hurried over to her.

“Oh, you boys did so good tonight,” Wendy Lucas said, giving him a big hug. “Congratulations, Troy.”

“Thanks, Grammy. Everything went like clockwork.”

Doris smiled at him. “You two boys make it look so easy. I suppose all that practice really does pay off.”

He shrugged. “And we have a good time doing it.”

“That’s a bonus,” Doris said, patting his arm. “Congrats to both of you. I suppose Truitt is off to have fun.”

“Yep. I’m just here to chauffeur Grammy home.”

Doris bumped his grandmother’s arm and waggled her snowy white eyebrows. “Lucky girl.”

Grammy laughed and hugged her friend, then looped her arm around Troy’s. “I’m beat, honey. Let’s head home.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Troy tipped his hat to Doris. “Do you want me to walk you anywhere, Miss Doris?”

“No, Troy, but thank you. Lester is waiting for me at the ticket booth, then we’re heading home.”

“Have a nice night, ma’am.”

Doris waved and scurried off in the opposite direction where her husband had been one of the volunteers who manned the ticket booth.

“It’s been a long day, Grammy. How did things go at the ranch?” Troy asked as he escorted his grandmother to his pickup and held the passenger door for her.

“Everything went well. I repaired that section of fence the heifers knocked down last week. If you have time tomorrow, we can move them back into that pasture.”

“Unless you volunteered me at the fair again tomorrow, I planned to work at the ranch all day.”

His grandmother raised an eyebrow and studied him for a long moment. “Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the fair? I heard from four different people that you made a new friend today.”

Troy assumed the four tattletales included Doris, Truitt, and two of his grandmother’s cronies who happened to see him walking away from Lark’s food truck after he’d eaten lunch there.

Bunch of gossiping busybodies.

Surely, they had more interesting topics than his befriending Lark. It wasn’t like he didn’t have any friends,

although Truitt seemed to have ten times as many. Troy had always been more about quality than quantity when it came to ... well, everything.

“Is the girl as pretty as I heard? Does she really have bright red hair?”

Troy’s grip on the steering wheel tightened as he drove away from the rodeo grounds. “Who said she was pretty or anything about her hair color? And it’s not bright red—more of a warm, rich ginger color.”

His grandmother’s eyes widened. “You don’t say. Well, Doris mentioned you helped her up after the steer knocked her down and that she has a lot of red curly hair. Truitt said she was pretty, at least from what he could see when she was in the food truck. And Marlene might have mentioned she has freckles on her nose, pale green eyes, and a heaping helping of spunk.”

The low, growling noise that came from Troy’s throat made his grandmother laugh.

“From that response, I’ll assume everything I heard today is true,” she said, reaching over and patting his arm. “Is she from Hermiston?”

“No. She’s a Gibson, of Gibson Farms. You know, the potato people.”

“Oh, my. So, she’s pretty and has money to spare, along with ambition and the ability to make delicious food with potatoes, one of your favorite things to eat. How about that?” Grammy eyed him. “She doesn’t sound like your type at all.”

Troy refused to fall into her trap and ignored the bait she tossed out. In his years of dating—or avoiding dating, which is more what he’d done the past few years—he didn’t think he had a type. All he required was for the girl to be nice and preferably not someone who liked to be the center of attention. Troy found it challenging to be with someone who constantly strove to be in the spotlight. He hated being anywhere near those shiny lights, much preferring to linger in the background.

Since his last girlfriend had made it clear she was tired of “dimming her shimmer” to be with him, they’d parted ways. Not that he had time for relationships, but he was reluctant to get involved with anyone again, afraid his desire to be out of the limelight might make someone else feel like he was trying to hold them back. He would never knowingly do that to anyone. How would he ever find a girl who made him feel like he was a blessing to her instead of a cross to bear?

Burdened by questions to which he had no answer and plagued by a bit of guilt over his past, he listened with one ear to his grandmother as she talked about people she’d seen at the rodeo.

Despite his intentions to block Lark Gibson from his mind, he couldn’t help but hope he’d run into her again.

Chapter Four



“I think she likes him,” Jay sing-songed in an annoying voice that made Lark want to shove an entire potato into his mouth.

Rather than succumb to the somewhat childish desire, she glared at her brother. “More shredding, less yakking.”

Jay laughed and bumped Lark’s arm with his elbow as he and Rachel helped her shred hundreds of boiled potatoes to make tater tots for the upcoming events that weekend. They planned to have the food truck at two farmer’s markets and a baseball game. Although they wouldn’t keep as busy as they would at a fair or rodeo, they still made a profit.

Besides, Lark had signed a contract to rent the commercial kitchen where they currently worked for half a day every Tuesday through the end of November, when she planned to park the food truck for the winter. Either she’d make enough profit to be able to move to Portland in the spring to pursue her dream of opening a restaurant there, or she’d be forced to give up on her cooking and—horror of all horrors—go to work for her family.

To ensure a job that entailed taking orders from her sister didn’t happen, Lark was doing everything she could to make

her food truck a success. If all went according to her plans, she'd be able to spend January and February working on her menu, making some changes to the food truck, and finding a place to live in Portland. She figured after a year or two of running her food truck in the big city, she'd be able to invest in a small space for a restaurant and build her career from there.

Today, she, Jay, and Rachel worked at a frenzied pace at the commercial kitchen, hoping to prepare enough food to carry them through the local fair and rodeo. It was a huge event for them, and they'd need every bit of food they could prep in advance to keep up with the demand from customers.

Lark had already baked dozens of little shortbread cookies to go with the Arctic Spud desserts. While the potatoes had boiled, she, Jay, and Rachel had made Spuddy Bites, which didn't take long to do. Once she had the tots in the ovens to bake, she would start cooking the meats she used in the toppings.

In truth, Lark had no idea how she would have managed her business without Jay and Rachel. They knew what to do without her having to ask. She hated to think of the fast-approaching day when they both would return to college. At least they'd be around to help her through the craziness of their local fair next week, one of the largest in the region.

Lark had listed an ad in the newspaper and with the employment office to try to find at least two new hires to begin training. She needed employees she could trust, who could work in a quick-paced environment and think on their feet. She was convinced finding anyone who could fill her list of preferred qualities, not to mention Jay's and Rachel's shoes, would prove impossible.

"Have you looked over the applications for our replacements?" Jay asked, as though he could read her mind.

"Not yet. I'm dreading it. You two are awesome and a big part of the reason the food truck has done so well this year. I keep thinking if I ignore the applications, you'll stick around."

"Aw, it's so nice to know you love us, sis." Jay made a ridiculous kissy face that caused all three of them to laugh.

“I’d be happy to go through the applications for you,” Rachel offered. “I could even narrow it down to the top five prospects if you like.”

“Okay. I’ll take you up on that, Rach, and thank you.” Lark felt one heavy burden lift off her shoulders. Ideally, she’d like to hire someone and have them start next week, when Jay and Rachel would be around to train them. “Just so we’re clear, let’s go over the food prep schedule again.”

After reviewing the details of who was responsible for preparing each item, they returned to forming the shredded potatoes mixed with Lark’s unique blend of seasoning into tater tots. She baked them in the big commercial ovens, froze them, then reheated them in the air fryers in the food truck, which gave them a nice crispy texture outside but kept them soft on the inside. Some people had commented they tasted more like little bites of baked potato than tater tots.

She thought that was one reason her food truck had been so popular. The other was that she didn’t have any competition. No one else in the region had a tater tot truck, and she hoped it stayed that way.

“Isn’t that right, sis?” Jay asked, giving her a questioning look.

Lark realized she’d been lost in her thoughts and completely missed whatever her brother had said.

“Sorry. My mind was wandering. What did you ask?”

Jay tossed Rachel a grin, then looked back at Lark. “I mentioned that you might want to take an evening or two off at the fair so you can go watch your cowboy at the rodeo.”

Lark stiffened and glowered at her brother. “He is not my cowboy. He’s not my anything.”

“Unless a guardian angel counts. You did say he helped you and carried the cooler for you, and kept offering to go get a medic if you needed it.” Rachel gave her a knowing smile. “He sounds like a nice guy, Lark.”

“He is.” Lark released a long, frustrated breath. She didn’t need her brother or his girlfriend playing matchmaker

for her. “I’m sure he’s perfectly nice, but you two know I have zero time for relationships right now. If we don’t hit our projected numbers at the fair and if I don’t do well at the events from now through October, you both know that means I’m going to have to postpone moving to Portland for a year and get a job for the winter, which I might do anyway, but I’d prefer to have the option, not make it a dire need. I’d rather work at the mall as Santa’s helper than listen to Robin at the office.”

Jay snickered. “Oh, come on. You don’t think a daily dose of her positivity wouldn’t cure all that ails you?”

Rachel tried to hide a laugh by pressing her face into her shoulder until Lark tossed a wacky smile her way. “Right. Let’s leave our sister, Miss Crazy Pants, out of the conversation for the rest of the day. Tell me about what classes you two are taking this semester.”

For the next three hours, Lark, Jay, and Rachel prepped food, chatted, laughed, and then cleaned up the kitchen before they packed the food out in trays to be transferred to the freezers in Lark’s tiny garage at the house she rented. It belonged to the mother of one of the women Lark’s mom had been friends with forever and they all referred to as Aunt Carol. After downsizing from a large home a decade earlier, Carol’s mother had lived in the cozy house until she’d moved into an assisted living facility a few years ago. The house was small, but it was in great condition and located on a quiet street not far from the city limits.

It was perfect for Lark, except for the lack of space in the kitchen to do much more than prepare a meal. That’s why she’d been so grateful when she’d discovered the commercial kitchen that rented their space by the hour or day.

“You should get another freezer,” Jay said as he helped carry in trays of tater tots and slid them into one of the two upright freezers.

“I know, Jay, but I’m already worried about blowing a breaker as it is. Even if that weren’t a concern, I’m not sure how I’d get another freezer in here.” Lark looked around the

cramped space. The only type of car that would fit in the garage would have to belong to circus clowns. A normal-sized vehicle wouldn't make it through the door.

Rachel, ever the planner, eyed the space and the freezers, then pointed out that if they shifted the biggest chest freezer between the two uprights, they would have room for another chest freezer in front of the garage door.

“If this weekend goes well, I'll consider it.”

Once everything was unloaded, Rachel took the folder of applications and waved as she and Jay left.

Exhausted, Lark went inside the house, took a shower, dressed in a comfy pair of lounge shorts and a tank top, and sat in the shade of her patio to watch the sun set.

Too tired to concentrate on anything, yet too fired up from all the work of prepping to rest, Lark took out her phone and did an online search for Troy Lucas.

A picture of him roping a steer popped up on her screen. She made it larger, studying the look of concentration on his face as he threw the loop. In the photo, the rope hovered above the steer's head, caught at the precise moment before Troy roped the animal.

Lark had never been interested in dating a cowboy. She'd gone out with enough country boys during her growing-up years to know she wasn't interested in a rural way of life.

Because of her fair skin that started to burn after five minutes in the sunshine, she'd spent a lot of her time as a young girl inside with her grandmother, who had seemed to always have room for one—or a dozen—more people at her dinner table.

Some of Lark's happiest childhood memories had been spent in the kitchen with her grandmother, learning to cook and trying out new recipes. Ellen Gibson had encouraged Lark to have fun in the kitchen and be creative.

When Lark had been barely fifteen, her grandma had passed away from kidney failure. From that point on, it seemed like the family had started to fall apart. Lark had taken

over cooking the big meals, making the recipes her grandmother had taught her, but the woman's passing had left a hole in the family that no one could fill.

Lark had distanced herself from her parents' expectations that she would go to college and study business and then eventually work for Gibson Farms. She'd set her sights on culinary school and moved to Seattle the summer she graduated from high school, full of naiveté and dreams. She'd found a job as a server in a restaurant, moved into an apartment with three other culinary students, and put herself through school.

When the opportunity had arisen for her to go to Paris, she swallowed her pride and asked her father for a loan to pay for the expenses.

He'd given her the money, along with a lecture about moving back home when things didn't work out like she planned. She'd glibly informed him she never intended to come back to the Tri-Cities area or their home on the farm located a few miles outside of Pasco.

One dark night, the rose-colored glasses she'd worn had been stripped away along with her dreams.

Lark sighed as she tucked away the hard memories and went inside the house. She poured a glass of watermelon lemonade, settled onto her couch, and turned on the television. Without even thinking of what she was doing, she flipped to a channel that covered rodeos around the country. She'd only been watching a few minutes when team roping was announced as the next event.

"I should go to bed," Lark muttered to herself but didn't move. Instead, she watched with eager anticipation as one team after another raced into the arena, ropes sailing through the air. A few missed catching the steer entirely. Four of them broke the barrier. She was just about to turn off the television when she heard the announcer say Troy's name.

She set the remote on the coffee table, leaned forward, and watched as Troy raced out of the box. He tossed his loop, and it settled perfectly around the steer's horns. A man she

assumed was his cousin roped the back legs and they pulled out the slack in their ropes as they faced each other. The clock stopped, and even Lark could tell they had a good score.

“These Washington cowboys are heading home in third place, folks. That’s nothing to sneeze at. Good job, team Lucas!” the announcer proclaimed.

The camera panned in on Troy and the other man. Their faces were shadowed by the hats they wore, but their body language said they were pleased by the outcome.

Lark had dated a few boys in high school who were on the rodeo team. She’d learned enough from them to know the basics of each event, even if she’d never really paid much attention to it.

“And you aren’t paying attention now, missy.” Lark turned off the television, gulped the last of her lemonade, and went to bed.

Instead of sleeping and getting the rest she needed, she kept envisioning the way Troy looked the day he’d leaned over her and asked if she’d had the wind knocked out of her. A light had shone in his amazing blue eyes that had been impossible to ignore, like a beam that had come from his soul.

Something about that cowboy refused to let her cast all thoughts of him aside as she fully intended to do.

Lark punched her pillow and rolled over, concluding she’d just have to work harder at blocking images of his warm smile and rugged good looks from her mind.

But perhaps one more night of letting him infiltrate her thoughts wouldn’t hurt anything. Lark smiled as she finally drifted into a peaceful slumber with visions of Troy floating through her dreams.

Chapter Five



“I saw your girlfriend today,” Truitt taunted as he helped Troy move an irrigation handline across the hayfield.

Troy glowered at his cousin as sweat poured down his back and stung his eyes. He was not in the mood for his cousin’s tormenting with the August heat beating down on them.

Since the day he’d met Lark, Truitt had made it his goal in life to drive Troy crazy teasing him about the woman he’d met in Hermiston being his girlfriend. There was absolutely zero possibility of that ever happening. Not only did Troy have no time or interest in getting his heart crushed again, but Lark Gibson was way, way out of his league. In rural circles, she was royalty. Her family had more money than he’d likely ever see in his lifetime.

However, the woman had intrigued him enough that he’d been unable to get her out of his thoughts, even if he hadn’t let on to Truitt or Grammy that she was firmly lodged there. At night, when he finally slid between the cool sheets of his bed, he pictured the twinkle of mirth in her eyes as she looked up at

him with her springy red hair spread out against the verdant green of the grass.

“Which girlfriend are you talking about? Blonde? A raven-haired beauty? Maybe that girl with the short brown hair you were making calf eyes at last week at the rodeo in Caldwell?” Troy asked, doing his best to sound flippant as he lugged another pipe through the knee-high hay. He could feel something crawling around in his left irrigation boot. He wiggled his toes, hoping it squished whatever was bumming a ride, and continued moving pipe.

Truitt tossed a handful of slimy mud at him. Troy ducked with a laugh.

“You know who I’m referring to, dude. The redheaded hottie with the tater tot truck. She was setting up at the fairgrounds when I was there this morning helping to get things squared away at the rodeo grounds.”

Troy didn’t say anything, refusing to give his cousin any ammunition he’d later fire at him. “Was Trevor King there?”

Truitt smirked. “He was. That guy is in love. He couldn’t stop talking about his pretty wife. Mykah showed up at noon to bring him lunch and stayed to eat with him. Can’t really blame Trevor for being proud of his wife. She is the whole package, man.”

“Whole package?” Troy’s left eyebrow inched upward, and he pretended to be confused. “I didn’t realize women came in half or quarter packages.”

Truitt looked like he considered swinging the pipe he carried and beaning Troy with it. “You know what I’m talking about. She is classy and smart, knows how to dress to impress, and carries herself well. She also seems to be kind and genuine. Remember hearing her sing last year at the boat races?”

“Nope, because I wasn’t at the boat races.”

Truitt’s expression showed he was sorting through his memories. “Oh, that’s right. You got called away on a farrier

job that morning and didn't go. She can really sing, Troy. She's the kind of gal anyone would be lucky to marry."

Troy agreed with Truitt. Mykah King was a lovely woman with a good heart. He'd gotten to know her a little last summer and found her to be sweet, beautiful, and kind.

Just to aggravate his cousin, though, he placed his hands on his hips after he connected the last pipe and tossed Truitt a disapproving frown. "Do I need to warn Trevor that you're out to steal his wife?"

A dark glower crossed Truitt's features. "No! I'd never give a married woman a second glance, and you know that. What's wrong with you? You're as crotchety as a cougar on a starvation diet. Speaking of starving, I can't wait for supper. None of the food vendors were open, so I skipped lunch and rushed back to help you as quickly as I could."

"And I'm grateful for that," Troy nodded to his cousin. "Let's go wash up. Grammy said she planned to make enchiladas for dinner."

Truitt jogged over to Troy and slapped his bare shoulder since they'd both tossed off their shirts when they'd started moving the pipe. When they reached the all-terrain vehicles they'd parked at the end of the field, Troy leaned against his and toed off his left boot. He dumped out bits of hay, two worms, and what was left of a tiny smooshed frog.

"That's gross," Truitt said, then took a long swig of water from the insulated water jug he'd brought along. He passed it to Troy, then tugged on his shirt.

Troy drained the cold water, yanked on his boot, then slid onto his ATV.

"Want to race?" Truitt asked, starting his machine and turning it around.

"Do I look like I'm still thirteen?" Troy grouched, then gunned his ATV and took off while Truitt shouted threats behind him.

They both were hooting with laughter when they pulled up by the house and parked in the shade of a big maple tree.

“Cheater!” Truitt accused as they walked across the backyard and up the porch steps.

Troy held open the door to the mudroom, then followed his cousin inside. The spicy scent of their grandmother’s enchiladas filled the air, making his stomach growl. He left his boots on a rubber mat by the door and his filthy shirt and socks on the floor.

“I didn’t cheat,” Troy said as the two of them sauntered down the short hallway into the kitchen.

“Who’s cheating who?” their grandmother asked as she glanced up from slicing garden-fresh tomatoes into a green salad.

“Who’s being true? And who don’t even care anymore?” Truitt sang the words to an old country song, and swung Wendy Lucas into a two-step around the island in the kitchen.

Grammy laughed, then popped him on the shoulder. “Did the two of you get into some locoweed when you were moving handlines?”

Truitt winked and kissed her cheek, then tipped his head toward Troy.

Troy shook his head, smiling at his grandmother and cousin. He loved to see them both happy and laughing. They needed more of that in their home and lives.

“No locoweed, Grammy.” Troy washed his hands at the kitchen sink, then carried the pan of enchiladas from the oven to the counter where they usually ate, while Truitt washed up. Neither of them bothered to put on a clean shirt since they had more work to do before they could call it a day.

The three of them sat on barstools at the counter and ate their dinner after Grammy offered a word of thanks for the meal. They discussed the work Troy and Truitt would see to before they called it a night, and plans for the following day.

“Don’t forget, Troy, you promised Mykah King that you’d participate in the Rodeo Day event at Creekdale tomorrow,” his grandmother said, glancing over at him.

Troy stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth, gooey cheese dripping in a trail toward his plate. “I’m glad you reminded me or I would have forgotten, Grammy. I need to be there by ten.”

“I’ll hold down the fort tomorrow,” Truitt offered, then looked to their grandmother. “Grammy, aren’t you planning to be at the fair tomorrow?”

“Yes. I promised Alice I’d be there to help with the 4-H textiles tomorrow. I’ll be gone a good part of the day.” Grammy dabbed at her lips with a napkin, then looked out the window over the kitchen sink. “We can enjoy a few days of fun. The hay isn’t ready to cut, and we wrapped up the wheat harvest a few weeks ago. If the cattle all stay where they belong, we shouldn’t have any trouble being gone more than usual this week.”

“It’s going to be tough to get the hay up between rodeos, though,” Troy said, thinking of all the work on the ranch that needed his attention. There were always fences to fix, equipment that needed to be serviced or repaired, and cattle to keep an eye on. The door on the barn listed to one side after the last windstorm. The freeze faucet down by the east corral was leaking again. A pile of tack needed to be mended and cleaned. Despite the broiling August heat, it wasn’t too early to start getting the ranch ready for winter.

But first, they needed to get through this week. The fair in Kennewick was their hometown event, and all three of them enjoyed attending. Troy knew his grandmother didn’t get to spend nearly as much time there reminiscing with her friends as she’d like. Truitt had volunteered to help with the rodeo setup, and Troy had promised to help in the beef barn on Thursday.

Troy would work late into the night and rise in the pre-dawn hours to get as much work done as possible if it meant his grandmother could have a few extra hours to enjoy herself.

Mentally making plans, he hurried to eat the rest of his dinner, thanked his grandmother for the meal, then rushed

outside to see how much work he could accomplish before it was too dark to see.

While Troy put a new sickle bar in the swather, Truitt rode out along a section of fence the heifers just couldn't seem to leave alone. Once Troy finished with the sickle bar and serviced the swather, leaving it ready to run next week, when they planned to start their last cutting of hay, he went through his farrier kit, making sure he had everything he'd need not only for the demonstration tomorrow, but also for any unexpected jobs that might pop up. It never failed that a horse would throw a shoe at the fair and emergency repairs would be needed.

He fixed the barn door with a headlamp fastened over his ball cap so he could see the hinges before he finally turned in for the night.

The next morning, he stumbled out of bed at half past three and hustled to get as many chores as possible crossed off his mental list before his grandmother arose. Truitt joined him sleepy-eyed and yawning at four.

"Are you sure you're awake enough to do any work?" Troy asked when Truitt tripped on a piece of pipe and would have fallen on his face if Troy hadn't stuck out an arm for him to catch himself on.

"I'm awake now," Truitt said, rubbing grit from his eyes.

By the time they returned to the house at seven, they'd accomplished more work than Troy had hoped to complete that morning. They'd even taken time to reset the gopher traps along the top of the hayfield where the destructive critters seemed to take great joy in digging holes and destroying the crop.

"You boys rolled out of bed early this morning," their grandmother called as they entered the mudroom and removed their wet, dirty irrigation boots. "Breakfast is ready. I made bacon."

"We could smell it all the way out to the barn, Grammy," Troy said, stepping into the kitchen and kissing his

grandmother's cheek. She looked more animated than usual, like she was excited to spend the day with her friends at the fair.

Breakfast was lively as they talked about some of the more colorful residents at Creekdale retirement home, where Troy would do the farrier demonstration.

Mykah King managed the facility and trained recruits from the Creekdale corporate headquarters there. Last year, when Trevor had been trying to win Mykah's affections, he'd rounded up a bunch of his friends to give the residents a glimpse into the lives of rodeo and rural people.

They'd set up booths and offered demonstrations a few days before the fair. Troy had even shown the steps involved in shoeing a horse. It had been a fun day with good food and great friends, even if some of the female residents got a little too friendly with their hands.

Last year, a feisty woman named Blanche had rubbed her hand over Troy's rump every time he bent over. He'd almost driven a horseshoe nail through his knee the first time she'd done it. Tally Taggart had told him to ignore the older residents they referred to as the 'golden grannies' and they'd move on to torment someone else.

Troy hoped the old gals were better behaved today, or he'd have to figure out a way to work so they couldn't get too close to him. Maybe he should take a few fence panels to set up so they couldn't reach him.

As soon as Troy finished the filling breakfast his grandmother had prepared, he hopped up and set his dishes in the dishwasher, then eyed Truitt. His cousin received his unspoken message as he set his dishes in the dishwasher, then started helping him set the kitchen to rights.

"We'll get the dishes, Grammy. Why don't you go get ready to head into town. I'm sure Alice wouldn't mind if you got there a little early." Troy smiled at the woman who'd raised him with a firm but loving hand.

She eyed him speculatively, as though she was trying to figure out what had come over him and Truitt since they rarely volunteered to clean up the kitchen, even if they were good about putting their dirty plates in the dishwasher.

“Are you sure?” she asked, sounding hesitant.

“Yep. Go on, Grammy. We’ve got this,” Truitt said, scrubbing the skillet she’d used to cook the bacon.

“Thank you, honey.” She kissed first Truitt’s, then Troy’s cheek. “You boys have a grand day. I’ll be back in time for dinner. If you both behave today, I’ll bring home barbecue from that place you like so well by the mall.”

“That sounds great, Grammy. Thank you.” Troy picked up a dish rag to wipe down the counters, then watched his grandmother leave the room with a spring of excitement in her step. He glanced over at his cousin. “Thanks, Tru. I just want Grammy to have a fun day without worrying about anything.”

“I get it. She needs more time to enjoy life instead of always taking care of us and the ranch.” Truitt dried the skillet and put it away. “I’m going to fix the fence next to the bull pasture this morning, then I’ll make sure the baler is ready for haying next week.”

Troy rinsed out the dish rag and draped it over the center divider of the sink. “Great. Thanks for staying home today, Tru. I know you’d rather be in the thick of things at the fair and rodeo.”

Truitt shrugged and hung the dish towel to dry on a hook by the sink. “You do it all the time. It’s no big deal. Besides, we both know I’ll want to stay out late this weekend. If you play your cards right, maybe you can spend some time with Miss Tater Tots.”

Troy tossed his cousin a glacial glare as he went outside to see to a few more tasks before he needed to leave for Creekdale.

Three hours later, he was bent over, shoeing a horse for Wyatt Nash at Creekdale with a dozen elderly residents

watching his every move when he felt someone rub a hand over his bum and down the back of his thigh.

Startled, he jerked, impaled his hand with a horseshoe nail, and turned around to glower at the golden granny named Blanche.

“It’s nice to see you again this year, Troy. You are such a handsome thing, aren’t you? Did I tell you about my granddaughter Miranda? She lives in California, you see, and she needs to find a good, strong man of her own.” Blanche squeezed his bicep and batted her sparse lashes at him.

Troy might have laughed if the whole situation didn’t leave him feeling oddly creeped out. Weren’t women her age supposed to behave themselves, not make advances on near strangers that weren’t appropriate at any age?

“Oh, you’re bleeding,” Marvella Hawkins said as she stepped between him and Blanche.

Aunt Marv, as she insisted everyone call her, was Trevor King and Tally Taggart’s eccentric aunt. She’d moved to Creekdale when Trevor had married Mykah last December. Marv dressed in clothes that spanned every era from her teen years to modern fashions, but she was sweet and basically harmless.

“Come with me, darling,” Marvella insisted.

Before he could refuse, the woman had latched onto his arm. She led him away from the booths and his friends as she marched toward the front entry of Creekdale.

“It’s nothing, Miss Marvella. I’ve had far worse.” Troy hated for anyone to make a fuss over him, and he certainly didn’t want to walk into the facility when he was dusty and dirty from shoeing a horse.

“Nonsense. You need to cleanse the wound and bandage it. We have an excellent nursing staff.” Marvella barged inside the lobby and turned loose of his arm long enough to shake a bony finger in his face. “You wait right here. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Troy took a handkerchief from his back pocket, wrapping it around the cut on his hand that bled profusely, although he was certain it wouldn't require stitches. At least it wasn't his roping hand. He and Truitt were competing tomorrow at the rodeo.

He removed his hat and nodded politely to two women he was sure were part of the golden grannies' gang of grabby octogenarians, subtly turning so his back faced a wall. If they were going to try and grab his backside, he'd at least make it hard for them to reach it.

Much to his relief, they disappeared through a doorway. Troy wondered how much noise Marv would make if he snuck outside and returned to his work. In the midst of his internal debate, he heard a gasp and looked over at Lark Gibson.

"Hey, you. What are you doing here?" she asked, walking over to him as she held a vase of flowers in one hand and a small paper sack that looked like it contained candy in the other.

"I'm helping with the rodeo demonstration out back." He motioned with his hat toward the door. "What about you?"

"I just dropped by to see my grandma's best friend. They knew each other all through school and were close even after they had grandchildren." Lark smiled at him, and he felt like his world shifted from monotone to bright, vibrant color.

Lark was even more beautiful than he'd allowed himself to remember. She wore mascara on her lashes today, accenting her incredible green eyes. Her hair, though, hung in long, springy curls around her face and down her back, making him long to bury his hands in it.

When he inhaled a breath meant to calm him, it carried her fragrance straight to his olfactory system. He tried to figure out how a simple thing like her soft scent could cause him to feel as though his brain was about to short-circuit.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Lark asked, glancing around the lobby.

“No. Yes.” Troy tried to swallow around the lump of nerves suddenly clogging his throat. “I hurt my hand, and one of the residents insisted I come inside. I think she went to get a nurse.”

“That explains the handkerchief wrapped around your palm.” Lark moved closer to him. “Do you need stitches? I could drive you to the hospital. It’s not far from here.”

“It’s not that bad. Honestly, a Band-Aid will probably do the trick. If I were anywhere but here, I wouldn’t have stopped working.”

Lark grinned and leaned closer to him. She lowered her voice, even though no one else was in the lobby. “The residents enjoy having young people around to dote on. Don’t deprive them of the joy they take in it.”

“I won’t.” Troy dredged through his scattered thoughts for something to say to keep Lark talking. He hadn’t seen her since the fair in Hermiston, even though she’d lingered in the corners of his mind. “How’s the tater tot business?”

“Fine, I think. I’m about to lose my two employees, so that’s been a bit of a challenge. They head back to college on Sunday, but I’m hoping to train at least one replacement this week.”

“Will you be at the fair?” Troy asked, wondering if his voice sounded as eager to her as it did to him.

“I will. You know, you never came back to try my Spuddy Bites when we were in Hermiston. You’ll have to stop by if you’re at the fair. Are you competing this week?”

“Tomorrow.” Troy cleared his throat. “Look Lark, I just wanted you to know how much ...”

Before he could finish his thought, Marv breezed into the room with the two older women who’d eyed him earlier as the door opened. Tally Taggart rushed through the entry doors, her face expressing her concern.

“Who’s dying, Aunt Marv?” Tally asked, giving her aunt a worried glance, before her gaze roved over the other two women.

“I couldn’t find the staff nurse, and poor Troy is going to bleed to death in the lobby if you don’t do something!” Marv said with her customary dramatic flair.

“Lark! Oh, it’s good to see you!” one of the old women exclaimed when she realized Troy wasn’t alone.

“Hi, Beulah. How are you?” Lark asked, hugging the old woman, then handing her the vase of flowers. Beulah clutched it to her like it was a prized treasure.

“I’m wonderful. Do you have a minute? Can you join us for a while? There are the most wonderful demonstrations outside today. Some of the women set up booths. There’s even one with Dew products.”

Lark looked like she was on the verge of saying she had to leave, but she glanced at Troy, then nodded to Beulah. “I can stay for a little while. Let’s take the flowers and candy up to your room; then we can join the others.”

“Splendid, my dear. Right this way.” Beulah hustled toward a doorway, and Lark followed, looking over her shoulder at Troy and winking.

He barely noticed as Tally unwrapped the blood-soaked handkerchief from his hand.

“How did this happen?” she asked, looking at the wound.

“Well, um ...”

Tally turned to her aunt. “Go on outside, Auntie. We’ll be there in a minute.” When Marv and the other woman left, Tally gave Troy a questioning look. “Let me guess. Blanche got a little too friendly when you weren’t expecting it. Is that right?”

Troy nodded. “Exactly right. Don’t they know how to behave at their age?”

Tally laughed. “You’d like to think so, but sometimes they act like naughty, spoiled children.” She led the way to a restroom off the lobby and cleansed the wound, then had him press paper towels against it. “I’ve got a first-aid kit in the

pickup. You don't need stitches, but it would be best to keep that covered so it doesn't get infected."

Troy followed her outside to the parking lot and waited as she applied ointment, a thick gauze pad, and a bandage to his hand.

"Change that at least once a day and try to keep it dry. It should be fine in a few days." Tally eyed his injured hand, then his other. "Is it your roping hand?"

Only a rodeo wife would ask that question. Troy grinned and flexed his hand. "Nope. I can still rope. What night is Gage riding at the rodeo?"

"Tomorrow." Tally fell into step with him as they walked toward the demonstration area.

"We're roping tomorrow. I hope Gage comes out the winner. Is he still talking about retiring after this year?"

Tally blew out a wistful breath. "Talking about it, although I'm not sure he can give up riding altogether. However, he has cut back his schedule considerably."

"He's still ranked in the top five, so he must be doing something right." Troy smiled at Tally. "Thanks for fixing this for me." He held up his bandaged hand. "I'd better get back to work. I was hoping to get Wyatt's horse finished before lunch."

"You've got about twenty minutes before they bring out the food. If you need help, holler. Trevor is pretty good at farrier work. He can assist if you need it."

"Thanks." Troy tipped his head to her, settled his hat back in place, pulled on a pair of gloves, and returned to shoeing Wyatt's horse.

Two older men sat on chairs that had been set up for those who wanted to watch him work and talked about the glory days of their youth.

Troy listened to them discuss serving in the Korean War, and how hard it had been to resume a normal life when they'd returned from the war. Admiration for the humble veterans

filled him as he finished the horse and handed him off to Wyatt.

After removing his gloves, Troy wiped his right hand on a wet wipe he kept with his farrier gear, walked over to the two men, and held his hand out to the first one.

The elderly man glanced up at him with eyes that were slightly cloudy and wrinkles that carved deep canyons across his face. He took Troy's hand in his, giving it a strong shake despite his frail appearance.

"You did a nice job shoeing that horse, son. Been doing it long?" the man asked as Troy released his hand and then shook the other man's.

"My grandpa taught me when I was about seven or eight, I guess. Been doing it since."

The other old man grinned. "You know what you're doing. My brother-in-law was a farrier for a while. I used to go with him and hand him tools."

Feeling awkward and out of his element, Troy gave the men a solemn nod. "I just wanted to thank you both for your service. I heard you talking earlier about being in Korea. My great-grandpa served in France during World War II. My grandma said he really had a hard time when he came home, but the family was so grateful he survived when so many of his friends didn't."

The two old men grew misty-eyed, but they each reached out to shake his hand again. "Thank you, son. War isn't for the faint of heart."

The men asked him a few questions about his farrier business, the ranch, and what it was like to be a rodeo contestant. Troy happily answered their questions and thanked them one more time when Mykah clanged a handheld bell and declared it time for lunch.

Troy cleaned his tools and put them away as people went through the food line. He'd just removed his leather chaps and tucked them in with his gear when he felt someone move beside him. He half expected a handsy old woman to latch

onto him but was pleasantly surprised to see Lark studying him.

“Are you staying for lunch?” he asked, tipping his head toward the tables that had been set up in the shade. “The head chef knows his way around the kitchen; although I doubt his tater tots can compare to yours.”

Lark grinned. “Sure, but only if you promise to sit beside me. One old codger keeps bumping into me like it’s by accident, but I have my doubts.”

Troy nodded in shared commiseration. “A few of them are a little bold, aren’t they?” He motioned for her to precede him.

After they filled their plates, he and Lark found seats across from Beulah and Marvella. Troy took a seat at the end of the table where no one could get too grabby with him. Lark sat beside him, sandwiched between him and Trevor King.

Lunch was lively, especially with the banter that took place between Trevor and his aunt. Lark seemed to enjoy being there, visibly relaxing as she ate and got to know his friends. She’d barely eaten the last bite of food on her plate when she hopped up, walked around the table to kiss Beulah on the cheek, and started to leave.

“Go after her, you big lunk.” Marv kicked his shin under the table.

Troy tossed down his napkin and hurried after Lark while it felt like every eye seated at the outdoor tables watched him. He caught up with Lark before she reached the parking lot. When she saw it was him chasing after her, her tense posture relaxed.

“Hey, you. Did you need something?” she asked as she stopped and looked at him in question.

Troy was certain she wouldn’t appreciate it if he blurted out that he needed to kiss her—to taste those sweet, rosy lips—before the want of them drove him bonkers. That would not be a good way to lead the conversation any more than

admitting he wanted to bury his hands in her hair and breathe deeply of the feminine fragrance that clung to her.

Nope. Not one of the thoughts trailing into his mind could be vocalized.

Realizing he hadn't responded to her question as he played over a few fantasies in his thoughts, he shook his head. "I didn't need anything, Lark. I just wanted to say it was good to see you. I hope to run into you at the fair."

She placed a hand on his bicep, and even through the cotton of his shirt, the heat of her touch branded his skin. "I look forward to seeing you this week, Troy. Remember, I still owe you some Spuddy Bites."

"I won't forget, Lark. Have a nice day."

She smiled at him as her hand slid down his arm and clasped his fingers, giving them a gentle squeeze. "You do the same."

Troy might have stood there on the hot pavement all afternoon, contemplating what that hand squeeze meant, but he heard the clank of a walker and turned to see some of the residents making their way inside Creekdale.

He returned to the demonstration area to show those who were curious about the various tools he used, but his mind was miles away, lost in a vision of Lark laughing at something Beulah and Marv had said while the sunlight set her hair aflame.

Chapter Six



“What is that?” Lark asked, her voice high and anxious as she leaned out the order window of her food truck. A new vendor pulled in and parked just two spaces down and across from her at the end of the row of food vendors at the fair.

Jay and Rachel leaned out beside her, gaping at a truck that had “The Totinator” painted in glaring orange outlined in black on the side. A big, full-color graphic showed an image of crispy tater tots with ketchup being drizzled over them.

“No, no, no! How is this happening?” Lark questioned, although she didn’t expect Jay or Rachel to answer.

“I thought you were supposed to be the only tater tot vendor,” Jay commented as a short, paunchy guy in a tracksuit climbed out of the truck. He swaggered around like he was the king of the fair. “That dude looks like he should play a half-witted mafia scapegoat in a low-budget crime film destined for failure.”

Lark and Rachel laughed at Jay’s attempt to lighten the mood.

If she wasn't mistaken, Lark had seen that same guy last year at the fair with a food truck selling something that tasted terrible, even if she couldn't recall what it was. She had vague memories of him making a few rather inappropriate comments to her, though.

Before she could gather her wits, Mr. Totinator started handing out flyers.

Lark gave Jay a push toward the door. "Go see what those flyers say."

"I'm not going. That guy is an idiot. Don't you remember he had the terrible gyros last year? I'm still not convinced he wasn't grinding up road kill and trying to pass it off as lamb." Jay shuddered and returned to shredding lettuce for their taco tots.

"I'll go," Rachel said, whipping off the ball cap she wore with a Bud's Spuds logo. She pulled on a denim jacket she'd left on the passenger seat of the truck, then hurried over to snag a flyer. Rachel returned with a scowl on her face.

"What's it say?" Lark asked as she and Jay crowded around Rachel to study the flyer. Anger welled inside her as she read through the menu the annoying little man had copied, almost word for word, from Lark's menu. If that weren't insulting enough on its own, he'd also undercut her prices by fifteen percent. The only thing he hadn't copied were her desserts.

Rachel dropped her jacket on the passenger seat, yanked on her ball cap, and gave Lark a sympathetic pat on the back. "I know this seems bad, but people will figure out soon enough his food is terrible and come over here."

"Not if he ruins them on eating tater tots forever." Lark sighed and tried to convince herself she was overreacting. She rolled her neck, straightened her spine, and got to work, forcing her thoughts away from her unexpected competitor.

Yesterday, she'd been happily surprised to come across Troy at Creekdale. Lark didn't often make it over to visit Beulah, a woman who had been so dear to her grandmother.

She'd been in the neighborhood to pick up flats of fresh tomatoes and decided to stop by for a quick visit. What she hadn't planned on was running into Troy and forgetting about the food truck she needed to get ready for the fair. All she'd wanted was to linger beside him, watching the way his eyes filled with joy when he looked her way. She had a hundred questions she wanted to ask him, but now wasn't the time.

Maybe there never would be a good time to open her heart to the possibility of romance and love again.

Yet, she couldn't seem to keep her thoughts from circling back around to Troy. He was so good with the elderly residents there. Lark had a good idea his injury had something to do with one of the golden grannies. She'd seen the old women get all twitterpated on other occasions when a handsome young man visited Creekdale.

She'd met Mykah and Trevor King, and Trevor's sister Tally before when she'd stopped in to see Beulah, but she hadn't realized Troy knew them too.

From the way the women had fawned over Trevor, she could easily envision them doing the same to Troy. Only she couldn't picture a quiet, reserved man like him handling the attention well. Maybe one of the octogenarians who hung out with Beulah got a little too friendly and spooked him.

Lark almost giggled, picturing Troy's appalled and startled reaction to one of the older women trying to snuggle up to him.

"Are you finished with your meltdown?" Jay asked, bumping her with his elbow and drawing her out of her thoughts and back to the fair and her food truck.

"For the moment. We'll see how things roll out today. If he is as obnoxious as I anticipate, it might mean war." Lark glowered at the idiot trying to steal her ideas as he flapped flyers in the faces of everyone who walked past him.

"Want me to get the dirt on him?" Rachel asked, giving her a conspiratorial grin. "One of my former classmates is a niece of the fair manager."

“No. Let’s just focus on doing our thing and pretend that cretin isn’t even here.”

As the day progressed and they had far fewer customers than Lark anticipated, ignoring Mr. Totinator was far easier said than done. At one point, he stood three feet in front of Lark’s truck, directing everyone who stopped to look at her menu to come check out his and save a buck. She’d even heard him telling people that Bud’s Spuds used the cheapest products available and charged twice the price.

By four that afternoon Lark was seeing red. She whipped off the food service gloves she wore, tossed her apron over the open back door, and looked at Jay. “I’m going to the office to report him. This is ridiculous.”

Before Jay or Rachel could comment, she stormed out of the food truck and strode to the fair office. It appeared she was one of a dozen disgruntled people. She saw the fair manager pass through the mob and followed her outside.

“Mrs. Smith? May I speak to you for a moment?” Lark asked as she caught up to the harried woman.

“Oh, hello. Lark, isn’t it? What can I do for you?” the woman asked.

“A vendor came in today in a food truck selling tater tots. I was under the impression I’d be the only one here with a tater tot truck. He’s copied my menu, almost word for word, and he is undercutting my prices. He’s also telling customers that I’m offering poor quality food when they’re standing at my booth. Can anything be done about him?”

The woman blew out a frustrated breath. “His father is one of our main sponsors. Every year, Kyle Rearden brings his food truck even though the food is terrible. I specifically requested he not copy any vendors this year, but it seems he didn’t listen. I’m so sorry. If I could ban him from the fair for life, I would, but we need the money his father gives us through sponsorship. Give it a day. It probably won’t even take that long for word to get out about his horrid food. Again, my apologies, but my hands are tied.”

“I see. Thank you, Mrs. Smith.” Lark nodded politely as the woman turned and scurried off in the direction of the 4-H barns.

Anger fueled her steps as Lark marched back toward her food truck. She was halfway there when a hand clasped her arm. She whirled around, ready to strike, only to find Troy offering her a concerned glance. Her fury dissipated as she became acutely aware of his hand on her bare arm. His skin felt hot and rough and wonderful as his hold loosened to a caress and his thumb brushed over her skin in lazy circles. She wondered if he was even aware of what he was doing, or the profound effect that seemingly innocent touch had on her entire system.

“Something wrong, Lark?” he asked as his brow furrowed with worry. He continued to stare at her, as though he tried to puzzle out what had left her upset.

“Just a vendor who is a big pain in the patootie.”

Troy looked like he was trying to hide a grin as he moved beside her and they continued to her food truck. “What’s going on?”

“Kyle Rearden, a first-class imbecile who calls himself the Totinator, copied my menu and is undercutting my prices. We’ve hardly had any customers all afternoon. I heard him telling people our food is of poor quality and overpriced. When I went to the office to report him, I discovered his daddy is one of the main fair sponsors, so I’m stuck with his annoying, disgusting, idiotic presence.”

Troy remained silent for a moment. “Don’t they say imitation is a form of flattery?”

She scoffed and kicked at a rock in her path. “Whoever *they* are obviously never had someone like Kyle Rearden trying to steal all their hard-earned business.”

“If it’s the guy I think you’re talking about, he copies a new vendor every year. Last year it was the gyro truck. The year before that it was the German sausage guy. Oh, and the year he tried to do barbecue beef was the worst. Don’t let him

get to you. It doesn't take long for word to spread about which vendors to avoid and which ones are the best. You'll be fine."

Lark stopped and glared at the end of Kyle's truck that proclaimed, "We'll be back!" She rolled her eyes and turned to Troy. "I bet he uses the cheapest frozen tater tots he can find and fries them until they are so grease-soaked they could be used to oil equipment."

"Come on. He's not worth wasting your time worrying about. Can't you declare it Tater Tot Day or something, and do some social media blasts to come visit your food truck at the fair?"

"The social media part is a great idea, but National Tater Tot Day is in February, not August."

Troy gave her a strange look, then smiled, settling his hand on her back as they walked over to her food truck.

Jay and Rachel tossed Troy interested glances before they returned to filling a customer's order. When they finished, Jay stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Hi, I'm Jay, Lark's only brother, and favorite sibling. This is my girlfriend, Rachel."

Troy shook their hands and smiled. "Nice to meet you both."

Jay looked at Lark. "Any luck at the fair office?"

"No. The Totinator is the son of a big sponsor, so he stays. Troy had a great idea of doing some social media blasts, though. Let's take a photo of some Spuddy Bites, an order of Texan tots, and a cheese melt, then post them everywhere."

"The patty melt you made when we were in Hermiston was incredible, Lark," Troy said. "In fact, Truitt was jealous he didn't get one."

Lark smiled as she stepped inside the truck to help Jay and Rachel assemble the food for the photographs.

Troy started to leave, but Lark leaned outside and called to him. "Troy!"

He turned and looked at her in question.

“Don’t run off. I’ll need a taste tester, you know.”

He grinned and walked around to the back of the food truck. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No, cowboy. Just wait right here. It will only take a minute to get this stuff together.”

Lark filled a big cup with Dr Pepper and gave it to Troy, remembering he’d ordered it when they were in Hermiston. He gave her an appreciative nod when he took a sip and leaned a brawny shoulder against the door frame as he stood outside and watched them work.

Aware of his gaze following her, she almost dropped the cheese melt before she settled it in a paper tray. She added a few toppings for color, then arranged it next to the Texan tots and an order of Spuddy Bites on her counter. She snapped several photos, as did Jay and Rachel.

“Maybe you should get a photo of the three of you smiling as you help customers,” Troy suggested as they posted the photos to their social media accounts.

“That’s a great idea, but we don’t have any customers at the moment.” Lark pointed in front of the food truck. “The Totinator is still stealing our customers.”

“I’ll find some.” Troy took out his phone, tapped a few buttons, waited a few seconds, tapped another message, then slid his phone back into his pocket. “They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?” Lark asked.

“The cavalry.”

Lark handed Troy the Texan tots and motioned for him to sit on the back steps. He’d taken a few bites when a bunch of people she recognized from the previous day at Creekdale arrived, greeting her with smiles. They loudly proclaimed her food the best at the fair and made over the things they’d eaten from her booth last year or at other events.

Before she knew what was happening, people were lined up and placing orders while Troy spoke to a beautiful woman

who also had red hair. The woman snapped several photos of Lark, Jay, and Rachel as they worked, then smiled at Troy before she disappeared.

Lark wondered if he had a thing for redheads. Maybe he had a girlfriend he'd failed to mention.

And maybe she was reading more into things than she should.

She mouthed "thank you" to Troy when he resumed his seat on the steps as they hurried to fill orders for his friends. Lark would have gladly fed them for free since their jovial conversations drew people away from Kyle's booth, but they all insisted on paying and promised she'd see them again before the fair ended.

Amazed by the kindness of his friends, Lark bent down by Troy and whispered in his ear. "What did you do?"

"You said you needed some customers. Now you have plenty." He shrugged, as though whatever he'd said to draw his friends over was of no importance, but it was hugely important to Lark.

She kissed his cheek and smiled. "Thank you."

A blush climbed up Troy's neck beneath his tan. Instead of saying something to embarrass him, or herself, she rushed back to work. The next time she glanced over at the doorway, Troy was gone, but she couldn't stop smiling. She was certain he'd be back.

Much to her delight, they stayed busy through the rest of the day. Lark had hoped to watch Troy compete in the rodeo, but they'd been far too busy for her to leave.

Tomorrow, they'd start training the girl Lark had hired. Rachel had gone through the stack of applications and narrowed it down to three she thought might be good at the job. Lark interviewed all three of them and decided to try the one who sounded the most eager for a job.

If Candee didn't work out, Lark didn't know what she was going to do, but she'd worry about that another day.

Exhausted as they cleaned up and readied the food truck for a busy day tomorrow, Lark glanced over and watched as Kyle shooed away a customer, shut down his truck, and then sauntered off. Maybe it would be scorching hot tomorrow and he'd stay home. He didn't strike her as the type to ever break a sweat despite the clothes he wore.

She walked out to the parking lot with Jay and Rachel. "You two have a good night and rest well. Tomorrow will be another crazy day."

"Night, sis." Jay waved at her as he walked off hand in hand with Rachel.

Weary, Lark climbed into her SUV and headed home. She took a shower, then collapsed on her bed, dreaming about a sweet cowboy with incredible blue eyes.

Chapter Seven



Lark raced out the door early the next morning, in a rush to run a few errands before she headed to the fairgrounds. She intended to spruce up her food truck and maybe even do a few promotions to gain more customers if it proved necessary to draw them away from that detestable Kyle Rearden.

She loaded coolers into the back of her SUV, full of tater tots, toppings, and Arctic Spuds, then closed the garage door. Rushing to slide behind the wheel, she'd just inserted her keys into the ignition when she realized she'd left her phone charging in the kitchen.

“You would forget your head if it weren't attached,” she chided herself before she rushed inside, grabbed her phone and the healthy snacks she'd packed, then hastened back outside.

She drove to a supermarket that had a nice selection of fresh florals and selected a bouquet of sunflowers. She picked up a few things she thought might be useful to have on hand, then headed for the fairgrounds.

It was quiet when she arrived since it would be another hour before the gates opened to the public. After storing the food in the freezers located beneath her long counter, she

stood in front of the truck, giving it a critical eye. She lifted the awning and opened the window where they took orders, then draped a sunflower garland along the top of the awning. She'd snagged it from a plastic storage tub full of props she kept on a shelf in the closet of her guest bedroom.

Lark set the bouquet of sunflowers on the counter, arranging the napkin dispenser in front of it. It added a nice pop of color and fit the country theme of the event without taking up much space.

She snapped a few photos of the food truck with her phone, then realized she had half a dozen text messages that hadn't been answered.

The first was from the girl she'd hired telling her she had a better job offer she planned to accept.

Lark quickly read a text from her mom wishing her a successful day, and one from Robin, asking if she had time to pick up the boys from daycare that afternoon because she and Danny wanted to attend the fair.

She started to send a text to her sister asking her if she had Fruit Loops for brains, but with a great deal of restraint managed to delete the message and just typed "No."

She replied to her mother, responded to a text from Jay that he was on his way, and one to Rachel saying she'd be there at eleven.

The last text was from Troy. She wondered how he'd acquired her number, not that she minded, then recalled exchanging numbers with him at lunch the day they'd run into each other at Creekdale. He'd sent several photos taken of her food truck the previous day. The person who had taken them knew what they were doing as the lighting and angles looked professional. She read his brief note.

"Celia Kressley is a pro photographer. She took these for you yesterday. Hope they help terminate the totinator!"

Unable to stop herself, Lark searched Celia Kressley's name. Images of a gorgeous woman with red hair popped up, the same woman she'd seen talking to Troy yesterday.

Apparently, the award-winning photographer was married to Kash Kressley, one of the stock contractors at the rodeo.

Lark sent a reply to Troy.

“Thank you for these. They are perfect! So grateful for your help. See you later?”

Not even a minute passed before Troy sent a reply.

“Yes. I still need to try those Spuddy Bites!”

“I’ll save you some.”

Lark sent the text, then pulled up the information on the other two applicants she’d interviewed. The first one she called said he was no longer interested, but the second one said she could be at the fair by two that afternoon and stay the rest of the day. Lark thanked her and said she’d see her then.

“One problem at a time,” she said, glancing at her watch. Lark quickly braided her hair, tied an apron around her waist, and got to work.

She’d just finished chopping tomatoes for that day’s toppings when she saw Troy stroll by with his arm around a tall, willowy blonde. He laughed at something the woman said, then kissed her right on the lips, like they were alone in a bedroom, not walking through the fairgrounds. Troy looked so different from any time she’d seen him. He moved with a confident swagger she wouldn’t have expected from him.

Fuming at the way he’d shyly flirted with her, she wondered what sort of game he was playing. She detested games and wanted no part of it, whatever *it* was that he had planned.

Lark began chopping peppers with far more force than necessary. She knew she had no right to be angry. It wasn’t like Troy had come right out and expressed an interest in her. He hadn’t even asked her out.

The rational, reasonable part of her brain said he had been a friend to her, helping her out yesterday by bringing in a flood of customers. He’d been kind to her when they crossed paths

at Creekdale, and had come to her rescue that day at the Hermiston fair.

Calming slightly, she realized her anger was because of her interest in him that was apparently one-sided.

“Get a grip, girl,” Lark chastised herself, then jumped when Jay stepped inside, his arms loaded down with supplies.

“Someone get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?” Jay asked as he set down bags on the order counter.

“No!” Lark snapped, then realized what she’d done. “Sorry. That was uncalled for. I had a text from Robin, asking me to pick up the boys from daycare because she and Danny want a date night at the fair.”

Jay stared at her with a disbelieving expression before he shook his head. “Did you explain to her, in detail, why that isn’t going to happen?”

“I started to, thought better of it, and just texted her a big fat no. I intend to ignore any and all messages she sends today.”

Jay washed his hands, pulled on a pair of gloves, and started chopping onions. “Are you sure we’re related to her? Maybe the folks got the wrong baby at the hospital. She doesn’t look like either of us.”

Lark had often mused how much she and Jay resembled one another with their red hair, freckled skin, and pale green eyes. Robin had brown hair and brown eyes—a replica of their mother. Both of Robin’s sons took after her husband, sporting blond hair and blue eyes.

“You know as well as I do that Robin looks just like Mom. Mom looks just like Grandma. I bet you could go back five generations if we had pictures of each one and they’d all look alike.”

“Probably,” Jay conceded.

Lark told him about their new employee quitting and choice number three planning to come that afternoon. She’d

just started cooking the onions and peppers when she saw Troy stroll by again, although this time he was alone.

“Troy!” she called, leaning out of the order window.

He took two more steps, stopped, and glanced around. It wasn't until he turned in her direction that she realized her mistake. The man who walked toward her looked almost identical to Troy from a distance, but the closer he drew, the more she could see their features were slightly different. This man was a little leaner than Troy, and he carried himself with an outgoing persona Troy lacked.

“I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else,” she said, as the man looked up at her. She could see a resemblance to Troy in his smile. “Are you Truitt?”

His smile broadened and he held out his hand. “Truitt Lucas. Troy's cousin. You must be Lark. Troy's spoken of you, all good stuff. It's nice to meet you, Miss Gibson.”

Jay leaned around her. “I'm Lark's brother, Jay. I'd shake hands, but you don't want to smell like onions all day.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.” Truitt glanced up at Lark. “If you're looking for my cousin, he's helping in the beef barn today. I think he plans on eating lunch here, though. If I run into him, want me to send him over?”

“No, I don't want to disturb him, and I apologize for bothering you.”

Truitt offered her a charming grin. One she was sure dazzled women of all ages. He swept off his hat, and she noticed he wore his hair slightly longer than Troy wore his, even though it appeared to be the same hue of brown.

“You could never, ever be a bother, Miss Gibson. If there's anything Troy or I can do for you, just ask.” He tipped his head to her, settled his hat in place, then strode away.

She watched as he headed toward the animal barns, wondering how she could have confused him with Troy.

“Kind of funny we were discussing family resemblances and there you have walking proof of dominant genes. He'd be

so easy to mistake for Troy. If Truitt hadn't introduced himself as Troy's cousin, I would have assumed he was a twin brother."

"I know." Lark's heart felt pounds lighter after realizing the man she'd seen brazenly kissing the blonde earlier was Truitt and not Troy. Relieved, she refused to sort through the reasons why it mattered so much to her.

The morning passed in a blur. It was after two before Lark realized her new hire hadn't shown up. She checked her phone, but the girl hadn't sent a message. Well, it looked like she was back to the drawing board when it came to finding replacements for Jay and Rachel.

She tucked her phone into her pocket and glanced up to see Troy and Truitt approaching.

"Hey, you," Lark said in greeting to Troy, then nodded to Truitt. "Did your cousin tell you I mistakenly thought he was you this morning?"

Troy nodded and grinned, settling a hand on Truitt's shoulder. "Tru did mention it. We get that a lot, though, so don't think anything of it. If you aren't too busy, could I get two double patty melts and an order of the Spuddy Bites?"

"You sure can," Lark said, glancing at Jay as he studied first her and then Troy. "Beef, Jay. Cook the beef."

He saluted her, then hurried to place four beef patties on the grill. Rachel had volunteered to run to the bank with their deposit and pick up more lettuce and tomatoes, so Lark and Jay worked together to fill Troy's order.

"What can I get you to drink, Truitt?" Lark asked as Jay melted the cheese on the tots.

"A Coke if you have it."

"Coming right up." She filled a cup with ice and added the soda, then looked at Troy. "Same as usual?"

He nodded and smiled.

She filled his cup with Dr Pepper and set the drinks on the counter just before Jay slid their patty melts into trays and

placed them beside the beverages.

“What do we owe you?” Troy asked, pulling out his wallet.

“It’s on the house for what you did yesterday. And make sure you don’t leave until I give you an order of Spuddy Bites.” She looked at Truitt. “Do you like coconut?”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. Troy loves it though.”

Lark smiled at him. “Then you can have an Arctic Spud if you want it.”

Troy elbowed his cousin as he took napkins from the dispenser. “It’s so good. You’re going to like it.”

“I look forward to trying it. Thank you, Miss Gibson.”

Lark smiled at Truitt. “Call me Lark, please?”

“Lark,” Truitt repeated.

“Thanks for the food,” Troy said, holding up his tray in one hand and the cup of pop in the other.

Lark should have let him leave, but she hated for him to disappear so soon. It might be her only chance to see him all day. She tipped her head toward the back of the truck. “You can sit on my fine outdoor furniture if you have nowhere else you need to be.”

Troy grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

Lark took a bottle of water from the fridge in the truck and then walked to the back. Truitt sat on one of the coolers she’d left outside, and Troy stood by the other. It wasn’t until she plunked down on the step that he took a seat and settled in to eat his meal.

“So good,” Truitt mumbled between bites. “Best I’ve had.”

“It’s as good as I remember, Lark. Thanks,” Troy said, smiling at her as he ate his meal with slightly less abandon than Truitt.

Jay took care of the few customers that placed orders while she rested on the step and listened to Truitt. Although he and Troy might look alike, it was clear their personalities were far different. Truitt seemed to possess the gift of gab as he segued from one topic to another.

When the two men finished their meal, Lark hopped up and got Troy a bag of Spuddy Bites and an Arctic Spud for Truitt. Troy bit into one of the coconut-filled bites, then hurriedly ate the rest of it.

“These are amazing, Lark.” Troy looked a little guilty as he popped two more into his mouth. “I could eat a hundred of them.”

Pleased he’d enjoyed the treat, she reached out and brushed a bit of cocoa powder from his lip. When her fingers skimmed his chin, the taut, smooth skin felt fantastic. She wanted to explore it. Caress it. Kiss it.

She jerked her hand back and tried her best to pretend indifference to the effect he had on her. “You can eat as many as you like. Want some more?”

“Not now. I’ll be waddling away from here as it is.” He looked over at Truitt as he dug into the ice cream, uncharacteristically quiet as he shoveled in one bite after another.

Suddenly, Truitt winced and pressed a hand to his forehead. “Brain freeze.”

Troy chuckled and winked at Lark. “That’s what you get for being a pig.”

Truitt smirked. “Speaking of pigs, did you see Alden Beaver and his wife parading around with their baby?”

Troy shook his head. “Nope, guess I missed them. Why?”

Truitt motioned with his spoon toward his head. “I swear that baby looked more like a pink piglet with a mop of hair than anything that should come out of a human.”

Jay howled with laughter as he listened to the conversation, and Lark came close to snorting water out her

nose since she'd just taken a drink.

Troy stared at Truitt, as though he was from an alternate universe, then gave Lark a look that communicated his refusal to be held responsible for whatever might come out of his cousin's mouth.

Far more amused than she should be, Lark couldn't help but join Jay in his laughter. "I'm going to have to keep an eye out for that baby," she said as she used the back of her hand to wipe spilled water from her chin.

"You'll know it when you see it. It even has a nose that looks all piggy-like." Truitt used his index finger to demonstrate a pig nose, making even Troy chuckle when he crossed his eyes. Truitt rose and tossed his garbage into the trash can, then bent over and kissed Lark's cheek. "Thanks for the good food and a place to rest in the shade. I'm sure we'll see you later."

Before she could reply, Truitt tipped his hat to her and hurried off.

Lark realized when he kissed her cheek it was like having Jay give her a hug, something that felt brotherly and nothing more.

However, the mere thought of Troy kissing her cheek made her limbs tingle with anticipation.

She glanced at the quiet cowboy and noticed his gaze rested across the way where Kyle and his Totinator truck weren't doing any business.

"How are things going today?" Troy asked, inclining his head toward Kyle as he stood outside his truck, loudly proclaiming his tots were the best and freshest in the Pacific Northwest.

"Better. I think the social media idea helped a lot, so thanks for that. And thank you for the photos from Celia. They're wonderful. Does she do commercial photography?"

"Not really. She mostly shoots rodeos, traveling with her husband. He and his dad own the Rockin' K rodeo stock

company. Celia sometimes shoots weddings, but I think that's about it."

"She's really talented."

Troy nodded in agreement. "She is. Celia's not afraid to get in the line of fire in the arena to get the best shots. Kash acts like a fussy old woman during the bull riding, afraid she's going to get hurt, but everyone keeps an eye out for her, you know."

Lark didn't know, but if the outpouring of support from Troy's friends yesterday was an example of how they rolled, then she had a good idea the friends in Troy's circle would step in front of a bull to rescue one of their own.

Troy rose and threw away his trash, wiped his hands on his jeans, then studied Lark as though he was hesitant to go.

"What time do you close down the food truck?" he asked.

"I'm hoping to be out of here by nine."

"We close at nine, but Lark will be free after seven," Jay called from inside the truck. "Rach and I can handle closing tonight if you have something to do or somewhere to go."

Lark glared at her brother over her shoulder, then turned back to Troy. "Did you have something in mind?"

"I just wondered if you might like to go to the rodeo tonight. I'm not competing, but I have two tickets if you're interested." Troy's look was hopeful, like a puppy eagerly awaiting a juicy bone.

She couldn't have refused him even if she wanted to, which she certainly didn't. "I'd like that, Troy. According to my boss, I'll be free to go at seven. Truthfully, once the rodeo starts, things are generally quiet out here." Lark glanced down at the cropped jeans and Bud's Spuds T-shirt she wore with food-splattered sneakers. She didn't have anything to change into and no time to go shopping.

"Whatever you wear is fine. See you at seven. I'll meet you here." Troy took two steps away, turned around and kissed her cheek, then rushed off in the direction of the barns.

Her cheek tingled along with her limbs. She released a long breath, ignoring the smug look Jay tossed to her as she stepped back inside the truck.

“Hot date with the cowboy tonight. Good for you,” Jay said, smirking as he cut a block of cheese into slices.

“A date, nothing hot about it, buster.” Lark blew out another puff of air. “What am I going to wear? I don’t have anything here beyond our T-shirts.”

“Call Rach. She’ll figure something out.” Jay went back to slicing cheese.

Lark called Rachel in a panic. The girl assured her she’d pick something up on her way there for Lark to wear.

At ten minutes to seven, Rachel and Jay both shooed Lark out of the truck and told her to go change. She made a beeline for the restrooms, where she pulled off her T-shirt and took a new emerald green cotton blouse from the bag Rachel had brought back with her that afternoon. Lark unbraided her hair and shook it out to let her curls go free. She added a bit of lip gloss and a spritz of perfume from the little bottle she kept in her purse, hoping she didn’t smell like sauteed peppers and spicy beef.

Without time to dwell on it, she returned to the truck just in time to stash her things in the front of the food truck. She glanced up and saw Troy approaching her with a small bouquet of wildflowers tied with raffia ribbon in his hands.

He handed her the flowers without saying a word.

“For me?” Lark asked, thinking the gesture quite romantic. Where had Troy acquired the flowers, especially if he’d been at the fair all day? It didn’t matter, though, because she loved the cheerful blossoms.

“I can put those in water for you,” Rachel offered, smiling at Lark as she leaned out of the truck to take the bouquet.

“Thank you, Rachel. For everything.” Lark squeezed the girl’s hand, then looked to Jay. “If you have any trouble or need my help, just text me.”

“We will. Now, go have fun. We’ve got everything under control.”

Lark nodded, then placed her hand on the arm Troy held out to her. She wasn’t sure if he was being gallant for Jay and Rachel’s benefit, or if he truly was a throwback to gentlemen that rarely existed in modern life.

Deciding not to question her good fortune in spending time with him, she wrapped her arm around his and walked beside him as they made their way to the rodeo arena.

Troy didn’t even glance at the tickets to see where the seats were located. He led her to a section with a great view of the bucking chutes and waved to a bunch of people with faces Lark was beginning to recognize. Truitt was there, but he wasn’t with the woman she’d seen him kiss that morning. Tonight, he sat between Tally Taggart and a man named Chase Jarrett who used to ride bulls. He’d recently retired. If Lark remembered correctly, he and his wife Jessie had a ranch somewhere near Hermiston.

Jessie held an adorable toddler girl on her lap who looked enough like her and Chase for Lark to know the baby belonged to them. The child was beautiful, so Lark doubted that was the one Truitt had referred to as a piglet. Not that any baby should be called that, but just the honest, open way he’d said it had made it funny.

“We saved you seats,” Paige James said, scooting over to make room for Troy and Lark. Lark sat close to Paige, leaving Troy in the aisle seat. Truitt was directly behind them.

“Glad you could join us,” Truitt said, leaning forward and whispering in Lark’s ear. “Troy was worried he wouldn’t be able to talk you into coming.”

Lark glanced back at him. “He didn’t have to twist my arm too hard.”

Truitt grinned. “Good to hear. This guy,” he tipped his head toward Troy, “deserves an evening of fun.”

“I’m not deaf and can hear you, you know.” He turned and glowered at his cousin, making Lark swallow down a

giggle.

She enjoyed every minute of sitting with Troy and his friends through the rodeo. Truitt kept everyone laughing, cracking jokes, and sometimes teasing Troy.

A big gate opened, and a tractor rumbled into the arena to work up the dirt for barrel racing when Cooper James pranced out from behind the chutes wearing a chicken costume.

“Super Cooper! What in the world are you doing down there?” the announcer questioned.

“I’m looking for some cowboys to join in a chicken-chasing contest.” Cooper folded his hands into his armpits so it looked like his wings were flapping, tipped back his head, and crowed.

“Looks to me like the biggest clucker is wandering around the arena,” the announcer chided. The crowd erupted in laughter.

Cooper turned to give the announcer a peeved scowl. “Just read the names I gave you, will ya?”

The announcer cleared his throat. “Will the following report to the arena right away. You have been recruited by Cooper. Failure to cooperate will result in excruciating and extensive embarrassment.”

“The script, you big dummy,” Cooper shouted to the announcer in feigned fury. “Stick to the script!”

Amid the crowd’s cheers and laughter, the announcer read off a list of names. Some were cowboys who’d already competed that evening. Others were behind the scenes lending a hand. A few were in the stands. The last name the announcer called was Troy’s.

“Go, Troy!” Truitt shouted and slapped his cousin on the shoulder.

Even Lark could sense how much Troy didn’t want to be involved in whatever nonsense the rodeo barrelman had planned, but he stood, jogged down the bleacher steps, and hopped over the fence into the arena.

Lark wouldn't admit it to anyone, but she enjoyed watching the brawny man move. Even though he could have been a football star based on his size, there was a quiet grace about him she found utterly intriguing.

Cooper gathered the cowboys around him and gave them instructions no one in the stands could hear. Four teenage boys hurried into the arena with cages full of chickens they then released.

The dozen cowboys started a mad scramble to catch a chicken.

"All they have to do is catch a chicken and carry it over here to me," Cooper said as he stood near the chutes.

Although it seemed like it should be a simple task, the chickens were big, fast, and angry.

Lark laughed along with everyone else when one of the steer wrestlers caught a chicken and it pecked his hand so hard, he turned it loose with a yelp.

Troy chased after a fat chicken that waddled more than ran, but it was cagey, slipping between his legs when he almost crashed into one of the other contestants. In the end, Gage Taggart was the one who caught a chicken and managed to carry it over to Cooper. When he raised his arm in victory, the chicken pooped all down the front of his shirt.

Gage made an awful face as the crowd roared with laughter. Two brassy women in the front row yelled for him to take off his shirt. Tally glowered at the women ogling her husband as he ran out of the arena.

Troy walked out of the arena with Trevor King, who'd also been roped into the shenanigans. When he returned to his seat, he held two cold cups of soda and a bottle of water.

"I wasn't sure what you liked. I have Dr Pepper, Sprite, or water," he said, holding all three out to her.

"Sprite sounds good," she said, knowing Troy preferred Dr Pepper. She rarely drank pop, but when she did, she generally chose something with a lemon-lime flavor. Lark

accepted the cup from him and took a deep drink, not realizing until that moment how thirsty she'd become.

Troy remained oddly quiet through the remainder of the rodeo. Truitt leaned down and said something to him Lark couldn't hear as the last bull rider competed. Troy shook his head, then gave Lark his hand as he stood. The crowd surged out of the stands in a steady wave. Lark was grateful to have Troy holding tightly to her hand, leading the way to the exit. She feared she might have been crushed otherwise. It was only when they were away from the crowd that he seemed to relax a little.

"Do you want to check on your food truck?" he asked, perceptive to her thoughts. She'd worried about leaving Jay and Rachel alone to handle the evening traffic and closing.

Then again, with Kyle the Totinator doing everything he could to steal their customers, they might not have been too busy.

"I can walk over alone if you have somewhere else you need to be," Lark said, glancing up at Troy. His face was shadowed by the brim of his hat and the dusky evening light, but she could almost feel the intensity of his gaze even if she couldn't see it.

"Nope. I'll go with you. You can't be too careful at night, you know."

Lark knew all too well what lurked in the cover of darkness, but she refused to let fear hold her back. It was on the tip of her tongue to inform Troy there were many, many nights when she walked across dark parking lots by herself. She wasn't an idiot, though. Lark carried pepper spray and took precautions.

However, she certainly wouldn't deprive herself of his company, even if he'd grown even more somber after the chicken-chasing competition. If she hadn't observed Troy before, seeing how quiet he could be, how he preferred to stay in the background and not in the center of things, she might have thought him to be a sore loser.

Yet even the little she did know of him made her think he was probably embarrassed Cooper had involved him in the event in the first place.

She decided not bringing it up was probably the best way to handle it.

When they reached the food truck, it was locked up tight. Jay had told her he'd leave her coolers in the back of her SUV since he had a spare key to her vehicle. Assured that everything was as it should be, she glanced around to see all the other vendors had locked up and gone home for the night too.

"Is Mr. Totinator giving you more trouble?" Troy asked as they headed toward the exit.

"Not more. He sure doesn't mind bad-mouthing the competition though. I wonder who he'll decide to copy and harass next year. It's too bad he can't just think up his own thing." Lark led the way through the gate and into the parking lot. She glanced over at Troy. "Where are you parked?"

"Way over there in the far corner. I figure I have legs that work just fine and there are many who don't, so I try to park in the back forty." Troy held her door for her when she unlocked her SUV. "Nice wheels."

"Thanks. It's been handy to have with my business. I seem to need the room to haul a lot of stuff." Lark tossed her purse onto the seat, then turned to face Troy. He seemed nervous. Uncertain.

She felt that way herself. If she kissed him, really kissed him, she had a feeling it would change everything. And she wasn't sure she was ready for that. Right now, Troy was a lovely, wonderful dream. If she let anything shift from dream to reality, she might lose something she was coming to treasure.

"I'm glad I got to spend time with you, Lark," Troy said, brushing one of her wayward curls behind her ear. His fingers trailed along her jaw, then cupped her chin. Gently, he tipped

her head back and studied her face, as though he wanted to memorize it.

His features remained shadowed by the brim of his hat, even though they stood a few feet away from one of the parking lot lights.

“I had a great time tonight, Troy. Thank you for asking me to the rodeo,” she whispered, afraid to break the spell that seemed to wrap around them.

“It was my pleasure.” Troy edged a step closer and lowered his head toward hers.

Lark closed her eyes, preparing for the impact she was sure his kiss would deliver. Only instead of his lips connecting with hers, he brushed them over her cheek. By the time she opened her eyes, Troy was halfway across the parking lot, as though he couldn't escape her fast enough.

Confused and unclear about what just happened, she slid behind the wheel, shut her door, and drove home, pondering if Troy was inordinately shy, or if he had no interest in her.

Chapter Eight



Troy drove home in a fury, lambasting himself with every mile that passed. Why hadn't he kissed Lark when he'd had the opportunity? She'd been right there in front of him, head tipped back, eyes reflecting the yearning he was sure was in his own. All he had to do was press his lips to hers. The intense attraction that sizzled between the two of them combined with natural instincts would have taken care of everything else.

Instead, like a dimwitted dolt, he'd kissed her cheek and fled.

Troy pounded his fist on the seat beside him, then hit it a second time before he released a pent-up breath.

It wasn't like he'd never kissed a girl. He'd kissed plenty over the years, especially when the girls had confused him with Truitt.

Why did the thought of kissing Lark leave him so nervous he experienced a feverish chill? And why did he feel like his brains trickled out his ears every time he looked at her?

Troy might have acted like a dunce, but he was smart enough to know the answers to his questions. He liked Lark. Really liked her. If they were in grade school, he might even tug on her pigtails to let her know he liked her. Who was he kidding? He hadn't been that bold when he was eleven, and nothing had changed over the years.

He'd already been embarrassed when Cooper had included him in the stupid chicken-chasing frenzy in the rodeo arena. Troy hadn't wanted any part of it. He hated being in the spotlight. The only way he was able to team rope was because he loved it. Once the rope was in his hand and his horse was ready to run, he blocked out the crowd and everything else except tossing a loop over the calf and trying to get a good score.

Troy had been down in the arena, halfheartedly trying to catch a chicken when he had glanced up into the stands and had seen Lark laughing along with the rest of the crowd. He would have been happy just to stand there watching her, but looking like a big human post would have drawn more attention than catching one of the squawking, wild chickens. Troy had no idea where Cooper had found them, but they were nothing like the hens his grandmother kept at the ranch.

When he returned to his seat after the chicken debacle, Troy felt uncomfortable, as he did any time he was unwillingly thrust into the spotlight. He wondered if Lark thought he was pouting because he didn't catch a chicken. He couldn't have cared less about winning or losing. He just would have preferred to stay in his seat and spectate instead of being actively involved.

Truitt would have thought it was great fun to participate in it, and Troy couldn't help but wonder why Cooper had chosen him instead of his cousin. He knew them both, knew which one of them would have enjoyed the chase and which one would hate it. Maybe it was Cooper's convoluted way of trying to nudge Troy out of his comfort zone.

If that was the case, he'd find some subtle way to get back at the clown later.

Right now, Troy stewed over the fact that he'd likely blown his chance with Lark. She'd probably never go out with him again, and that was for the best. He was far too busy to get involved with another female, especially one that had haunted his dreams since they'd met a few weeks ago.

Troy felt too keyed up to sleep when he arrived at the ranch. Truitt had plans to stay out late with his friends, and the lights were already out in the house except for one in the kitchen, a sure sign his grandmother had gone to bed.

On silent feet, Troy entered through the mudroom and made his way to the bedroom that had been his for as long as he could remember. His mother had died two weeks after he was born due to complications from his birth. With his father in the military, his grandparents had taken him in and raised him. When he'd been five, and Truitt four, his cousin had come to live with them too. The two boys had their own bedrooms on the far side of the big living room.

Troy turned on the lamp by his bed and changed into work clothes, then returned outside. He gave the two ranch dogs a pat on the head as he stepped off the back porch, then walked out to the shop. With the flick of a switch, the big open space was illuminated by the overhead lights. The tractor they used to pull the baler had been leaking transmission fluid the last time they'd used it. The problem needed to be fixed before they started haying next week.

As he worked on the tractor, he talked to the dogs that had followed him into the shop and flopped on the cool concrete floor.

"What do you two think?" he asked, glancing at the canines. "Should I ask Lark out again? Do you think she'll go out with me? Should I leave well enough alone and stay away from her?"

Lotus woofed, and he grinned at her. "Ask her out? You sure that's the best plan?"

The dog woofed again and wagged her tail.

Troy shook his head. “I don’t know, Lotus. She might never speak to me again after I acted like a nincompoop when I had the chance to kiss her tonight. I think I’m out of practice when it comes to women. But Lark’s special, not like those empty-headed girls I used to date. They’re more Truitt’s style.”

Lew barked in agreement.

“I’m going to have to give this some thought. I don’t have time for a relationship, and they never end well. The girls usually tell me I’m too shy and boring, or I hold them back, or something equally as hurtful. They might not realize it, but even a big, tough, ol’ cowboy has feelings. Besides, if Lark is interested in me, which I’m not convinced she is or will be, she’s already made it plain she’s focused on her food truck business.” Troy walked over to the workbench and opened a big plastic jar that held dog treats. He took two out and tossed one to each dog before returning to work.

It took him two hours to repair the leak, and by then he was more than ready for bed. He wiped his greasy hands on a rag and wrote a note that the leak was fixed, leaving it taped to the side of the tractor if Truitt or Grammy went out there before he had a chance to tell them the repair was complete.

Back inside the house, Troy took a shower, then fell into bed, wondering what it would be like to hold Lark in his arms.

Troy found excuses to stay away from the fair the following day. He wasn’t ready to see Lark, and there was plenty of work at the ranch to keep him busy. Truitt had promised to help one of the 4-H groups, so he drove off after breakfast and took their grandmother along, despite her protests she should stay home and can the peaches she needed to pick.

Dusty Hills Ranch wasn’t a huge, sprawling enterprise, but it had always been home to Troy. He’d missed it every day he’d been out on the rodeo circuit with Roger. It was as though the dust that blew off the hills around it was in his veins and he only felt completely at ease when he was there.

He and Truitt ran almost three hundred head of Simmental cattle and had hundreds of acres of wheat and a few hundred acres of hay. In the summer, they hired local high school or college-age kids to help around the place. The rest of the time, it was just Troy, Truitt, and their grandmother seeing to all the work.

Grammy always planted a big garden, and they had several raspberry and blackberry bushes along with a small orchard that yielded sweet, juicy peaches, tangy cherries, and crisp, tart apples.

It was a lot for the three of them to handle, but they managed and even made a decent profit most years.

Troy worked all morning to get caught up on the tasks lingering on his to-do list. After he made a sandwich from leftover meatloaf and drank two glasses of milk, he gathered up several baskets and boxes, loaded them on the side-by-side vehicle Grammy drove around the ranch, and headed to the orchard. The ladder was still there from when they'd picked the cherries a few weeks ago.

The dogs followed him and settled down in the shade as he started picking peaches. He climbed up high in the trees so his grandmother wouldn't need to and picked his way down to the fruit she could easily reach from the ground. After he'd filled four bushel baskets, he figured that would be more than plenty to keep her busy for a few days. He thought of the delicious peach pies she made, and the peaches she canned so they could enjoy them all winter.

His mouth watered as he returned to the house and set the peaches in the mudroom where the dogs wouldn't be tempted to use them as chew toys. He snagged two and ate them over the sink, letting the juice run down his chin and along his fingers before he washed up and headed outside to mow and edge the lawn.

Hours later, his growling stomach told him it was time for dinner. He finished moving the handline in the hay field, then returned to the house, wondering if there were any leftover enchiladas in the fridge. He'd just made sure the dogs had

food and water in their bowls on the back porch when he saw Truitt pull up in the carport and park.

“We brought dinner!” his grandmother called as she opened her door and stepped out, carrying Styrofoam containers.

“What did you bring?” Troy asked, following her inside the house.

“Meat and potatoes. Two of your favorite things.” Grammy stared at the baskets of peaches, then kissed his cheek. “Thanks for picking those for me, honey.” She hurried into the kitchen.

“Did you have a good day?” Troy asked as Truitt came inside and closed the door, blocking out the air that felt humid and heavy with heat. Although the weather hadn’t predicted rain, Troy could tell by the dark clouds gathering in the sky, they were in for a summer storm.

“Had a great day. The group I was helping all got ribbons. It was neat to see them show their animals. One little cutie just about stole my ol’ heart. She had blonde curls and was missing her two front teeth, but she never even sniffled when the sheep she was showing butted her so hard it knocked her down.”

“I’m glad you had a good time,” Troy said, taking off his filthy shirt and washing up in the mudroom. He had everything from grass clippings to peach tree leaves stuck to him.

When he stepped into the kitchen, Truitt was setting plates on the counter while Grammy filled glasses with iced tea.

“What did you do today, Grammy?” Troy asked, gathering napkins and cutlery and placing them by each plate.

She handed him a glass of tea. “I spent the morning helping Alice. This afternoon, I judged some of the 4-H sewing projects. It was so much fun, and the students did a wonderful job with their creations.”

“That’s great, Grammy.” Troy pulled out a barstool for his grandmother and waited for her to take a seat before he slid

onto the one next to her. “What did you two bring home for dinner?”

“We told you,” Truitt said, bumping him with his elbow. “Meat and potatoes.”

“Truitt, would you give thanks?” Grammy asked, leaning around Troy to look at his cousin.

The three of them bowed their heads, and Troy listened as Truitt offered a brief but heartfelt prayer.

“Amen,” Grammy said, then slid a Styrofoam container closer to Troy. “I think you’ll like this.”

Troy opened the lid to see tater tots covered in slices of tenderloin beef, caramelized onions, shredded cheese, and a dollop of sour cream.

“You went to see Lark?” he asked, glancing at his grandmother, then glowering at Truitt, who ignored him as he dished tater tots smothered in marinara sauce, melted mozzarella cheese, and plump meatballs onto his plate.

“We did. My goodness, she is a hard worker, and so pretty, and such a sweetheart. It’s no wonder she’s tickled your fancy.”

Troy shifted his dark look from his cousin to his grandmother. He counted to ten while she dished tater tots with shredded pork, thin slices of ham, cheese crumbles, and bits of pickle onto her plate. No doubt she’d ordered Lark’s Cuban tots.

“My fancy or nothing else has been tickled, Grammy. She’s just ... I was only...” Troy shoveled in a bite of food hoping the subject would magically change while he ate. It tasted even better than he’d anticipated. With the variety of toppings Lark offered, he was convinced he could eat at her food truck every day and never get tired of it.

“Yes, honey? You were saying?” His grandmother gave him an encouraging smile. One he chose not to acknowledge.

“Is the Totinator still trying to steal Lark’s customers?” Troy asked, then hurriedly forked another bite.

Truitt nodded and wiped his mouth on a napkin. “Trying, but not succeeding. Jessie and Chase Jarrett mentioned when I saw them this afternoon that Kyle was bad-mouthing Lark’s food to everyone who walked by, so Cooper went over and ordered something from him. Then he put on quite a show, acting like it was the worst thing he’d ever tasted, which I think it definitely could be.”

Troy grinned. “I wish I’d been there to see that. Kyle’s not directly bothering Lark, is he?”

“Not that I’ve heard.” Truitt gave him a long look. “Why don’t you just admit you like her, bro? She’s pretty and smart and nice, and she knows how to cook. That’s three more things than the last two empty-headed twits you dated.”

“They were pretty, Truitt,” Grammy said, winking at Troy’s cousin, “even if I’ve seen dirt clods with more brains than they possessed.”

Troy scooped in his food, desperate to escape the conversation, but his grandmother’s hand on his arm made him set down his fork.

“Would it be so terrible to date again, Troy? I know that last ninny you dated a few years ago almost broke your heart when she fed you that nonsense about you holding her back in the shadows when she was meant to shine. That girl wasn’t worth any of the grief you put yourself through over her. I think Lark might be someone you’d never regret spending the time to get to know.”

Troy shrugged and returned to eating. As he did, Truitt and Grammy seemed to feel the need to evaluate not only his past girlfriends but every girl he’d ever dated. They discussed a few Troy had completely forgotten about. To hear them pick apart his past love life made it sound like he preferred girls who were short on brains and had a mean streak a mile wide.

“Look, I appreciate what you two are trying to do, but I don’t have time for a relationship right now. We’ve got the ranch, my farrier business, and, for the next month, rodeo competitions to keep me busy. I’m much more concerned about keeping this ranch running smoothly than wasting time

chasing after a woman who is so far out of my league, she might as well exist in a different universe.”

“She’s not out of your league, honey. In fact, I think she’d be well suited to you,” Grammy stated. “Did you know she grew up on a potato farm?”

Troy battled the urge to roll his eyes but merely nodded his head. “Yes, Grammy. I am aware of that fact. Gibson Farms. Potato princess. Family has money.” He made a dismissive motion with his hand in the air. “She’d never be happy with me. I can’t give her all the things she’s probably accustomed to.”

“Seems to me if she was potato princess, as you put it, she wouldn’t be working her tail off in a food truck in the scorching summer heat at county fairs and rodeos trying to make something of herself,” Grammy said, giving him a pointed look. “Why not ask her on a real date, not just an evening at the rodeo surrounded by your friends, and see where things go from there? You do remember how a date works, don’t you?”

Troy did roll his eyes this time, then growled at Truitt, assuming he was the one who tattled to Grammy about Lark going with him to the rodeo the previous evening.

“Yes, I remember, and no I’m not asking her out. In case you two don’t recall, I’ve been vaccinated against women and refuse to catch the disease known as love.”

Truitt snickered, but their grandmother didn’t find him amusing at all.

“Troy Aaron Lucas!” she said in a tone he’d heard many times throughout his childhood. That tone, accompanied by the use of his full name, let him know he was in trouble.

Grammy yanked the fork from his hand and slapped it onto the counter, then grabbed the arms of the barstool and swiveled it around so he had to face her. “You listen to me, young man. Love is not a disease. It’s a beautiful, wonderful thing when you find the right partner. Just because you had a few bad experiences is no reason to run from your feelings or

avoid them altogether. I know you're busy and overburdened with work, and I can't begin to tell you boys how much I love and appreciate you both being here, working beside me every day. But if you don't start living a little, Troy, you're going to wake up one day as a lonely old man and question why you wasted your youth. You are asking this girl out. If the date doesn't go well, then you can tell us, and we both promise to leave you alone and stop meddling. But if you have a good time, then at least open yourself to the possibility of getting to know Lark."

Truitt nudged him with his elbow and waggled his eyebrows. "There are worse things than going out for an evening of fun with a beautiful girl who has brains instead of bubbles in her head. Come on, bro. Give her, and yourself, a chance."

Troy sighed in defeat. Not only would his grandmother and cousin nag him to death about Lark, but they would also keep him from finishing his incredible dinner if he didn't go along with their plans.

"Fine. I'll ask her out, but it will be in my own time and my own way. Don't push, and don't go blabbing it to anyone. Deal?"

Troy held his grandmother's gaze until she nodded her head, then he looked at Truitt, who nodded once.

"Now, eat your dinner before it gets cold," his grandmother said, giving him back his fork as though it was his fault they'd all stopped eating.

Troy took a few bites, then started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Truitt asked.

"I was just picturing Cooper doing something crazy like holding his throat and gagging while loudly proclaiming the Totinator's food was about to kill him."

Grammy giggled. "It would have been something to see, I'm sure."

The following afternoon, Troy drew in a deep breath, then headed toward the food vendors at the fair. He wasn't

ready to ask Lark out on a real date, but he felt a need to see her. Hopefully, she wouldn't think he was a complete loser for kissing her cheek and walking away the other night.

Man, he really needed to get his A-game on if he wanted a chance with this girl. Only, he had yet to decide if he wanted one.

Truitt had told him that morning over breakfast that if Troy didn't get his act together and ask her out, he would. Troy had envisioned how much his grandmother would fuss if he pulled back his fist and broke Truitt's nose.

The thought of his cousin—or anyone, for that matter—dating Lark made him want to growl, bang his fists into something, and turn into a full-fledged cavedweller.

According to one of his past girlfriends, he was closer to a neanderthal than a modern man. Considering the scrawny purse-packing urbanite she'd ended up marrying, he'd decided to take it as a compliment.

However, none of that helped to bolster his confidence as he neared Lark's food truck. He could see a line of people waiting to order in front of it. Kyle Rearden stood outside his truck, waving flyers in people's faces and offering a buy one, get one free discount. A few people took him up on the offer but most kept walking. Apparently, word had gotten around about his terrible food.

Curious, Troy veered off course and walked around behind the food trucks. When he moved behind the Totinator truck, he peered into the garbage bin to see bags of the cheapest tater tots made by a big box store and containers of discount pre-packaged meats and toppings.

Lark had nothing to worry about when it came to her competition.

Not only was her food fresh and delicious, but she also didn't use a vat of hot grease to cook everything. Troy had been surprised at how good her tater tots tasted. She'd told him the other day she made them from scratch, added her own seasoning, baked them, then froze them before heating them in

an air fryer. The tots were the best he'd ever eaten and tasted more like something a gourmet chef might serve than an offering from a food truck at the fair.

Troy walked over to Lark's truck and stood in the shade by her back door. He could see Jay and Rachel inside, working with Lark. Rachel took the orders and made change when needed. Jay seemed to be in charge of adding toppings, while Lark cooked the potatoes and made patty melts and cheese melts.

His mouth started to water, and he wasn't sure if it was from hunger or getting an eyeful when Lark bent over to take something out of a freezer beneath the counter.

"Hey, you," she said, glancing over her shoulder and noticing him outside. She smiled at him, her eyes bright in welcome. "Are you hungry?"

Troy grinned at her. "Always, but take care of your customers. I can come back later."

"No. If you have time, wait right there. What would you like to eat?" she asked as she flipped meat patties on the grill.

"Surprise me," he said, leaning against the door frame, content to watch her work. Even when she was rushing to fill orders, there was simple grace in each movement she made.

"I will," she said, winking at him as she added cheese to smashed tots.

"We need more napkins and trays," Rachel said as she took another order.

Lark took a set of keys from her pocket and tossed them to Troy. "Would you mind? They're in that locked box by the generator."

Troy stepped around behind her food truck and saw a large storage box with a padlocked lid below the generator that stuck out slightly on the side of the food truck. He unlocked the box, took out paper trays and napkins, then relocked the box. He handed the paper goods to Rachel and the keys to Lark before returning to his position just outside the door.

He felt like he could be useful, but had no idea what to do beyond staying out of their way.

“Here you go, cowboy,” Lark said, handing him a tray with tots smothered in cheese, seasoned ground beef, sour cream, chopped lettuce, guacamole, sliced olives, and refried beans.

“Looks great, Lark. Thank you.” He tipped his head to her and accepted the cup of Dr Pepper held out to him, then took a seat on one of the big Tundra coolers near the back door of her truck.

He ate every bite of the meal, wondering how she came up with so many different, delicious ways to serve tater tots. Troy had just thrown away his tray when Lark stepped outside and handed him a bag of Spuddy Bites.

“Did you like the taco tots?” she asked, plopping down on the step and waving the hem of her apron up and down to create a breeze. Her face was flushed, and the tendrils of hair that had escaped her braid clung to her temples and neck.

Troy glanced around the truck to see there was only one person in line. That was good. Lark and her small crew needed a break. He looked back at Lark and nodded. “It was amazing, just like everything I’ve eaten here.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying the food.” Lark blew out a long breath, like she was overheated and exhausted. “It’s a good thing today is the last day of the fair. I’m not sure I could survive another day in this heat.”

Troy had been so wrapped up in thoughts of Lark and being tormented by his cousin and grandmother, he’d barely noticed the thermometer had edged up into the triple digits. He took a frozen treat from the bag he held and popped it in his mouth. It was just as good as he remembered from the other day.

“The rainstorm last night should have cooled things off,” Lark said, looking up at the cloudy sky. “Instead, it just made the humidity level climb.”

Troy's hand was cool from holding the cup of icy pop. Without thinking about what he was doing, he moved close to Lark, placing his hand on her neck. Heat radiated off her, and he felt it spiral through his veins when she moaned and tipped her head to the side.

"That feels so good," she muttered, closing her eyes.

For a moment, Troy almost forgot he was at the fair, surrounded by thousands of people, at least fifty of whom would tease him without mercy if he gave into the urge to bend down and kiss Lark.

It was as if the world around them blurred into the background and the only thing in focus was Lark and those tempting lips of hers.

Because he was about to fall into a place—into a feeling—he wasn't yet sure he wanted to experience, he lifted the lid on his cup, fished out a piece of ice, and dropped it down the back of Lark's T-shirt.

"Oh!" she gasped and did a few contortionist-worthy moves as she jumped off the step and snagged the ice cube before it slid into her shorts. She held the ice against her throat and glared at Troy. "I feed you, and this is the thanks I get?"

Although her words sounded angry, the smile she couldn't hide and the mirth sparkling in her eyes let him know she wasn't upset.

"You looked warm." He shrugged, as though that should explain everything. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Lark shook her head and sank back onto the step. "No. It just feels good to sit down for a minute. We should have an hour or so before things get super busy again."

"Has Kyle been bothering you?" Troy tilted his head toward the Totinator's truck.

"Not anything worth mentioning. Your friend Cooper made quite a scene in front of Kyle's truck yesterday. Since then, we've been flooded with customers. Tell him I owe him a free meal for his family if he and Paige want to stop by."

“I’ll pass that on to him,” Troy said, planning to thank Cooper as soon as he caught up to him.

“You’re roping tonight at the rodeo, aren’t you?” Lark asked, giving him a studying glance as water rivulets from the rapidly melting ice cube ran down her neck. Something about watching those droplets of water trickle below her neckline made Troy feel like something attempted to cut off his air supply.

He nodded and took a long drink of soda, but it didn’t seem to help his suddenly overheated state.

“I really had a nice time with you the other night, Troy. Thanks for asking me to go with you.”

Worried that she might think he’d only asked her out to keep getting free food, he decided he had to speak up and set things right. “I had a great time with you, Lark, and I’ve enjoyed getting to see you here at the fair. I was wondering if you, um ... maybe if sometime, when you aren’t so busy ...”

Lark offered him an encouraging look as she sat up and leaned toward him. “Yes?”

The words burst out of him before he could get control of his tongue. “Would you go on a date with me?”

Lark appeared surprised as she stared up at him for what felt like half of eternity. “Do you mean tonight? To the rodeo?”

Troy shook his head. “No. I was thinking more like a real date where we aren’t surrounded by too many people we know, where we can sit at a quiet table and eat dinner or go to a movie or something along those lines.”

A smile wreathed Lark’s face, and she slowly nodded. “I’d like that, Troy, but I’m not sure when I’ll have time. I still need to hire two new helpers, and I’ve got to get all the food ready for the Walla Walla fair next week.”

“She’ll go with you Monday,” Jay called from inside the food truck. “Lark does food prep on Tuesday afternoons, but her Mondays are free.”

Lark glowered at her brother before turning back to Troy. He wasn't certain if she was making excuses not to see him, or if she, like him, just lived an incredibly busy life.

"How about lunch on Monday?" Lark asked, casting one more death glare at her brother.

"If you're too busy, Lark, that's okay. Don't give it another thought." Troy popped the last Spuddy Bite in his mouth, tossed the sack in the garbage, and started to back away. "I'll see you guys later."

"No, Troy, wait!" Lark bounded off the step and caught the hand that wasn't holding his drink. "I would very much like to have lunch with you. I just won't have a lot of time until I can get some people hired." She took a notepad from the pocket of her apron, scribbled an address on it, and handed it to him. "Could you meet me there Monday at eleven?"

"Only if you're sure it won't mess up your plans."

"It won't. I promise. And after this crazy week, it'll be nice to have lunch with you to look forward to."

Troy smiled and tucked the paper in his shirt pocket, then bent forward and kissed Lark's cheek. "I'll talk to you later."

"I'll count on it," she whispered.

Troy turned and strode off, pondering what craziness had possessed him to ask for a date, then wondered how he'd survive until Monday at eleven rolled around.

Chapter Nine



“Don’t you look nice, honey,” Grammy said as Troy hustled into the kitchen.

He’d been up since three to get as much work done as possible so he could be gone for a few hours to have lunch with Lark. On the way home, he planned to run by the feed store, pick up parts at the John Deere dealership, and swing by the tire store to retrieve a tractor tire he’d ordered two weeks ago.

At ten, he’d turned off the old swather they only used when they were behind on cutting hay, zoomed back to the house on his ATV, and rushed to take a shower and shave. Truitt was busy running their newer swather in another field of hay, and Grammy had been elbow-deep in canning peaches, so he thought he’d be able to sneak in and out of the house unnoticed, but apparently, his luck ran out.

“You heading to town, Troy?” Grammy asked as she peeled a big peach, then sliced it into a bowl.

“Yep. I’m meeting someone for lunch. I shouldn’t be gone long. I’ll run a few errands on my way back. Do you

need anything from town?” Troy gulped a glass of water, then wondered if Lark would enjoy some peaches.

“No, I think I have what I need. I’m hoping to get all these peaches put up today. Thank you for picking them for me. I should have started on them after church yesterday, but it was nice to have a day of rest.”

Other than feeding animals and doing only what was absolutely essential around the ranch, Sunday had always been a day when the Lucas family went to church, then came home and rested. When he was younger, Troy and Truitt used the quiet time to sneak out and fish or go riding. Now, he was grateful his grandmother stuck to the rule, allowing herself time to rest and recharge before she dove into another hectic week. Troy often spent his Sunday afternoons doing bookwork or paying ranch bills.

Troy nodded to his grandmother and glanced at the clock on the wall. He needed to get a move on, or he’d be late for his lunch date with Lark.

“Can I steal a few peaches, Grammy?” Troy asked, sorting through those she’d set on the counter by the sink.

“Of course, honey. I’ve got a basket in the pantry you can set them in.” She gave him a wide, perceptive smile, as though she knew where he was headed and whom he intended to see.

Troy turned on the light in the pantry located off the kitchen and spied half a dozen baskets stacked together. He chose a medium-sized basket with a sturdy handle and took it back into the kitchen.

Grammy set a dozen peaches inside it, then handed it to him. “I think she’ll appreciate that gift more than flowers.”

Troy didn’t bother to ask who Grammy assumed he was going to see. He pecked her cheek and headed toward the door.

“Tell Lark I said hello,” his grandmother called after him. “It was lovely to meet her last week. I hope I’ll see her in Walla Walla.”

“Bye, Grammy!” Troy escaped outside and shut the door behind him. He headed over to his pickup and started it,

wishing he'd thought to give the interior time to cool off before he had to leave. He really needed to add an exterior door to his bedroom so he could go in and out without suffering the scrutiny of his grandmother and Truitt.

Maybe he'd investigate the possibility this winter when work was slower and he'd have more time.

Troy drove down their lane, ignored Truitt's questioning gestures and the text his cousin sent as he drove past the field, and headed toward town. He was just a few miles down the road when a pickup veered into his lane, honked, then pulled back onto the proper side of the road. He waved at Cort McGraw and Tate Morgan as they drove in the direction of Cort's ranch. The two retired rodeo stars were still as thick as thieves. Troy could understand their close friendship. He felt that way about Truitt even if his cousin drove him bananas half the time.

He let his thoughts trip around his head as he drove into Kennewick then took the freeway toward Richland. He rarely had a reason to drive to the town that had boomed during World War II when the government acquired the town and surrounding area as part of a secret wartime project to build an atomic bomb with the Hanford project. They'd spent a week in school learning about it and even had a field trip to the museum. He'd thought it was neat, but Truitt hadn't been as impressed by it.

A glance at the clock on his dash confirmed he was cutting it close if he wanted to avoid being late. Troy preferred to always be at least five, if not ten, minutes early regardless of where he was going.

He checked the GPS on his phone, concerned he'd somehow typed in the wrong address from the slip of paper Lark had given to him Saturday. He was in a residential area, not anywhere near a restaurant, but the arrival time was estimated at two minutes.

Troy had stopped by Lark's food truck Saturday before the rodeo started to see if she wanted to watch it, but Lark had been slammed with customers. He had managed to slip money

onto the back counter when she wasn't looking to pay for all the food she'd fed him at no charge. It had made him smile, thinking of her coming across the crisp bills and wondering where they had come from.

"Your destination is on the right," the voice on the GPS system announced.

Troy slowed and glanced across the street at a small house that looked like a cottage someone's grandma might live in. He recognized Lark's SUV parked in the driveway, so he pulled in behind it.

With a deep breath that wasn't particularly calming, he picked up the basket of peaches, got out of the pickup, and contemplated if it was too late to cancel. He saw Lark's face in the front window and knew it was time for him to square his shoulders and press onward. Troy waved to her and took the front steps in two long strides.

Lark opened the door and stepped back, welcoming him inside with a smile.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said, looking like a teenager with her hair in twin braids while she wore a lavender tank top and denim cutoff shorts.

The view of her legs caused Troy to feel like he'd licked a salt block, something he'd only done once on a dare from Truitt. Her skin was milky pale but smooth, and what he could see of her legs in the shorts confirmed they were as shapely as the rest of her.

"You brought me peaches?" Lark asked, pointing to the basket Troy carried.

He glanced down at it, as though the basket had somehow magically appeared in his hand without his knowledge. The vision of Lark with all that skin exposed made him feel like his brain cells had been exposed to a volatile strain of the plague and were dying one by one.

"Grammy has a few peach trees." He held the basket out to her. She took it, clutching it to her middle like it was a rare and treasured gift instead of a dozen pieces of fruit. Maybe

Grammy had been right when she'd said Lark would like the peaches more than flowers. But didn't all females appreciate flowers? Then again, Lark didn't seem to be like any woman he'd ever encountered.

"You're right on time," she said, edging toward a doorway. "I hope you don't mind a salad for lunch."

Troy reached to remove his hat, then recalled leaving it on the pickup seat. His hands fell nervously to his sides as he followed Lark from her living room into a small kitchen. "I'm sure whatever you made is great. You didn't have to cook for me. I would have gladly taken you out to lunch."

"I know, but I thought it might be nice for us to be able to get to know one another a little better without fighting the noise in a restaurant." Lark set the basket of peaches on the counter by the sink.

"Makes sense," Troy said, although nothing did. He wasn't even sure Lark liked him, but she'd invited him to her home and had cooked for him. If he'd known he'd be eating rabbit food for lunch, though, he might have grabbed a sandwich before he left the ranch.

Lark motioned to the doorway they'd just walked through. "Would you like to see the house? There isn't much to it."

"Sure." Troy followed as she showed him two bedrooms of almost identical size with a laundry room sandwiched between them. One bedroom was clearly used as an office space, although there was a bed in it. A peek into a moderate-sized bathroom concluded the tour.

They returned to the kitchen, and she handed him a glass of iced tea.

"Come on. I've got everything ready," she said, picking up a glass of water, then leading the way from the kitchen into a dining room. The table was covered in food. In addition to a large bowl of salad greens, there were at least two dozen toppings that included everything from grilled chicken to steak strips. Sliced boiled eggs, a variety of vegetables, a few dishes

of fruit, and even a bowl of roasted pecans were spread out like a grand buffet. The way Lark had arranged everything made it look like an edible work of art.

“Oh, wow!” Troy said, reluctant to disturb the food. It wasn’t just the way she’d arranged it but also the blend of colors and textures that made it look spectacular. Then he drew in a breath and filled his nose with the scent of roasted meat and yeasty bread, mingling with the soft, feminine fragrance that was all Lark. It proved to be a heady combination.

He knew his grandmother would love to see what the table looked like and pulled his phone from his pocket. “Do you mind if I take a photo of this for Grammy? She loves studying cooking magazines and recipes online.”

“Go ahead. I’ll set our drinks outside.” Lark opened a door onto the patio and he could see a small bistro table covered in a white cloth with place settings for two.

Troy snapped a few photos, noticed two text messages from Truitt he’d answer later, and shoved his phone into his pocket.

“Ready?” Lark asked, then handed him a rimmed plate that wasn’t quite a dinner plate, nor did it seem like a bowl.

Troy chose a small helping of the salad greens and then loaded up on all the toppings he liked best. He noticed Lark made her salad with chicken, strawberries, pecans, and some crumbled cheese he thought might be feta. His salad looked more like a plate of meat with a few veggies along for the ride. He added a spoon of strawberries and noticed Lark grinning at him as they moved outside.

The patio offered shade and a fresh breeze. Lark bowed her head and held out her hand to him. Troy took her slender fingers with his, expecting the jolt when they touched. He tried to focus as she offered a word of thanks for their meal and time together, then dug into the salad. The strips of tender steak were seasoned to perfection. Everything was so good, he went back for seconds. Lark had a small basket of breadsticks still warm from the oven on the table, and Troy ate three of

those before he forced himself to stop. If he spent much time with Lark, he'd have to put himself on a diet.

"I made dessert, but I think we should let our meal settle first." Lark leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other.

Troy considered what she'd do if he reached over and ran his hand over her calf just to feel the smooth skin. He quickly concluded he didn't want to explain to his grandmother why he returned home with a black eye.

Wisely keeping his hands to himself, he looked around Lark's tiny yard. There was a swatch of green grass bordered by a variety of thriving plants that ran along the eight-foot-high wooden fence. At first glance, Troy didn't give the plants any thought, but then he realized everything was in pots and most of it wasn't flowers.

"Herbs," Lark said, noticing his curious glances at her garden. She rose from her seat and walked over to a pot, breaking off a green leaf and carrying it back to him.

He rubbed it between his fingers and sniffed, getting a whiff of something that put him in mind of the sagebrush back at the ranch. It always smelled incredible after a summer rainstorm, rather like the leaf he held between his fingers.

"It's sage. I planted herbs and edible flowers that I can use when I cook instead of ornamental plants."

Troy nodded his head and sniffed the sage leaf again, hoping it might clear his jumbled thoughts. Most of what was circling through his brain—an acute urge to pull Lark onto his lap and kiss her until they both were breathless—would likely mean this was their first and last unsupervised date together. He didn't consider the night she went with him to the rodeo a true date since they were surrounded by people they knew. Then there was the failed kiss attempt at the end of the evening that he refused to think about.

"What got you interested in cooking instead of potato farming?" he asked, hoping it was a safe topic.

Lark leaned back in her chair and took a drink of her water. She glanced over at him and gave him a sad smile. “My grandma. She did most of the cooking for our family. Mom has always worked alongside Dad on the farm. Growing up, Robin had no interest in learning any useful skills, unless you consider makeup contouring vital for survival.”

Troy chuckled softly. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Me either.” Lark sighed. “Dad has fair skin like mine, and the red hair to go along with it. He’s had several skin cancer scares, and slathers on what seems like a boatload of sunscreen every day. My parents were always concerned about my skin burning, so I spent a lot of time inside with my grandmother. She taught me all about caring for a home, gardening, and cooking. Some of my happiest memories are from time spent in the kitchen with her, creating meals for our family. I knew by the time I was ten I wanted to be a chef, and the sooner I could move off the farm and to a big city, the better.”

When she fell silent, Troy felt compelled to get her talking again. “Is that what you did? Left for a big city?”

She nodded and looked out across her small but immaculate yard. “I went to culinary school in Seattle, spent time in Paris at a prestigious school, then returned to Seattle and started working at a high-end restaurant. It was hectic and fast-paced, and sometimes brutal, but I learned so much.”

“Why’d you come back here?” Troy could tell from what she didn’t say that something had happened to tarnish the shine the big city had once held for her.

“That’s a story for another day. My goal is to one day open my own restaurant in Portland. Until I can make that happen, owning a food truck seemed like a great way to share my creativity and still do something I love. This is my make-it-or-break-it season. If I can save enough money before winter sets in, I plan to move to Portland in the spring and use my food truck to build up a loyal clientele who will support me when I open a restaurant. If I can’t save enough, I’ll likely end

up working for my family and spending another year here running the food truck on festival and event weekends.”

“You sound like that’s only a step above a prison sentence,” Troy teased. At her nod of agreement, he decided it might be a good time to change the subject. “Did you make any headway on finding some help to replace Jay and Rachel?”

“I have four people lined up for interviews this afternoon. I’m hoping even one of them works out.”

“Someone will.” Troy looked at her, thinking about Jay and Lark being so close. “Was it your mom or dad who was into bird names? You said Robin is your older sister. Lark. Jay. I just put it all together.”

Lark grinned. “Actually, that was from my mom’s mom. She loved birds of all types, so when we were born, Mom gave us names of some of her favorite birds as a way to honor her. She passed away right before Robin was born.”

“I’m sorry she passed, but that’s a pretty cool way to honor her through your names. Would you give your kids bird names?”

Lark shook her head. “I don’t think so. A boy named Hawk or a girl named Wren just isn’t what I have in mind, if I ever get around to settling down and having a family. Right now, I’m all about my food truck.” She gave him a long, observant look. “And you’re all about the three balls you seem to be juggling in the air.”

“Three balls?” he asked, feeling more like he had a dozen and someone was running an automatic ball launcher that randomly shot more at him when he was least prepared to catch them.

“Sure. One is the rodeo and team roping with Truitt. One is the ranch and your grandmother. And one is your farrier business. I heard someone asking on the last day of the fair if anyone knew a good farrier, and I gave them your name. I hope that was okay?”

Troy nodded, thinking of the man who'd tracked him down at the beef barn and asked him to shoe six horses after the Pendleton Round-Up. "Absolutely. I'm always happy to take on more shoeing business. Every little bit helps."

Lark studied him again until he felt like fidgeting, although he remained still. She tipped her head and gave him a long look. "Have you thought about modeling? I heard Paige James and Jessie Jarret talking about the Lasso Eight photo shoot coming up in September. Paige said she was looking for models because most of the people she's been using are ready to retire. Jessie told me that meant they were now married and not comfortable having their backsides branded across billboards for everyone to ogle."

A grin creased his face. "And that's the reason I don't model, not that anyone wants to see my ugly mug anyway."

Lark's mouth fell open, and she gaped at him. She looked like she was about to say something, thought better of it, and stood. "You don't give yourself enough credit, cowboy. You ought to talk to Paige. I heard her mention their pay scale for one shoot, and it was a lot. You ready for dessert?"

Before he could respond, Lark gathered their dishes and disappeared inside. He rose, but she called from inside for him to stay there. He walked around the yard, looking at her herbs and pots full of pansies and other flowers. He had no idea what they were but assumed they were safe to eat. He plucked off a stem of something that more closely resembled a tiny Christmas tree than an herb and rubbed it between his fingers. The odor it emitted was strong, but not unpleasant.

"Rosemary," Lark said from behind him.

He turned and walked back to where she'd set two dessert plates on the table. Troy could see what looked like a bar cookie drizzled in chocolate and caramel with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the side.

"What's this?" he asked, waiting for her to resume her seat before he sat across from her.

“I call them cowboy blondies. It’s kind of a cross between a brownie and a cookie. There are oats, three kinds of chocolate, and pecans in there.”

Troy cut off a bite, discovering the treat was still warm from the oven. Coupled with the melting ice cream, it was a perfect way to end a meal. He ate the whole thing in a few bites.

Lark gave him an indulgent look, hurried inside, and returned with another serving for him.

“It’s so good,” he said, after taking another bite of the decadent dessert. “Have you thought about selling these at your food truck?”

She shook her head. “They would be cost prohibitive, and they don’t go with my potato theme. I chose tater tots because Dad lets me have the cull potatoes they can’t sell for free. There’s nothing wrong with the potatoes, but they have blemishes that keep them from being up to par with the quality product we sell. The toppings for the tots aren’t terribly expensive. The beef is purchased from my family, and I get the chickens wholesale through a distributor. I try to buy as much produce locally as I can, so that adds to the expenses, but I think it’s important to support fellow businesses in town.”

“I agree. We try to shop locally as much as we can. Grammy hates having to order anything online and avoids it as much as possible. Truitt is the computer whiz at our house and will often order something we need instead of trying to track it down in town. The time-saving aspect is a draw.”

Lark nodded. “I know. I do that too, sometimes. There are just some things it’s cheaper, faster, and easier to order with a click of a button and have delivered to your door.”

Troy felt stuffed and realized he’d eaten far more than he should have, but everything was delicious. Spending this quiet time with Lark had been nice. He felt as though he’d learned a little about her as she shared about wanting to get away and forge her own path far from her family. He understood it, even if he’d had to alter his wishes and dreams.

He glanced at his watch and stood. "I've sure enjoyed this time with you, Lark. I didn't intend for you to go to all this work, though. How about next time I provide the meal and we go for a drive or something?"

"I'd like that, Troy. Very much. Until I get my employee situation sorted, though, I might not have much free time, but I hope you'll stay in touch. You'll be in Walla Walla this week, won't you?"

"Yep. Truitt and I rope in the slack tomorrow, and we'll go from there. Do you need help getting set up or anything?" he asked as he carried his plate and glass inside. He set them in the sink and glanced around, wanting to help clean up.

"It's sweet of you to offer, but my mom volunteered to help this week. She has a friend in Walla Walla she wants to visit, so it's all worked out." Lark set the plates in the sink, rinsed her hands, then took a plastic container from a cupboard and set half a dozen of the cowboy blondies inside. "You can share these with your grandmother and Truitt."

"Thank you," Troy said, taking the container from her, then setting it on the counter. "Let me help clean up. I can at least bring stuff in from the dining room."

He didn't wait for her to protest but began carrying in dishes. They worked in companionable silence as she stored food in resealable containers. Troy loaded the dishwasher and when everything was put away, washed his hands. Lark handed him a towel, giving him a look he had no hope of interpreting. He wasn't certain if she didn't like him in her kitchen, or was impressed he'd wanted to help clean up.

"I should get going," he said, picking up the container of blondies and heading toward the door. "This was a real treat for me, Lark. Thank you for letting me see your home and enjoy another of your fine meals."

"My pleasure, cowboy." She reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out the money he'd left on her food truck counter. "I think this belongs to you," she said, tucking it into his shirt pocket.

“No, Lark. You’ve fed me far more than I’m worth. Let me pay you for at least some of the meals you gave me at the fair.”

“I can’t do that. You saved me from a wild steer, and you helped with my food truck several times, not to mention siccing Cooper on the Totinator. You more than earned the little bit of food I gave you. In fact, before I forget ...” She rushed back to the kitchen and reappeared with a resealable bag full of Spuddy Bites. “These are for you.”

Troy grinned and took the bag. “These things are addictive. What am I gonna do when fair and festival season is over?”

“Anytime you want some, you let me know and I’ll make them for you. Better yet, I might even teach you my secret recipe so you can make your own if you promise not to share it with anyone.”

“Scout’s honor,” he said, crossing his fingers over his chest, then raising them in front of him.

Lark laughed and gave him an impulsive hug. “I’m so glad you came today.”

“Me too, Lark.” Troy set the food in his hands on the small table by the door, then wrapped both arms around her, thinking she fit against him so perfectly, like she was made just for him. He rested his chin on her head and wondered when anything had ever felt so right.

He could have stayed right there, holding her, absorbing the warm aura that was all Lark, for the rest of his life, but he didn’t want to scare her off. He loosened his hold and eased back, smiling down at her when she looked up at him with questions in those amazing wintergreen eyes.

“I should get going,” Troy said, but made no effort to move.

Lark reached up and ran a hand over his jaw, then the next thing Troy knew, their lips connected in a soft, gentle brush.

Cautious, his mouth touched hers like a butterfly dipping into nectar once, then twice more.

“I’ll call you tonight,” Troy said in a raspy whisper when he pulled back. Before he did something he wouldn’t regret in the least, something that might offend Lark, he grabbed his treats and raced out the door.

The entire drive home, he lectured himself for having feathers for brains. Why hadn’t he kissed Lark like there was no tomorrow when he had the opportunity instead of barely touching her lips? Even that simple contact had set his blood on fire.

If he all-out kissed her, would he implode? Explode? Burst into flames? Spontaneously combust?

He grinned as he turned onto the Dusty Hills Ranch lane. He didn’t know what might happen, but he was certainly game to find out.

Chapter Ten



“Can this day get any worse?” Lark muttered to herself, not wanting an answer as she frantically chopped tomatoes for her taco tots.

It was the first day of the fair in Walla Walla, and nothing had gone according to plan. The generator had spluttered and died five minutes after she'd arrived. Lark had completely forgotten about fueling it before the event because that task was one Jay had always taken care of for her.

She'd rushed to find an open store where she could purchase gas cans, fill them, and return to the fairgrounds. Lark had spilled fuel on her shirt when she was pouring it into the generator and hadn't had the time or a place to take a shower. At least she had extra T-shirts to wear.

Once the generator was up and running, she'd started to shift food from coolers to the freezers, only to find them warm inside because the generator had stopped running. Thank goodness she hadn't left any food in the freezers or the fridge overnight when she'd set up yesterday. She'd slammed the lid on the cooler and waited for the freezers to reach a proper temperature.

Prep work had gone fine until she realized she'd forgotten to bring any lettuce, so she'd made another trip to the store. Already running behind, it didn't help matters that she'd only been able to find one person willing to work for her, and they weren't available to come until noon.

Lark startled at a loud bang from a vehicle backfiring and sliced through her finger. She bled all over her apron and the counter before she got it cleaned and bandaged, then pulled on gloves to make sure it stayed dry. She didn't have a spare apron, so she tossed it with her fuel-dampened shirt in an empty milk crate she set behind the food truck and returned to work.

It was nearly opening time when a guy who had to be twice her age drove his camo-painted pickup past her, tossing her a lecherous look, before he headed toward the end of the food trucks and booths. He parked right in the way of anyone trying to get through.

As she moved from cutting tomatoes to slicing cheese for patty melts, she kept an eye on him as he climbed out of the vehicle. He was dressed in camo that matched the pickup. The man walked in what she assumed was supposed to be a swagger, but the off-kilter gait made him look more like the bug alien from the original *Men in Black* movie than a dude with some game. He wasn't much taller than she, had a paunch hanging over his belt, and put her in mind of the Totinator.

"Go away, go away, go away," she chanted under her breath, hoping he wouldn't come her direction.

Despite her fervent pleas that the universe seemed intent on ignoring, he headed straight for her food truck.

"Hey, doll. What's cookin'?" he asked, resting a beefy arm on her order counter.

"Nothing yet. We aren't quite ready to open. Are you a vendor?" she asked, hoping to get a name and description if she needed to file a police report later. She didn't know what it was about him that made her so unsettled, but something about him gave off creepy stalker vibes.

“I’m Cecil Olinger. I run a camo shop up north of here. That’s my truck,” he said, smiling at her with two gold front teeth as he pointed to the pickup he’d just parked in the way of anyone trying to come or go between the food vendors and the carnival.

She couldn’t help but stare at the gold teeth glittering in the morning light. Lark had no idea dentists still used gold for teeth. Then again, Cecil Olinger looked more like a do-it-yourself kind of guy. Maybe he’d spray-painted them for the fair.

“That’s nice,” Lark said, breathing through her mouth to keep from inhaling a whiff of his overwhelming cologne mixed with an unwashed-body odor.

She tried to think of something she could say to get rid of him. He didn’t seem to be in a rush to leave, but her brain kept coming up empty on a tactful phrase that would send him on his way. She hated to be rude and make an enemy before the fair even began, but she didn’t know how much longer she could tolerate him gawking at her like she was a prime piece of beef.

“You got plans tonight, doll? We could take my truck for a drive and have us a heckuva time. What do you say? I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Olinger.” Out of instinct, Lark moved back, beyond his reach. “I’ll be working tonight. Even if I weren’t, I’m not interested. Thanks, but no thanks. Now, if you’ll please excuse me, I have work to see to before we open.”

The man’s too-wide smile dripped into a sneer. “I said we’re going, and what I say goes. Understand? Be ready at seven, or you’ll be sorry.”

“Didn’t you hear the lady?” Troy stepped around the side of the food truck, crossed his arms over his chest, and leveled Cecil with a frigid glare. “She said no. You have a problem with that?”

Cecil stepped back from the truck and shook his head. “Hey, man. I don’t want no trouble.”

“That’s good. Now get out of here. If I hear of you bothering Bud’s Spuds again, I’ll come pay you a visit, and there will definitely be trouble. Understood?”

Cecil nodded. He never even gave Lark a second glance as he hightailed it back to his pickup, where a security guard was on a radio. The guard said something to him and Cecil jumped into his rig and took off, throwing clumps of grass and a cloud of dust behind him.

“Idiot,” Troy said, shaking his head in disgust before he looked up at her as he stood in front of her food truck. “Are you okay?”

Suddenly blinded by the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks, she closed her eyes, nodded her head, and drew in a breath tinged with the wonderful woodsy smell that was all Troy. She released the knife she held, wiped her hands on a towel, and continued breathing in calming breaths.

The back step groaned and the floor shifted slightly, then she felt Troy’s presence beside her.

“Hey, Songbird. What’s wrong?” Troy didn’t hesitate to pull her against him, offering a comforting hug as his big hands gently splayed across her back.

He made her feel safe and protected—loved.

“Songbird?” she asked in a thin voice, still not in control of her emotions. She knew if she looked up at Troy and saw sympathy on his face, she’d lose the tenuous hold she had on her tears.

“You know, like a lark is a songbird. It just seemed like a good name for you. I don’t even have any idea if you can sing, but you’re always so bright and cheerful, like a songbird. I won’t call you that again if you mind.”

Lark tightened her hold around him, enjoying the feel of his solid muscles and the calming rhythm of listening to the steady beat of his heart. “You can call me Songbird, but only you. I’ll deck anyone else who tries.”

“Good to know,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “I’m sorry that dummy was bugging you. Did he say anything he shouldn’t have other than insisting you go out with him?”

Lark shook her head but didn’t move out of his embrace. “No. He did give me his name, though. Do you think I should report him?”

“I do,” Troy said with conviction in his tone. “If you don’t, he might come back or try that with someone else here at the fair. I’ll go with you if you like.”

“No. That’s okay. I should do it on my own, but it’s just me here at the food truck until noon. Do you think you could find the guard and send him over?”

Troy pushed her back just enough he could tilt her chin upward so she was forced to look at him. “I thought when we talked last night, you said you hired someone.”

Lark nodded and forced her tears away. “I did. They couldn’t make it until noon today. I’m not holding out hope they’ll work out. I really need to find a couple of good people I can count on, but it’s hard with all the college kids heading back to school and everyone else too busy for part-time work.”

“I’ll ask around,” Troy said, releasing her chin and pulling her against him once again, as though he enjoyed holding her as much as she loved being held. “I could help you for a little while until Truitt and I have to rope in the slack.”

Lark pulled back and gazed up at him. “No. The way my day is going, you’d be taking your life in your hands to stay in here with me.”

“It might be worth it,” he said, lifting one eyebrow and wagging it suggestively, making her laugh at his teasing.

Troy took a step back. “I’ll go find the security guard. After that, I’ll serve as your errand boy or whatever you need for the next hour.”

Before she could argue, Troy took one big step out of the truck and disappeared around the corner. Lark couldn’t help it

if she leaned out and watched him walk away in those jeans that fit him like a smooth glove.

True to his word, Troy sent a security guard to speak with her. He wrote down all the information about her unwelcome visitor and told her she wouldn't need to worry about Cecil bothering her again.

Relieved but starting to panic about meeting the demands of the day without any help at all, she looked up from sauteing onions and peppers to see Troy heading toward her as he spoke to a young man who looked vaguely familiar.

"Hey, you," she said, smiling at Troy as he stepped in front of her order counter.

"Hey, yourself. Did you talk to security?"

Lark nodded. "Yes. He said I shouldn't have any more trouble."

"That's good." Troy settled a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Lark, this is Birch Barton. I'm not sure if you've met him or not, but his brother-in-law is Shaun Price, one of the pickup men."

"Of course. I thought I recognized you, Birch, but I wasn't sure from where."

The young man, who was probably around eighteen or nineteen, grinned. "Nice to officially meet you, Miss Gibson. Troy said you are hiring, and I could use some extra money this week."

"Oh, okay." Lark set the saucepan on a trivet, wiped her hands on a towel, and moved over to the counter. "Do you have any experience working in a vendor booth or food truck?"

"No, but I've helped with the FFA fundraisers each year in school, and I'm good at math."

"You're hired!" Lark smiled, and told him what she'd pay per hour. "Seriously, at this point, I'll take any help I can get. If you're interested, what hours can you work?"

Birch glanced at Troy, who gave him an encouraging look before he shifted his focus back to Lark. “I can help starting today until two, but then I’ll have to leave.”

“That works, Birch, and thank you. Whenever you’re ready, come in the truck, and I’ll give you the lowdown.”

“Great. I’ll just get a few things squared away, then be right back.” Birch tipped his ball cap to her then raced off in the direction of the horse barns.

Lark leaned on the counter and smiled at Troy. “Thank you for thinking of Birch.”

Troy shrugged. “I make no promises about how much help he’ll be, but he’s a good kid. He has a new girlfriend he’s trying to impress and mentioned he could use some extra money while he’s hanging out at the fair. You’ll be funding his date nights to the rodeo.”

“I’m glad his hard work won’t be wasted,” she said with a teasing smile, then reached out and grabbed Troy’s hand. The sizzle was still there that happened every time they touched, but she relished it instead of fearing it. If Troy ever got around to kissing her, *really* kissing her, she wondered if her lips would melt or catch fire.

He glanced from her hand to her face, and she saw something in his eyes that made her want to beg him to never leave her. It had been such a comfort to have him hold her earlier when she’d been upset. Lark was used to standing on her own two feet and taking care of herself. It would be so easy to grow accustomed to leaning on Troy’s strength, which was precisely why she refused to allow herself to even consider the possibility.

Regardless of her tumultuous feelings, though, Troy had quickly become a friend she could truly count on.

“Thank you, Troy,” she said, squeezing his hand. “For being a good friend.”

“Takes one to know one,” he joked, but he lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed the backs of them, sending her senses into overload. “I’ll see you later, Songbird.”

“Okay,” she said, feeling slightly lightheaded. The kiss on her fingers seemed so out of character for the quiet cowboy she thought she knew. She was starting to discover he was far more complex than she’d first assumed.

Troy started to walk away, but she gathered enough wits to call out to him before he’d made it far. “Troy!”

He turned back and hurried to the counter. “Something wrong?”

“No. I just wanted you to try these,” she said, opening the air fryer and dumping the contents of the basket into a paper tray.

“No way.” Troy looked at the bacon-wrapped tater tots, then at her. “You really are the potato princess.”

She laughed as he blew on one of the tots, then popped it into his mouth. “I thought it might be good to add these to the menu as a quick snack,” she said. “What do you think?”

“So good,” he muttered and backed away, already blowing on another. “Definitely keep these on your menu list. In fact, save me some for later.”

Lark had no time to watch him walk away as people got in line to place orders. Just when she wondered how she’d ever manage on her own, Birch arrived.

“Take orders, collect money, fill drink cups,” she said, then tossed him a T-shirt with the Bud’s Spuds logo on the front.

Birch yanked off the western shirt he wore, causing three teen girls in line to practically faint as he pulled on the T-shirt. He winked at Lark, then got busy writing down orders, taking payments, and getting beverages for the customers.

Although a third person helping would have been wonderful, they somehow made it through the lunch rush. The woman Lark had hired to help her never showed up, nor did she text or call with an excuse or explanation.

Birch stayed until half past two, giving her time to get a restroom break before he said he had to leave. She paid him

for the time he worked, plus a ten-dollar bonus just for showing up.

“Thanks, Lark. I’ll see you in the morning. What time do you want me to be here?”

“Anytime between eight and nine would be awesome. Have a great rest of the day, Birch, and thank you for stepping in to help today.” Lark made a shooing motion toward her door. “Now, go have fun.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Thanks again!” Birch raced out the door and she saw him jogging off toward the horse barns.

Lark’s mother had promised to come at four to help with the evening crowd. She just hoped her mom didn’t get busy and forget.

While she waited for her mother to arrive, Lark filled orders, cleaned up from the lunch rush, refilled napkin dispensers and baskets with condiments, then started prepping for what she assumed would be a busy evening.

Nervous when four arrived and her mother didn’t, Lark forced herself not to send a text demanding to know where she was. It was a sign of how desperate she was that she’d asked her mom for help in the first place. Everyone in her family would know the end of the world was near if she stooped low enough to ask her sister for help, though.

Amused as she pictured Robin trying to take orders, make change, and fill drink cups while keeping her perfect manicure from getting mussed, Lark couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s the face I like to see,” her mother said as she stepped inside the truck. “How’s it going, sweetheart?”

“Good and bad.” Lark told her mother about the rough start to her day, glossing over the creepy camo guy, then highlighting how she’d hired a teenager to help through the lunch rush each day.

“Why don’t you place a help wanted sign out front? Surely there are more kids who could use a job for a few days.”

Lark felt like an idiot for not thinking of the idea herself. She used a marker to write on a piece of cardboard she cut off a box, then duct taped it beneath the Bud's Spuds logo where everyone could see it.

"Wow! It's so hot in here, sweetie. How do you survive it?" her mother asked, looking around for a place to store her purse. Lark took it from her and stuffed it into the cubby where she kept her purse along with a box of office supplies.

At least her mother had come wearing one of the Bud's Spuds T-shirts and an apron. Lark made a mental note to bring extra aprons so she wouldn't be left without one if she spilled or bled all over hers.

"What do you need me to do?" her mother asked, glancing from the air fryers to the fridge and freezers to her prep counter.

"I need you to work the front counter, Mom. You write down orders on this pad with a name. I've already numbered them. Collect payment and make change if necessary. The cash drawer is right there under the counter." Lark showed her where she kept the change. "Most people pay with plastic and use this little card reader." Lark tapped a card reader connected to a small tablet.

"That seems easy enough," her mother said, looking somewhat bored.

"Good. Once you have the order, clip it to this portable order wheel. That's how I know which order to make next. While I get the food ready for the order, you fill their drink order. We have bottles of water, or they can get a cup of soda. The options are Coke, Diet Coke, Dr Pepper, or Sprite." Lark pointed to the small freezer beneath the far end of the counter. "If they order a dessert, I keep the Arctic Spuds and Spuddy Bites in there. If they order a loaded Arctic Spud, make sure you add the chopped mint, orange peel, and candied bacon."

"Okay," Marsha Gibson said, looking far less confident than she had when she'd first entered the food truck.

“Here’s your chance, Mom. Take the order, put it on the wheel, take payment, get them drinks, give them the order. Nothing to it.” Lark gave her mom an encouraging pat on the back as a family of four walked up to the order counter.

From there, the day that had started so badly got far worse. Her mother, a person who owned the gift of gab, seemed to think it necessary to make small talk with every person who stood in line. The line grew, the orders backed up, and Lark wasn’t sure her mother had remembered to charge a customer with a hundred-dollar order.

“Mom, did that guy pay?” Lark asked, stepping behind her mother and speaking quietly in her ear.

“Oh, gracious!” Marsha clapped her hands to her cheeks in obvious dismay. “I think I’ve forgotten to charge the last six or so people.”

“Mom!” Lark couldn’t help the volume of her voice. She wasn’t going to be in business long if her mother continued giving the food away. The last half a dozen orders had totaled well over three hundred dollars. Goodness only knew how many other orders her mom had unintentionally given away for free.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. This is just way more work and far more stressful than I imagined. I have no idea how you do this all the time, or how Rachel and Jay managed the front counter as well as they did.” Marsha sighed in defeat. “I don’t think I can do this again.”

Lark knew her mother was doing her best, and she appreciated her help, but how could a teenage boy do a far better job than a woman who helped run a huge profitable farm? She would have traded places with her mother, but cooking had never been Marsha Gibson’s thing, with her preference to be outside amid the thick of the action.

“It’s okay, Mom. Let’s just try to remember the important steps like orders and payment, then worry about drinks and chatting.” Lark gave her mother a pat on her shoulder and returned to the griddle, where she was making three patty

melts and two cheese melts as well as heating sliced tenderloin.

By the time the dinner rush was through, Lark knew her mother was far too exhausted to drive herself home. She was contemplating how to get both her vehicle and her mom's back to the Tri-Cities when her sister and brother-in-law appeared at the order counter.

"Good grief, Lark! What did you do to Mom? She looks terrible!" Robin chided in her loud, bossy voice that always grated on Lark's nerves.

"I'm fine, Robin." Marsha stiffened. "What are you two doing here?"

Robin looked like a preening bird as she glanced over her shoulder at her husband. Danny was handsome in an aristocratic way. He was slender and on the shorter side, but he was kind and easygoing. "Danny's folks are watching the boys tonight, so we decided to come to the fair and concert."

"Great," Lark said, thinking her sister got far more date nights than most young unmarried women. "Can one of you drive Mom home later? She's going to be way too tired."

"No!" Robin said, going from preening to glaring in a second flat. "We're on a date!"

Lark bit back a comment that was sure to infuriate her sister and likely make Danny laugh, getting them into trouble.

Marsha placed her hand on Lark's arm. "I forgot to tell you, sweetie, but I'm going to spend the night at my friend Michelle's house. I left my car there earlier, and she dropped me off. She'll be back in a while to pick me up."

"That's a relief, Mom. I didn't want you driving home as tired as you look." Lark glanced at her watch. The concert held on the first night of the fair would begin in about fifteen minutes. After it started, the foot traffic would significantly decrease. Lark even considered closing down early but hated to do that. "Why don't you have Michelle come pick you up now? It won't be busy the rest of the evening, and I can handle it."

Relief washed over her mother's features. "Are you sure, Lark? I don't want to leave you without sufficient help."

"I'm sure, Mom. If you call Michelle now, she can be here by the time you have a little something to eat. Do you want some tots or something else?" Lark felt like she was mothering her mother, but the woman looked like she was about to collapse. She should have known better than to ask her for help. At least tomorrow she'd have Birch there for part of the day.

"Oh, I'd love to try your taco tots, and I want one of the Arctic Spuds when I finish my meal." Marsha smiled at Lark as she made her way out of the truck and stood in the shade it created, fanning her hand in front of her face as though she needed a breeze to cool her down.

"Coming right up, Mom." Lark looked at Danny. "Do you want anything?"

"Of course." Danny grinned at her as he read the menu board. "I want the Texan tots, please." He nudged his wife. "Rob, what about you?"

Robin's nose curled up on the end as though everything Lark sold was beneath her, then released a long sigh. "I suppose if we're eating Lark's food, I'll have the Greek tots."

"You've got it." Lark smiled even though she felt like sticking out her tongue at her sister. Robin was always such a big pill. One that was impossible to swallow.

It didn't take Lark long to complete their orders. Her mom's friend arrived a few minutes after Marsha had called her. It seemed Michelle had been at the fair for a while. She ordered Cuban tots, then she and Marsha sat on two of Lark's coolers to eat while Danny and Robin rushed off to catch the concert.

Lark served a dozen more customers, waved goodbye to her mother, then realized she hadn't seen or heard from Troy all day. She took out her phone and sent him a text, asking how he and Truitt had done in the team roping.

She helped two more customers, then leaned on the counter, sipping cold water, when her phone buzzed in her pocket. Without even looking to see who it was, she answered the phone. “Bud’s Spuds. This is Lark.”

“Hi, Songbird,” a voice that was both welcome and familiar made her smile.

She and Troy had talked each evening since their lunch date on Monday, so she wasn’t surprised he called.

“Hey, you. How did it go? Did you and Truitt place?”

“Yep. We took first. Looks like we’ll be back for the final round on Saturday.”

“That’s awesome, Troy. Congrats!” Lark was so happy for him and Truitt. She knew Troy wouldn’t come right out and say it, but she could hear the excitement in his voice. “I’m proud of you guys.”

She heard footsteps, like he was walking across a floor. The background noise she’d been able to hear quieted when she heard something click like a door shutting.

“Thanks, Songbird.” The tone of Troy’s voice made it seem almost like a caress. “Did Birch work out okay?”

“Yes, he was great, Troy. Thank you.” Lark couldn’t hold back a sigh. “He was so much better than my mom.”

“What happened?”

Lark plunked onto the folding stool she kept in the corner. “The worst thing was discovering she was forgetting to charge customers. She thinks she only missed six, but I have a feeling it was far more than that. She kept mixing up the regular Coke with Diet Coke, which made for some unhappy customers. She got about half the orders wrong, and she talked to everyone, Troy. Everyone. Like they were her new best friends. The line was backed up forever and instead of getting the orders out, she was too busy chatting to pay attention. It was awful.”

“Oh, well ...”

She could picture Troy with his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to figure out what to say.

“I’m not asking her back,” Lark said, hoping she didn’t sound as ungrateful as she felt. “I can’t afford it.”

Troy chuckled and Lark grinned, loving the sound of his laughter.

“I wish I could help you, Songbird, but I’ve got a full day of ranch work,” he said. “We’re haying this week, and I’ve got three farrier appointments tomorrow. I’m sorry I can’t be more help to you.”

“Are you kidding?” Lark asked, incredulous. “You’ve done so much, Troy, including bringing Birch to my food truck. Even with limited hours, he’ll be a huge help to me this week. I think I owe you some more Spuddy Bites, or would you rather collect with the bacon-wrapped tots?”

When Troy spoke, she could hear the teasing smile in his voice. “Both, and I wouldn’t refuse an Arctic Spud on the side.”

She laughed. “Gluttony does not become you, my friend.”

“Well, shoot. I guess I’m in big trouble then, considering how much I ate at your house on Monday and how much I love everything you’ve made.”

She heard someone call his name in the background.

“Hold your horses, Tru!” he hollered, although it sounded muffled, like he held his hand over his phone. “Listen, Lark, I need to go, but call me if there is anything I can do. And if that camo jerk bothers you again, let me know.”

“I’ll be fine, but thank you.” Lark hoped she’d seen the last of Cecil and his ugly pickup. “Talk tomorrow night?”

“You bet, Songbird. Have a good night.”

Lark listened as Troy disconnected the call, but before she could ruminate over their conversation, a group of teens wanted to place an order.

Although she wasn’t slammed, Lark kept busy the rest of the evening until it was closing time. She’d already closed the order window and started cleaning the equipment when she heard a light tap on the back door.

Lark turned and noticed a girl who looked to be about Birch's age standing by the back steps. The girl appeared shy as she hesitantly lifted her gaze to Lark's.

"I, um ... I saw the help wanted sign out front. Are you still hiring?"

Lark grabbed a towel and wiped off her hands, then walked to the back of the truck and down the steps until she faced the girl. She held her hand out in greeting. "I'm Lark. This is my food truck."

"Hi. I'm Allie," the girl said, shaking her hand. "I just wondered if you were still hiring."

"I am. Were you thinking something long-term or just for the fair?" Lark asked.

"Both, I guess. I'm a college student, new here in town, and could use a part-time job, but I don't have a lot of time with my class load." The girl sighed. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you."

Allie turned to leave, but Lark moved in front of her, blocking her escape.

"Can you work for me through the fair this week?" Lark asked, afraid to hope but desperate for help.

"Yes. I have classes tomorrow morning, but I'd be free in the afternoon and all day on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

Lark nodded. "That's great. Do you have any experience in the food industry?"

"No, miss. I've never worked in a restaurant or anything. But I have a little retail experience, and I'm a fast learner." Allie gave Lark a hopeful glance.

"Okay," Lark smiled at her. "Be here tomorrow after classes and plan to work until closing. Wear comfortable shoes and shorts or jeans you don't mind getting food spilled on. Make sure you wear your hair pulled back, and bring your ID with you."

Lark grabbed an application from her box of office supplies and handed it to Allie. "If you can fill this out and

bring it back tomorrow, that would be much appreciated.” She eyed the girl a moment. “What size T-shirt do you wear?”

“Medium.”

Lark riffled through her box of Bud’s Spuds shirts and pulled out one in Allie’s size. “Wear that when you report for work. I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Allie.”

“Thank you, Lark. I’ll be here no later than two.” Allie took the shirt Lark held out to her.

“That’s perfect. Have a great night, and thank you for stopping to ask about a job. I’m so glad you did.”

Allie’s smile was as bright as the lights beaming around them as she nodded once then hurried toward the exit.

Lark stepped outside and pulled the help wanted sign off the truck, hoping she wouldn’t have to stick it back out there tomorrow.

It took her twice as long as normal to clean up, and she had an hour’s drive back to Richland when she finally loaded the last cooler in her SUV and started home. She could only hope Allie and Birch would both show up and tomorrow would be a better day.

Chapter Eleven



At the sound of her steps squeaking, Lark glanced up from the patty melts she was making on the flat-top griddle in her food truck. Allie stood hesitantly on the top step, looking uncertain and a little scared but also determined.

“Hi, Allie! You’re early. That’s awesome. Come on in, and I’ll put you right to work,” Lark said with a smile, motioning the girl to step all the way inside.

It had been a busy morning, and she would welcome the extra set of hands. In fact, she thought it would be good for Birch and Allie to get acquainted before they were thrown into a full shift together. Birch had offered to work as much as Lark needed him the next few days after catching his girlfriend kissing her old boyfriend at the rodeo the previous evening.

Allie bobbed her head at Lark and took two more steps forward.

“Don’t I know you?” Birch asked, leaning around Lark to look at the newest Bud’s Spuds employee.

“You’re in my speech class,” Allie said, offering him a shy smile.

“Really? I’m sorry I haven’t spoken to you before,” Birch said, wiping his hand on a towel, then holding it out to Allie. “Have you chosen a partner for the class?”

Allie shook her head and shook Birch’s hand. Lark could see the girl made an effort at looking him in the eye and offering him a firm handshake.

Good for her.

Birch studied Allie a moment, then grinned in a way that probably sent teenage hearts aflutter all around the county. “Want to be my partner? I haven’t teamed up with anyone yet either.”

“Are you serious?” Allie asked, as though Birch was going to somehow renege on his offer and leave her in the lurch.

“Totally serious.” He took his phone from his pocket and held it out to her. “Add your name and send yourself a text so you have my contact info.”

The expression on Allie’s face made it seem as though Birch had just offered to toss a rope toward heaven and pull down a bucket of stars just for her. When they finished exchanging their numbers, Lark motioned with her elbow toward her sink. “Allie, go ahead and wash up, pull on a pair of gloves, and we’ll get started training you.”

Lark couldn’t help but smile as she watched Birch do his best to draw Allie out of her shell. He introduced her to a dozen young people, all of whom seemed to be on the college rodeo team. Before Lark quite knew what had happened, Birch had asked all his friends, which were many, to spread the word about the best food at the fair being at Bud’s Spuds.

Lark’s heart warmed when Allie let her guard down and laughed at a joke Birch and two of his friends made. She even teased Birch a little when he spilled an order of cheesy tots and the cheese clung to his shirt.

When he whipped off his T-shirt and Lark tossed him a clean one, she thought Allie might hyperventilate. Poor girl.

Lark could relate. She was sure if she ever saw Troy shirtless, her legs would refuse to hold her upright.

Thoughts of Troy made her grin as she turned her back to the teens and focused on cooking three more orders of tots. She hadn't seen him all day, but he'd let her know they were up to their eyeballs in haying and he wouldn't be driving over to Walla Walla that day. He had sent a couple of funny texts, and a photo of Truitt running away from a skunk that appeared none too happy to be disturbed. Apparently, Truitt had stopped at the end of a field to move a piece of handline they'd missed and the skunk had taken exception to his presence.

"Is it ready?" Birch asked, drawing Lark from her musings about the hunky cowboy and back to her food truck.

"Sorry, Birch. Yes. This order is ready." Lark shifted her focus to filling orders as quickly as she, Birch, and Allie could work.

When a lull came around four, Lark took advantage of it to make a quick trip to the restroom. She purchased three caramel apples from one of the other vendors and returned to the food truck to find Birch and Allie sharing an order of Spuddy Bites.

"These are incredible, Miss Gibson," Allie said, holding up one of the cocoa-coated pieces of candy.

Lark had told her new employees to eat anything they liked, just not to share anything with family or friends. Birch had sampled a variety of the toppings, but all she'd seen Allie eat was some of the bacon-wrapped tots.

"I'm glad you like them, Allie, and please just call me Lark." She held up the three apples. "Would you two like an apple?"

"You bet!" Birch took one and handed it to Allie, then snagged one for himself. Lark set her apple on a paper tray and sliced it into pieces she could nibble on between filling orders as another wave of customers arrived.

An hour later, she heard a teasing voice say, "Lark must be in dire straits to let you work here."

Lark spun away from the air fryer and grinned at Cooper and Paige James. Their son, Alex, rode on Cooper's shoulders. The little boy waved at Lark with a big grin.

"Hi, there! What are you two doing?" Lark leaned on the counter and smiled at two people she liked and now considered among her friends after spending time with them the past few weeks.

"We need some grub before the demolition derby," Cooper said, glancing at his wife and son.

"The cars go smash like this!" Alex rammed his little fists together and giggled.

Paige smiled indulgently at her son, then scowled at Cooper. "Like father, like son."

Lark laughed and hurried to take tots out of the air fryer while Birch took their order and Allie got their drinks.

"Lark, I've been meaning to talk to you," Paige said when Lark handed her an order of tots with grilled chicken, cheddar cheese, bacon, and ranch dressing.

"About what?" Lark asked, offering Paige a handful of napkins.

"About you modeling for Lasso Eight."

Shocked that Paige would even mention her modeling, Lark was too taken aback to immediately refuse.

"Please, consider it, Lark." Paige seemed to take her silence for agreement as she rushed ahead. "You're perfect for a model, and that red hair will look fantastic in the winter shots with snowy backgrounds. Would you please think about it? Ashley and I would love to have you join the Lasso Eight family. We're launching a new brand this December and think you'd be perfect as the main model for it. If you did decide to model, you'd get an all-expenses paid trip to Las Vegas during the rodeo finals. We have a fashion show, and our models make appearances in our booths."

"Seriously, Paige? You'd want me as a model even knowing I'm usually covered in food and smell like peppers

and onions?”

Paige grinned. “How about I toss in an added incentive? If you model for us, you can bring your food truck to the photo shoot, and I promise to use it in at least one of the ads. It would be nationwide exposure for Bud’s Spuds.”

Lark couldn’t help it when her jaw dropped open. Hastily snatching her composure together, she stuck out her hand and smiled. “It’s a deal. Count me in.”

Cooper laughed. “Told you the food truck incentive would nail it, babe.”

Paige smiled at her husband as she shook Lark’s hand. “I’ll text you more details, but the photo shoot is next week at Chase and Jessie Jarrett’s place. It’s going to be such fun to have you in our Lasso Eight family, Lark. Thank you for agreeing to give this a try.”

“Thank you for asking me, Paige. I’m excited.”

Cooper tipped his head toward his wife. “She’s been dying to talk you into modeling since the first time you two met. Now, if she can just convince Troy and Truitt Lucas into giving it a whirl, she’ll be set for the winter photo shoot.”

Paige nodded and offered Lark an imploring look. “Any chance you could talk the Lucas boys into modeling?”

Lark shook her head. “I doubt it, but I can try.”

“Great. Thanks!” Paige stepped back from the window. “Thanks for the great food, Lark.”

“Thank you for your business and this opportunity coming up, Paige. I’m truly grateful.”

Paige backed up a few more steps as Cooper carried Alex and their food to a nearby picnic table in the shade. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

Lark waved to them, then got back to work.

By Saturday afternoon, she had fallen into a smooth routine with Birch and Allie. She’d hate to not work with the

two teens in the future because they'd both been great employees.

More than that, though, she was happy to see them forming a solid friendship. It was obvious to everyone but Birch that Allie had a huge crush on him, but the girl was too shy to do anything about it.

Lark had learned Allie had received a full academic scholarship to the college. It was her first time away from home, which was six hours from Walla Walla, and she'd known no one when she'd arrived a week ago. Thanks to Birch, Allie had met several fellow students as well as people around town who owned businesses. She was sure Allie wouldn't have any trouble finding another job. Neither would Birch for that matter, if he were looking for one. From what she knew, Birch helped on his family's ranch which was run by his aging grandfather and his mother who worked in real estate. At least they had a couple of hired hands to keep things going.

On the final night of the rodeo, Troy had texted Lark to see if she wanted a ticket to go, but she assured him she couldn't get away from the food truck. She wanted so badly to watch him and Truitt rope, but the notion of leaving her truck, even for a few minutes, seemed impossible.

Birch was texting back and forth with someone as they filled orders for a few customers. He looked over at Lark and tipped his head toward the door. "The team roping is just starting. If you hurry, you can watch Troy and Truitt."

"No. I can't leave you two to handle everything."

"Sure, you can," Allie said, giving Lark a gentle nudge toward the door. "We'll be fine for a few minutes. It's slow right now, and the fair will wrap up at the end of the rodeo, won't it?"

"Yes. I doubt we'll get many more orders tonight. We can use just one air fryer," Lark said, already thinking of each thing she'd have to do to close the food truck and get it ready to drive home. "Help yourself to anything you want. I won't be gone long."

“Pass me an Arctic Spud, Allie,” Birch said as he turned off the other air fryers and started cleaning up from the frenzy of cooking for hundreds of people throughout the day.

Lark removed the apron she wore, washed her hands, dabbed at her cheeks with a paper towel, then rushed out of the food truck and hustled toward the rodeo arena.

She could hear the announcer long before she reached the arena. Gladly handing over the money for a ticket, she rushed into the stands and didn’t bother looking for a seat. She leaned against the railing and watched as two cowboys roped their steer in record time but got a ten-second penalty for breaking the barrier.

“Next up are cousins who might make you think you’re seeing double. Give a big hand to Troy and Truitt Lucas of Kennewick, Washington!”

Lark’s eyes were glued to Troy on the back of a beautiful horse she’d heard him call Indy. He tugged down the straw hat on his head and nodded once, and the steer burst out of the chute. She watched as he raced behind it, building his loop, throwing it, and catching the steer with such ease it almost looked choreographed. Truitt caught the back feet, and they faced each other as they pulled the slack out of their ropes.

“Look at that, folks! Troy and Truitt have moved into the lead. We may just have our winners!” the announcer boomed.

“Way to go, Troy!” Lark yelled, cupping her hands around her mouth.

She was sure he couldn’t hear her, but his gaze swiveled around in the crowd. Like a magnet pulled them together, his eyes locked on hers. Troy grinned, winked, and pointed a finger in her direction before he and Truitt rode out of the arena.

A blush warmed Lark’s cheeks as she turned around and jogged back to the food truck.

“Let’s start closing up,” she said when she stepped inside. “It’s only another twenty minutes until the official closing time for the food vendors. We can keep a few trays of tots warm for

anyone who might want to order, but I'm done cooking for the night."

Allie and Birch helped scrub and clean the inside of the food truck and pack up the food.

Lark would have to get someone to drive her back to Walla Walla tomorrow to pick up her SUV, but she figured her dad or brother-in-law would be game to do it after church.

"Okay, you two. Here's your pay, and a little bonus because you both are fantastic. If you ever want to work for me, just say the word. I have events most every weekend between now and November."

Allie took the envelope from Lark with a look of deep gratitude on her sweet face. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity, Lark. It's been amazing and beyond anything I could have hoped for. If you need help, I'm available to work Fridays and weekends, although I don't know my way around the Tri-Cities very well."

"I'd love to have your help, Allie. I'll text you the address for my next event and the schedule." She hugged the girl. "Thank you, thank you."

Birch took his pay from Lark with a grin. "I can't commit to working every weekend, but if you ever need an extra hand, let me know. I'd be happy to help."

"Because you're awesome, Birch." Lark shook his hand, then made a shooing motion toward the food truck door. "You two go on. If you hurry, I'm sure there's some fun to be had before the fair comes to an end."

"Thanks again, Lark." Allie hugged her, then rushed outside with Birch. The two of them strode off toward the carnival. Birch said something that made Allie laugh, and Lark smiled.

If nothing else good came of the past few days of the fair, she was glad Allie and Birch had found friendship with each other.

Lark closed the window over her counter and stuck the "closed" sign to it, then set about getting ready to drive the

food truck home.

“You have any tots left for a starving cowboy?” a voice spoke from her open door.

Lark jumped and turned toward it, hand pressed to her throat as Troy stepped inside, looking like he came from a Lasso Eight photo shoot. The blue paisley shirt he wore brought out the color of his eyes, while his smile gleamed in the interior lights.

“Only for you. Maybe Truitt if he wants some.” Lark grinned and filled a tray of tots she’d left in the warmer with the last of the brisket, then topped it with chili, shredded cheese, and sour cream. She handed it to Troy with a fork, then filled a cup with the last of the Dr Pepper.

“Thanks for this. I’ve been looking forward to more of your good food all day.” Troy waggled his fork toward one of her freezers. “Any chance you still have an Arctic Spud or Spuddy Bites left?”

“Yes to both.” She indulged in a moment of just studying the handsome man who filled her food truck and made the space seem so small. “Congrats to you and Truitt. I heard you came in second.”

“We did. We’re happy just placing at events. If we rodeoed full-time, I think we might have a shot at making the finals.”

“Why don’t you? Rodeo full-time?” she asked as she returned to cleaning.

“For one thing, Grammy needs us at the ranch. It’s more important to both of us than anything we’d find on the rodeo road. The other reason is I’ve done it before, and while I loved it, I don’t think I could invest that much of my life into it again. I missed Dusty Hills every single day I was gone.”

Lark didn’t know what to say to that, so she merely nodded and changed the subject. “Paige and Cooper James stopped by earlier.”

“I heard she twisted your arm and talked you into modeling. Are you really going to do it?”

Lark grinned at him. “The idea of having my food truck in one of the ads was too big of an incentive to turn down. It’s great publicity.”

“It is.” Troy agreed in between bites of his food.

When he finished the tray of tots, Lark made a loaded Arctic Spud for him and one for herself. She leaned against the counter as she took a bite, then pointed her spoon at him.

“You should do it.”

“Do what,” he asked, spooning a big bite of ice cream.

“Model. You and Truitt.”

Troy shook his head so vehemently, his hat shifted. “Nope. Not happening. I told you before, I’m not model material.”

“You’re being ridiculous. You and Truitt would be awesome in the ads. Think about it. Would you at least go with me to the photo shoot?”

Troy nodded. “I can do that, but no promises on the modeling. I think Truitt would do it, though.”

“Good. Paige said she really would love to have both of you.”

“I’ll think about it.” Troy finished his ice cream and tossed the tray in the garbage, then kissed her cheek. His lips felt cold against her skin, but it was his presence that made a shiver roll over her.

“Need some help packing up?” Troy asked, looking around.

“I’m about finished, then I’ll drive this thing home. I’ll have to get my dad or brother-in-law to bring me back tomorrow to get my SUV.”

“I’ll drive the SUV back for you tonight if you trust me.”

Lark gaped at him. “Really? You wouldn’t mind doing that for me?”

“Not at all. You’ll just have to give me a ride to the ranch. Truitt can drive the horses back to the ranch. It won’t kill him to cut his partying short one night.”

Troy took out his phone and had a brief conversation with his cousin. From what Lark could hear, it didn’t sound like Truitt was upset at having to drive the horse trailer home instead of hanging out with friends and having one of them drop him off later.

“All set?” Lark asked as she finished storing what needed to be put away and turned off the generator.

“Yep. Just tell me where you’re parked, and I’ll follow you back to Kennewick.”

“I leave the food truck at the farm in Pasco,” she said, closing and locking the back door, then going around to the side and reaching to pull down the awning.

Troy helped her secure it, then watched as she stepped into the front of the food truck. “Drive slowly on your way through town, and I’ll catch up with you.”

“Okay.” Lark handed him her SUV keys and pointed to a parking area the vendors used. “I’m over there on the end of the fifth or sixth row.”

“Got it. I’ll see you soon, Songbird.”

Lark watched him stride away in jeans that molded to his beautiful form. If all Paige wanted was someone to model Lasso Eight jeans, Troy would be absolutely, unmistakably perfect.

An hour and a half later, Troy parked in front of an old farmhouse. It was hard to see much in the dark of Dusty Hills Ranch, but from what was visible in the porch light and the light gleaming from a high pole out by the barn, the place was well-kept. In fact, in the beam of the headlights, Lark could see what looked like a firepit surrounded by five porch swings hanging from heavy timber braces.

“That is so cool.” She pointed toward the swings.

Troy grinned. “Truitt saw one somewhere and talked Grammy into letting us do that. It’s been a lot of fun to have that when we have company over in the evenings, which isn’t often.”

He opened the door, then jogged around her SUV to open the door to the passenger side, where she’d chosen to ride after dropping off the food truck at the farm. When she wasn’t using it, her dad let her keep the truck in a storage building with a few vintage cars he hoped to get around to restoring someday. Tomorrow, Lark would drive out to restock the food truck, give it a thorough cleaning inside and out, and leave it ready for the next event.

“It’s a great idea. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Lark took the hand he offered to her as she got out and shifted her gaze from the firepit to the hunky cowboy looking at her with a twinkle in his eyes. Or maybe it was just a reflection from the yard light.

Lark decided to ignore it and instead walked around the SUV. Two dogs ran up to her, tails wagging, seeking attention. She knelt and let them sniff her, then laughed as they nudged her hands, eager for her to pet them. She lifted her chin just in time to avoid getting a lick across her mouth. “Who do we have here?”

Troy grinned and hunkered down beside her, resting his hand on the back of one of the dogs. “Lotus and Lew. Lotus is the one liable to beat you to death with that thumping tail of hers.”

Lark laughed. “She’s a sweetheart.” She ruffled the dog’s ears, then pet the other dog. “And Lew is a handsome fella, aren’t you?”

As though he understood her, Lew woofed softly, nuzzling closer to her side. Lark gave both dogs a few more affectionate pats, then stood, brushing off her hands before she got into her SUV. Pet hair was something she tried to avoid getting into her vehicle or her house because of her food business.

“Thanks for bringing me home,” Troy said, lingering in her open door as she slid onto the seat.

“My pleasure, but I’m the one who should be thanking you, Troy. It was a huge help to have you drive my car back to town so I don’t have to find someone to take me tomorrow to get it. Thank you.”

“Anytime, Songbird.”

He took a step closer. Lark could feel heat radiating off him while the scent of leather and horses, and something that was uniquely Troy tickled her nose. His hand, rough from work and calluses, cupped her chin, tilting it up as he bent down.

Lark closed her eyes, more than ready for his kiss, when the sound of the screen door squeaking made him draw back so fast, he smacked his head on the door frame and knocked his hat into her lap.

“Troy, is that you?” his grandmother called. She stood on the porch, staring at them through the darkness.

“It’s me, Grammy,” Troy said, grabbing his hat off Lark’s lap and settling it on his head as he stepped away from the door and into a circle of light. “Lark needed help getting her food truck and vehicle back from Walla Walla, so I drove her SUV. She’s just dropping me off. Truitt is bringing the trailer and horses.”

“Oh, okay. Nice to see you again, Lark!” The woman waved, then returned inside the house.

Aware the moment had passed to share a kiss with Troy, Lark shut the door, rolled down the window, and waved at him.

“Talk tomorrow?” she asked as she put the vehicle in reverse and started to back around to leave.

“Definitely. Text me when you get home so I know you got there safely.”

“Will do.” She waved again, then blew him a kiss before she headed back down his driveway, wondering if the two of

them would ever get a chance to kiss.

Chapter Twelve



“How did I let you talk me into this?” Troy grumbled as Truitt turned off the road and onto the lane to Chase and Jessie Jarrett’s home. Today was the big photo shoot for Lasso Eight apparel. Paige had convinced Truitt to model, and because of that, Troy had been coerced into joining him.

Troy still wasn’t convinced he was model-worthy material, but at worst, he could be a fuzzy blob in the background. If he was lucky, no one would recognize him. The first year Cooper had been a model, he’d had women in a dither all over the country because the ads only showed him from the back. Once he and Paige wed though, Cooper refused to model again. Any number of their friends had modeled through the years, although it sounded like most of them were no longer interested in having their faces, or backsides, plastered across billboards and television advertisements.

“Well, well. Look who’s here,” Truitt said, smirking at Troy as he pointed to Lark’s food truck. “Imagine running into her today.”

Troy glowered at his cousin as he parked in a row of vehicles lined up out of the way by Chase’s foreman’s house.

“I knew she was going to be here, you dork. Unless you’re suffering from amnesia, you remember we even talked about it at dinner last night.”

Truitt shrugged his shoulders and offered an innocent smile. “So, we did. Are you going to scowl like that all day, or do you think you could maybe get into the spirit of modeling and enjoy this opportunity? Paige told me what each model is getting paid for today. If we both model, we could add the earnings to our rodeo winnings and be able to purchase that pivot we’ve been wanting.”

Troy knew the Lasso Eight models were well-paid, but he had no idea how much they earned.

“You’re yanking my rope,” he said, giving his cousin a dubious glance.

“Nope. I’m dead serious, bro. If you can tamp down whatever makes you look like you’ve eaten sour lemons and smile, we’ll be that much closer to buying that pivot. We both know it’s going to save us a lot of time and work.”

Troy sighed as Truitt turned off the ignition and got out of the pickup. “Fine, but if it goes south, let the record show this was all your idea, not mine.”

“Agreed. I’m to blame for talking you into having fun and spending the day with the beautiful woman you can’t seem to leave alone.”

Troy felt an urge to clobber his cousin but resisted as they headed toward a group of their friends.

“Hey! Glad you both could make it,” Paige said when they walked over to where she stood at a table covered in fabric swatches, sketches, and papers. “I just need you both to fill out this form, and we’ll be set.”

Troy read through the form. By signing it, he agreed to allow Lasso Eight to use any photos or videos taken of him today in their advertisements and promotional pieces, and that he would not sue them if something happened and he got hurt today.

He and Truitt both signed the forms, handed them back to Paige, and glanced around.

“The women are changing in the house. The guys are getting ready in the bunkhouse. You’ll find racks of clothes with your names on them, and Cooper is in there supposedly to keep things organized.” Paige wagged a finger toward the bunkhouse. “If you have any questions, just ask me or Ashley or even Jessie. She’s helped with this enough; she knows what to do.”

“Thanks, Paige,” Troy said, then tipped his hat to her, as did Truitt. Together, the two cousins made their way to the bunkhouse, where portable racks of clothes held shirts and coats. Every surface seemed to be covered in folded stacks of jeans, boot boxes, belts, and cowboy hats.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Cooper teased, offering both Troy and Truitt handshakes when they walked into the chaos. “Welcome to the zoo.”

Truitt laughed and stepped over to shake hands with Gage Taggart and Trevor King while Troy looked around. He saw Shaun Price pulling on a pair of boots and recognized the others as rodeo cowboys who’d be heading to Las Vegas for the finals.

“My wife gave me a detailed list of what you’re supposed to wear and when, so let’s get started.” Cooper moved over to a rack and handed a shirt to Truitt, then one to Troy. The shirts had identical paisley patterns, but one was a deep shade of blue with light gray while the other was a reverse of colors with gray accented by deep blue. “Paige has plans for you two to look like twins. Just giving you a heads up.”

“Fantastic,” Troy muttered under his breath and followed as Cooper led the way over to a stack of jeans with Troy’s name on them.

An hour later, Troy felt like a complete idiot as he and Truitt walked across a pasture toward cameras set up along the fence.

“A little more swagger, boys,” Ashley called out to them from her spot to the left of the photographer and videographer.

Troy did his best to strut like some of the proud peacocks he’d seen prancing around in the rodeo crowd but had a feeling he completely missed the mark Ashley was aiming for. Modeling was so far out of his comfort zone, he felt like he’d entered an alternate dimension.

“I hate this, Tru. I look more like a constipated gorilla with a lame foot than a guy with women falling at his feet,” Troy spoke softly so only Truitt could hear. He glanced at his cousin, and the two of them grinned, then started to laugh as they kept walking toward the camera.

“That’s good! Keep laughing!” Ashley directed.

“If you think you’re a mess, then picture me in that red shirt Paige wants me to wear. I’m going to look like I’m either sunburned or about to have a heart attack. You know neither of us has ever looked good in red,” Truitt grouched.

“Pull your hat down low and no one will be the wiser,” Troy advised, then hesitated when Ashley motioned for them to stop.

“Let’s try that again,” she said, motioning for them to go back across the pasture. They were halfway across when they heard Ashley say, “Cooper, can you show them the kind of walk we want?”

“Of course,” Cooper said, then hopped over the fence and proceeded to pirouette his way across the pasture, causing everyone to laugh. When he reached Troy and Truitt, he threw one hand in the air and swung his hips in an exaggerated fashion. “It’s all in the hips, baby. All in the hips.”

“Cooper!” Paige yelled. “Would you knock it off and be helpful?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asked, then moved so he stood between Truitt and Troy. “Truitt, let’s see you strut your stuff.”

Truitt took several steps, adding a little more sway to his shoulders than normal.

“Perfect!” Ashley and Paige called in unison.

Troy wanted to slink back to the bunkhouse, change his clothes, leave, and forget he’d ever agreed to model. Clearly, he wasn’t cut out for it.

He looked over to where people leaned against the fence watching him and caught sight of red hair flowing in a profusion of curls. Celia Kressley wasn’t there today, so there was only one other redhead he knew who would be there.

Lark.

The thought of her observing him as he made a complete idiot of himself made Troy even more nervous.

Cooper placed a hand on his shoulder. “Relax. We’ve all been right where you are at one point or another. Take a deep breath, let it go, and relax. Let your shoulders drop down instead of hiking them up by your ears. When you walk, let them move a little, just a little, from side to side. As you walk, it might help if you think of a song with a steady beat and pretend you’re just walking to the beat of the music. Make sense?”

Troy wanted to tell him nothing about the day made sense, but he merely nodded and took a few steps forward.

“Great, Troy! Let’s try shooting this again,” Ashley called.

Troy moved next to Truitt as Cooper jogged back across the pasture and jumped over the fence. He swung Paige into his arms, kissed her full on the mouth, and ignored her splutters as he let her go and those around them laughed.

“You can do this, man. Like Coop suggested—relax,” Truitt said, offering encouragement. “Just pretend the only one over there is Lark and you two are leaving for a hot date.”

“I don’t think that’s going to help me calm down, Tru.” Troy took a deep breath, then another, thinking he wouldn’t mind if Lark were the only one there. Recalling how close he’d come to kissing her at the ranch when she’d dropped him off the other night made him glad he’d offered to drive her SUV back from Walla Walla.

“You’ll be fine.” Truitt gave him a pat on the back just before Ashley motioned for them to begin walking toward her.

Troy let his mind settle on a song that had been on the radio as he and Lark had driven out to the ranch. The lyrics about sweeping a girl off her feet were upbeat and fun and made him want to do that very thing the next time he was alone with Lark.

Focused on the music playing in his head with his gaze fixed on Lark, Troy was across the pasture before he realized what had happened.

“That was great! Good job, you two!” Paige gave both Troy and Truitt high fives. “Go change into your next outfit while we do some shots of Tally and Gage.”

The hours rolled by as they took turns modeling. The little kids were hilarious to watch, especially when Grace McGraw struck one little diva pose after another.

Lark was a natural at modeling, or at least she looked that way to Troy as she sat on a fence fondly gazing at Truitt with a coy smile. The skirt of the dress she wore fluttered in the breeze, making him wish he felt confident enough to trade places with his cousin. Paige and Ashley had tried to talk him into modeling with Lark, but he just didn’t feel ready to participate in the photos of couples.

He watched as Truitt flirted shamelessly with Lark, then placed his hands on her waist and swung her off the fence. The two of them pretended to be dancing. When Truitt dropped her into a dip and brought her back up so close they could have kissed, Troy marched toward them without even being aware his feet carried him to his cousin. He’d never wanted to beat the stuffing out of Truitt before, but at that moment he could have pummeled him into the ground.

“My turn,” he growled, giving Truitt a less than gentle push out of the way and taking Lark in his arms. He could practically feel the electricity snapping in sparks around them as he held her close. When he glanced down into her green eyes, he saw questions mingling there along with something he could only think of as affection. The need to touch her, the

urge to kiss her, was almost more than he could bear, but he did his best to follow Paige's direction as she asked him to pose in a variety of angles.

After lunch and two more outfit changes, Troy watched as the cameras snapped photos of Lark in her food truck. It seemed Lasso Eight was branching out again into a line of work clothes labeled Rugged Stylz. He'd thought the tagline of "Clothes for behind the scenes yet still in the action. Functional fashion at its best," was clever.

Troy knew Tally was the exclusive model for Lasso Eight's Wyld Roads line for women with generous curves. Trevor King and his wife represented the Retro Riggin' line that showcased reproductions of vintage fashions. He thought Paige and Ashley had chosen wisely when they'd selected Lark to represent their line of work clothing for women.

When they finished the shoot inside the food truck, Lark disappeared to change, and Troy found himself pushed toward the bunkhouse.

"One more outfit after this and you're done, Troy," Cooper said as he walked inside.

"Thank goodness for small favors," Troy said, stripping off the shirt he wore and changing into what looked to be a work shirt. He liked the soft chamois material, and the color was almost the same hue as his eyes. The jeans were looser with half a dozen pockets along the legs, and he laced on a pair of work boots with thick soles. "These are great quality, Coop. Who came up with the idea for the new Rugged Stylz line?"

"Ashley. She said now that she lives in the country, she can understand what people mean when they talk about wishing their clothes were rugged enough to handle the work, but also wanting to look like they have a lick of fashion sense with the styles." Cooper shrugged. "Jon Sinclair is excited about rolling out this new line into all his stores. I expect it will be a hit."

"I agree. The clothing is well made and comfortable." Troy stood and glanced around to see a few other people

changing into the work clothing.

“Here’s the jacket,” Cooper said, handing Troy a denim jacket with several pockets inside as well as out. “You get a ball cap this time instead of a cowboy hat.”

Troy accepted the cap and stepped outside.

Paige and Ashley had everyone in the Rugged Stylz clothes pose together, then in small groups. When Troy got to stand next to Lark, he reached down and caught her hand in his, bringing her fingers to his lips and kissing the backs of them before he even realized what he’d done.

He tossed a sheepish glance at Paige, but she merely smiled and nodded her head, as though he’d done something right.

Troy returned to the bunkhouse and changed into a pair of Lasso Eight jeans, black square-toed boots, a black shirt with silver pinstripes, a gray wool coat, and a brown cowboy hat.

“Your wife does know it’s almost a hundred degrees out there, doesn’t she?” Troy asked, whipping off the coat as sweat began to trickle down his back.

“Well aware, but we need the shots with the coats. She saved it for last so you wouldn’t have to model after you finish up with them.” Cooper opened the bunkhouse door and stepped outside, followed by Troy, Truitt, and the others. “Paige and Ashley are going to try to make this move along quickly.”

“Sounds good to me,” Truitt said, looking around for somewhere to wipe the sweat that pooled on his brow.

“Here,” Cooper dashed back into the bunkhouse and returned with a handful of paper towels.

“Thanks.” Truitt wiped his brow while Troy dabbed at his neck.

Everyone else looked just as hot and miserable, except maybe Lark. She was lovely in a deep green sweater that set off her eyes.

Ashley had her pose on a ladder with a strand of garland, like she was stringing it around a porch post.

While Lark disappeared inside the house to change, a few of the other couples posed with garlands, an artificial tree, and strings of lights out by the corral fence, where horses grazed in the background.

“Okay, Troy. You and Lark are up next.”

Instead of western clothes, Lark was dressed in a pair of light blue jeans, a tan sweater and coat, suede boots, and a stocking cap pulled down on her wild curls. She looked adorable, like she was ready to go caroling or build a snowman.

“What are we doing?” Lark asked, following as Ashley led the way around the house so the Bud’s Spuds food truck was visible in the background. Someone had strung lights around the front counter area, and lights swept out in long strands that had been fastened to fence posts.

“Pretend it’s freezing. There’s snow on the ground. Carols are playing. And Lark has just given you something hot and sweet to drink,” Ashley said, setting the scene as she positioned Troy.

“I can do that,” he said, smiling into Lark’s beautiful face, thinking she grew lovelier each time he saw her.

“Lark, hold this cup out to him, and look up at him like he’s the sweetest cowboy on earth.”

Lark grinned and took the cup Ashley held out to her. “That won’t be hard to imagine.”

They moved into different positions while the camera snapped images and the videographer recorded their movements.

“Do something fun. Impulsive,” Ashley encouraged.

Troy had no idea what to do, so he picked up Lark and swung her around, making her laugh. When he stopped, she rested her hands on his shoulders, then slid them toward his

neck, giving him a smile so full of warmth, he would have overheated even if he hadn't been wearing the wool coat.

"That's a wrap and perfect!" Paige clapped her hands, then gave Ashley a sideways hug before she turned to Lark and Troy. "You two are awesome together. The chemistry is incredible."

Lark raised an eyebrow at Troy as he set her back on her feet. "Yeah, it is," she said, then hurried to the house to change.

Troy peeled off the coat, relieved to feel air blowing around him even if the slight breeze was hot.

"Hey, Troy," Paige caught him before he'd taken more than three steps toward the bunkhouse. "Lark mentioned you have a great setup with a firepit. Do you think we could do some night shots there this week?"

He shrugged. "Sure. When would you like to come?"

"Tomorrow evening? We could get there right at dusk and snap some photos."

"That works," Troy said, thinking of all the work he'd set aside to make sure everything at the ranch looked picture-perfect, even if it would be dusk when the camera crew arrived. "I'll let my grandmother know. She'll want to have food ready for everyone."

Paige shook her head. "She doesn't need to do that. Lasso Eight will provide drinks and snacks. However, if she wants to make something, she's welcome to."

"Sounds good." Troy backed up a few steps, then stopped. "I'm terrible at this modeling stuff, Paige, but I appreciate the opportunity. It means a lot to me and Truitt."

Paige's expression held disbelief when she gaped at him. "Terrible? You aren't terrible at this, Troy. You did a great job. Better than many of the so-called professionals I used to work with. Believe me, if you weren't doing a good job, we'd let you know. The photos of you and Lark together are going to be amazing. Just wait and see." She smiled at him. "And you're welcome. I'm glad you decided to give it a try."

“Me too.”

The next morning, Troy, Truitt, and their grandmother spent the time they should have been doing other work making sure everything around the firepit looked camera ready. Wendy Lucas knew a thing or two about entertaining and spent the better part of the afternoon preparing food. After dinner, they each showered and changed into Lasso Eight clothing Paige had sent home with Troy and Truitt the previous day.

“They won’t want an old woman like me in the photos,” Grammy said as she walked into the kitchen fussing with her hair.

“You look beautiful, Grammy.” Troy smiled at her.

“Sure do. You’ll be the prettiest gal here tonight,” Truitt said, then swept her into a two-step around the kitchen.

“Enough. You two don’t need to butter me up to get in on the goodies. I even set back a pan of brownies for you to eat tomorrow.”

Troy and Truitt flanked her and kissed her cheeks, making her laugh.

“Thanks, Grammy. You really are the best.” Troy settled his arm around her as the crunch of tires on gravel let them know someone had arrived.

Truitt hurried to the front window and hollered. “It’s Cooper and Paige with Chase and Jessie.”

“Did they bring the kids?” Grammy asked as she scurried toward the door. “I keep hoping one of you will settle down and give me great-grandbabies. At the rate you’re both going, I’ll be dead and long buried before you ever get married.”

“Don’t look at me,” Troy and Truitt said in unison, pointing to the other.

All three of them laughed as Grammy pulled open the door and welcomed the couples inside.

An hour later, the sun had just set, and dusk had settled around them as the photographer and videographer captured different angles of the group gathered around the firepit. Troy

ended up sitting on one of the bench seats with Lark. When she scooted closer to him to make room for his grandmother to sit down, he was glad to have her pressed against his side.

The fresh, soft fragrance of her tantalized his nose, while his fingers itched to bury themselves in the coils of her hair. One of their guests brought out a guitar and started playing songs they all knew. Soon the entire group was singing along to old campfire songs.

They toasted marshmallows for s'mores, drank hot chocolate and cider, and ate all the treats Grammy had set out on a long table covered in a white cloth that had once belonged to her grandmother.

Paige and Ashley had brought gallons of lemonade and a cooler full of bottled sodas as well as trays loaded with fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat and cheese slices. They'd also brought four dozen cookies from a new bakery in Kennewick, but it was Grammy's homemade cookies, brownies, and individual pies everyone kept indulging in.

"These are delicious," Lark said, taking a bite from a small peach pie. A bit of juicy filling clung to her lip, and Troy had the most outrageous urge to lean down and kiss it away.

If he kissed her now, would she taste like peaches and hot chocolate, or something even richer and sweeter?

Full of snacks and content to sit in welcome companionship with his friends, Troy leaned back and relaxed, giving the swing a gentle push with his foot.

"Come on, Jessie. What does the sky look like tonight?" Chase coaxed of his wife. Troy had heard she had quite a talent for describing things in unique ways.

Jessie snuggled against Chase and tipped her head back, resting it on his shoulder as she studied the stars. "Midnight on a sleepy ocean. The clouds roll through like gentle waves lapping at the shore, and the stars are pearls reflecting the moonlight."

Chase kissed her, then grinned at the group. "We're heading to the beach for a vacation in a few weeks. I think

she's got ocean and sand on the brain."

"Nothing wrong with that," Cooper said, toasting Jessie with his cup of cider. "Are you heading to ..."

Troy let the conversation flow around him. He joined in the laughter when Shaun Price told a joke about Cooper and grinned when Chase threatened to put melted marshmallows in Ashley Nash's hair. Since they were cousins, no one—not even their spouses—felt the need to intervene.

By the time the evening wrapped up, Troy felt both content and frustrated. It was excruciating to sit so close to Lark and not be able to hold her, to love her, to claim her as his own.

Is that what you want to do? a niggling voice whispered in his thoughts. Sometimes he thought the voice sounded a lot like his grandfather, especially when it doled out advice after he'd done something stupid.

Troy liked Lark. Admired her. Couldn't seem to get her out of his thoughts. But he wasn't sure he was ready to make a commitment to anyone. What if she rejected him as thoroughly and completely as his last few girlfriends, making him feel like the little kid on the playground who always gets chosen last? He didn't need to put himself through that kind of pain again.

Rather than examine his feelings, something he generally avoided whenever possible, he rose to his feet and helped carry things out to vehicles or into the house.

"Want to take a walk?" he asked when Lark bounded out of the house and nearly smacked into him.

He could see the refusal on her face. He could already hear the excuses about why she needed to leave even though she didn't say a word, only stared up at him.

"Okay," she finally said, waving at Jessie and Paige as they left.

"I feel like I've hardly had a chance to say more than hello to you this week. Did you enjoy the photo shoot yesterday?" Troy asked as he led the way across the yard and

down the lane toward the barn. He kept his steps slower and shorter than he'd normally walk, not wanting Lark to have to rush to keep up with him.

"I did have fun. It was stressful at first, but Paige and Ashley make it all seem so simple and easy." She sighed and looked out at the night around them. "I'm truly grateful for the opportunity. The money from modeling will go toward my restaurant fund. Having Bud's Spuds featured in even one advertisement is going to be spectacular."

"It will be cool to see your food truck in a Lasso Eight ad, although I guess it was mostly in the Rugged Stylz shoot."

Lark nodded. He slipped his hand around hers, lacing their fingers together. He took it as a good sign when she moved closer to him instead of pulling away.

"What do you think of the new clothing line?" Troy asked after a moment of silence.

"The clothes are marvelous. They seem like they'll hold up well, but I could easily move in them. They're breathable and so comfy. I plan to buy more of the pants when the new line debuts, and probably some of the shirts. They'll be great for wearing in the food truck when the cooler weather sets in. Paige let me keep the jacket I modeled yesterday."

"She also allowed us to keep whatever we wanted. Truitt and I won't have to buy new clothes for a long while." Troy glanced back toward the house where his grandmother stood on the porch with Truitt, waving to their departing company. "Grammy was so excited to be included tonight and get a new outfit."

"She did great posing tonight, and everything she made was delicious. I might have to get her recipe for brownies." Lark looked up at him, and Troy felt like the world suddenly skidded to a halt.

There was nothing but the sleepy midnight ocean sky above them, as Jessie had described it, the chirp of crickets to serenade them, and the fresh scent of country air around them, carrying a hint of smoke from their firepit.

“Lark, I ... um ...” Troy lost the ability to think when she faced him. The moonlight caressed her face, making her skin look like it was a flawless ivory carving.

Before he could snag together enough brain cells to figure out what to say to the woman who had captivated him, his phone buzzed. He almost tossed it on the ground and stomped it when a text popped up from Truitt that read, “kiss her already!”

Troy considered, for a moment, marching back to the house and plowing a fist into his cousin’s face. Instead, he caressed Lark’s cheek, but the spell they’d been under was broken. She sighed and took a step back.

“It’s late. I need to get home,” she said, moving toward the house. “I’ve got a lot of prep work to do before the event this weekend.”

Troy fell into step beside her. “You’re doing the Farmer’s Market this weekend, then you’ll be at the Pendleton Round-Up next week. Right?”

“Exactly right. Allie—she’s the girl I hired last week, the one Birch seemed to hit it off with. Do you remember her?” At his nod, she continued, “She’s going to be available to help me this weekend, which is a huge relief. I’m still trying to find some help for Wednesday and Thursday next week.”

Troy held back a sigh of frustration when they reached Lark’s vehicle. Truitt and his grandmother loitered in the yard under the guise of cleaning up after the photo shoot.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said, holding Lark’s door as she slid behind the wheel.

“I’ll look forward to it, Troy.” Her hand settled on his cheek, and she looked like she wanted something. If that something was the same thing that had his insides twisted into knots, neither of them would rest well that night.

Yet, Troy hesitated to believe she was as hungry for his kiss as he was for hers.

Rather than pull her from the vehicle, hold her in his arms, and plunder her lips with his family watching, Troy

leaned down and kissed each cheek and then the tip of her nose.

“Text me when you get home,” he whispered in her ear.

“I will, Troy. Good night.”

He stood in the same spot, watching until her taillights were no longer visible. A hand thumped his shoulder, and he glared at Truitt. “Way to interrupt, bro.”

Truitt shrugged, then chuckled. “Where’s that swagger you nailed yesterday? You need to get into that persona. Be that confident and take-charge guy who would give that girl a kiss she’ll never forget.”

Troy glowered at his cousin as they headed toward the firepit to make sure the fire was out. “I intend to, but I don’t need your help.”

“Whatever you say. I’m with Grammy, though. At the rate you’re moving, you and Lark will be old, gray, and toothless before you ever move past first base.”

Troy slugged Truitt in the arm, causing him to take a staggering step to the side all while laughing with far more glee than was necessary.

Chapter Thirteen



“What are those?” asked a feminine voice that taunted Troy in his dreams most every night.

He glanced up at Lark as he held a hammer in one hand, a hoof in the other, and had a mouthful of nails poking out between his lips as he worked to change the nails on a horse’s shoe before the Pendleton Round-Up’s first day of rodeo slack began. He spit the nails into his hand, released the hoof he held between his legs, and slowly straightened.

Troy used the distraction of placing a hand on the horse’s neck to regain his equilibrium. Lark’s unexpected appearance left him off balance. Rather than her hair being contained in a braid, ponytail, or bun, today it flowed loose and long in springy coils that looked wild and luscious as the sun caressed her red head. She wore more makeup than she typically sported, accenting her enthralling green eyes and the lips he so badly wanted to kiss. Instead of wearing a loose Bud’s Spuds T-shirt or an apron, her curves were clearly visible in a cute little cotton top, while a pair of dark blue shorts drew his gaze to her legs.

“What are you doing?” Lark asked, picking up one of the nails he’d spit into his hand, ignoring the fact he hadn’t yet engaged his brain enough to think let alone speak. “I’ve never seen horseshoe nails like these.”

“Ice nails,” Troy finally spoke, giving the horse a gentle pat as Lark continued studying the nail she held.

“Ice nails?” She tipped her head back, staring at the clear blue sky overhead before her gaze drifted back to him. A smile rode those lips he so desperately wanted to taste. “I could be wrong, cowboy, but I don’t think you need to worry about a snowstorm when it’s supposed to hit the mid-nineties today.”

“The nails are for traction. Pendleton’s grass arena is sometimes called the glass arena because of how slick it can be for the horses, even when it hasn’t been raining. Some of the competitors use ice nails in the horseshoes to gain a little traction.”

She handed the nail back to him. “How do those tiny little nails give a big horse traction?”

Troy held a nail between his forefinger and thumb. “Ice nails have a chiseled head that extends beyond the bottom of the shoe. It’s kind of like a cleat on a golf shoe. They’re made of the same metal as regular horseshoes, and I generally use two to four of them on each shoe. If I only use two, I place them as far back toward the heel as possible to give the horse a better grip on the grass.”

“Oh, wow. Did you already shoe Indy and Gunner?”

“Yes, and no.” Troy felt flustered, although he couldn’t exactly say why, other than Lark. She looked indescribably lovely with the sun filtering through that mass of curls, and she smelled so soft and feminine. The deep breaths he inhaled almost made him weak in the knees, which wasn’t good for a man attempting to shoe a horse that wasn’t all that interested in getting temporary nails in his shoes.

“Explain that, please.” Lark moved closer to the horse, let it sniff her, then eased her hand up to pat it on the neck. Jethro,

the equine that had been slightly testy five minutes ago, seemed to calm immediately.

“I put ice nails in Gunner’s shoes, but Indy does better if I just take his shoes off altogether.”

“Oh,” Lark said, continuing to pat the horse.

“Mind doing that a minute while I finish? He was thinking hard about kicking me before you walked up.” Troy didn’t wait for her response before he situated the nails between his lips, picked up the horse’s hoof, and quickly completed the job.

“Finished?” Lark asked as she scratched behind Jethro’s ears.

“With this one. I promised to help with a few others before Truitt and I ride in the first round of slack.” Troy brushed the horsehair from the farrier apron he wore, then removed his gloves. He took Lark’s hand in his and led her away from where he’d been working to a spot of shade created by the horse trailer behind them. “What brings you over here? Are the vendor booths open already?”

“No. I came early and got the food truck set up. I thought I’d watch you and Truitt compete in slack. Is your grandmother coming today?”

“No. We had a bull acting off this morning, so she’s keeping an eye on him in case she needs to call the vet.”

Lark placed a hand on his arm and gave it a pat similar to the one she’d offered to Jethro. Troy didn’t appreciate being lumped into the same category as a horse, even if Jethro was worth more than Troy’s pickup and horse trailer combined.

In fact, being stuffed into the friend category with Lark was starting to grate on his nerves even though his head continued to assure him he had no time for relationships or romance.

If he could have gut-punched that voice spewing negative thoughts into his mind, he would have gladly done it just to get it to shut up. Far too often, that voice reminded him what a loser he was at twenty-six, with a washed-up pro rodeo career

he contemplated resurrecting each year when he and Truitt competed in the local rodeos each summer.

Troy had felt like his confidence had taken a huge hit when he'd walked away from the rodeo to help at the ranch. Not that he was ever a seek-the-limelight kind of guy, but there were times he missed the way he felt when he and Roger had been at the top of their game, on their way to the national finals with sponsors eager to support them.

He knew his disappointment in what was never going to be was why Truitt and Grammy did everything they could to give him time to compete in the local rodeos, to give him back a few weeks of something that he missed the rest of the year.

Despite that, this year he hadn't felt that pull to head back out on the rodeo road. Not like he had in past years.

Troy couldn't help but wonder if the reason for that was standing next to him, flooding his senses with her fragrance while her warm, bright personality made his blood zing through his veins.

Lark was unlike any female he'd ever encountered. She could be all business one minute, focused on cooking a zillion tater tots, and the next she was all woman with delectable curves and come-hither smiles.

If he didn't tread carefully, he'd be as caught by her as a landed fish dangling from a hook.

And that couldn't happen. Not yet. Not now. Not when Troy felt such a responsibility to the ranch and his family. Granted, Truitt and Grammy had spent far longer than Troy wanted to consider encouraging him to pursue things with Lark, but Troy didn't figure he was good enough for one of the Gibson Farms' potato princesses.

Lark came from money. She might be forging her own way now, but he had no doubt someday she'd want all those comforts and luxuries he was sure she'd grown up with.

Although, according to the stories she had shared, she'd had a somewhat normal childhood, spending her time with her

grandmother in the kitchen, fighting with her older sister, and adoring her younger brother.

For reasons Troy couldn't begin to understand let alone explain, he suddenly felt out of sorts, even though he wasn't sure at who or why.

Before he did or said something he shouldn't, he glanced at his watch, then back at Lark. "Listen, Lark, I need to go. I've got to finish the shoes before Truitt and I are up to rope. I hope you have fun watching. It's sure nice of you to be here."

"Of course," she said, looking slightly bewildered as he forced himself to back away from her. All he wanted was to wrap his arms around her and bury his face in those silky, fragrant curls that smelled like sugar and spice.

And everything nice. Head in the game, you idiot, the voice in his head taunted.

For a brief second, Troy contemplated walloping himself to see if it would knock that voice loose. Thoughts of trying to explain to Truitt and Grammy why he gave himself a black eye made him fist his hands at his sides. Maybe the heat and stress from the pressure of the last few weeks was getting to him. Was he losing his mind, or what was left of it?

Being around Lark when she looked and smelled so enchanting seriously made him consider how many of his brain cells had fried to a crisp.

"Want to have lunch or dinner together?" Lark asked, tossing him a hopeful glance.

"I'd like that, but I'm not sure what time we'll wrap up roping today. If we don't do well, it's likely we'll head straight home afterward. Can I text you later?"

Lark nodded. "Of course, Troy."

Despite his determination to make a hasty retreat, she stepped up to him, placed both hands on his biceps, and brought his escape to an abrupt end.

"Hey, you, don't discount yourself or your talent. You and Truitt are great at what you do, and you'll pull out a top

score today. I know it.”

The words he’d gathered to argue all the reasons they were likely wasting the entry fee died on his tongue when Lark stood on her tiptoes, bracketed his cheeks with her soft hands, and gave him a tender kiss.

With her sweet, soft lips brushing his, Troy wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and forget about everything. He could easily pretend there was no rodeo, ranch, food truck, or horses that needed new nails in their shoes. All he wanted at that moment was to hold Lark and get lost in a mind-blowing kiss.

Instead of surrendering to his desires, he kept his hands at his sides and wished he didn’t feel such a strong responsibility to so many other people.

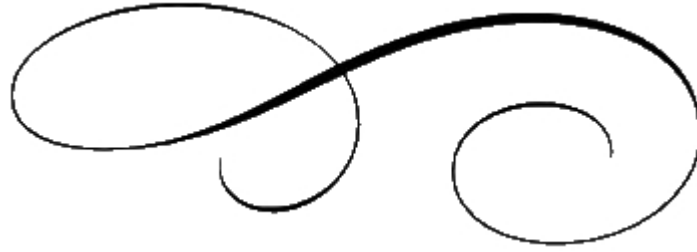
“Think of that as a little wish for luck,” she whispered, stepped back, and smiled at him before she hurried off toward the stands.

“Do you need an instruction manual, like a detailed step-by-step guideline with pictures of what to do when a beautiful woman kisses you?” Truitt asked as he stepped out of the shadows of the trailer and thumped Troy on the back. “I bet I could create one so basic even you wouldn’t misunderstand what to do with a gorgeous girl when she is clearly into you.”

Troy had to draw in three deep breaths and count to ten to keep from lodging his fist into Truitt’s nose. A nose that did not seem capable of minding its own business.

At his warning glower, Truitt merely grinned and picked up Troy’s farrier kit. “Come on. I’ll help you finish up, then we’d better get busy practicing. If we want a chance at competing in the final go-round on Saturday, we need to get your mind off a certain red-haired potato princess and back on winning this thing.”

Troy would have argued with his cousin, but Truitt was right.



“Super Cooper? What in the blazes are you doing down there?” the announcer asked on Saturday afternoon during the final day of the Pendleton Round-Up.

Troy and Truitt sat on their horses, waiting to compete in team roping, the next event. Troy had somehow managed to block everything from his mind except doing his best to win in the slack events. He and Truitt had pulled out two amazing scores and had secured their place to compete today.

As he watched Cooper, Troy wondered what shenanigans his friend was currently plotting. He didn’t appear to be lining up any strange events or on the verge of dragging innocent bystanders into an embarrassing situation.

Cooper ignored the announcer and pranced in a circle in the center of the grassy arena.

“Coop? What’s gotten into you? You look like a reject from the ballet school.”

Cooper stopped, put his hands on his hips, and stared up at the announcer’s booth.

“That so? How about you and I have a dance-off, man?”

The announcer chuckled. “That ain’t happening Cooper. Not today, and not ever. You’d better find someone else more your speed if you want to have a dance-off. By that, I mean a kindergartener hyped up on a pound of sugar.”

The crowd laughed, but Cooper feigned indifference to their reaction.

“I spy with my little eye ...” Cooper turned in a slow circle and pointed toward the sound guy in charge of the music played throughout the rodeo, and then he ran over to the

section where his wife sat with their friends. “I spy a great little dancer.”

Cooper reached up to Paige and lifted his son over the fence. Alex was dressed in a costume identical to Cooper’s clown outfit.

When the first beats of “Walking on Sunshine” began to play, the crowd clapped and whistled. Cooper and Alex broke into what was obviously a practiced dance routine. Troy leaned forward and cheered as Alex busted a bunch of cute moves.

“Woohee, folks! Give Cooper and Alex James a big hand!” the announcer said when the song ended. Cooper and Alex took a bow before the rodeo barrelman picked up his son and jogged out of the arena with the little boy sitting on his shoulder, grinning from ear to ear. It looked like Cooper’s son might be as big a ham as he was when it came to performing in the spotlight.

Troy shifted his attention from how fun Cooper James made the downtime at the rodeo to focusing on finding his center and getting ready to rope a steer in a prize-winning time. He glanced over at Truitt who was talking to some friends, relaxed and laid back. Troy sometimes wished he were more like his easy-going cousin. On the surface, Troy tried to appear calm, cool, and collected, but all too often he felt anxious and stressed. Maybe part of that was because he’d always felt like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Even when he’d been little, he could recall his father telling him to be tough and strong and help take care of everyone at the ranch while he was gone. So that’s what Troy had always tried to do.

Lost in his memories, he hadn’t even realized the team roping had started.

“Ready, man?” Truitt asked, reaching over and thumping him on the shoulder.

“You bet,” Troy said, nodding to his cousin, then watching as the team ahead of them roped in good time but got a penalty for breaking the barrier.

Truitt tossed Troy a pleased grin, then the two of them moved into the box.

“Get ready for two cousins to come out here and show you how it’s done, folks. Next up is Troy and Truitt Lucas of Kennewick, Washington. These boys are a couple of ranchers who rodeo just enough to let us enjoy their skills when they come out to play,” the announcer said.

Troy blocked out the rest of whatever the announcer said and glanced at Truitt.

“I’m ready to party,” Truitt said with a cocky grin.

Troy nodded, and the steer was released from the chute.

With a deep breath, the one Troy always took before urging his horse forward, he and Indy raced into the arena. Troy swung the rope, building his loop before he tossed it, catching the steer by the horns, then turning Indy to the left.

As they turned, the horse’s back feet started to slide on the slick grass. Troy prayed Indy wouldn’t go down. At that moment, he didn’t care about winning or losing. He hated the thought of his horse getting hurt. Over the years, he’d seen horses and riders injured in the grass, but it was a chance anyone competing in rodeo took every time they entered the arena.

Troy knew the moment Indy regained his footing. He could feel it in the way the big horse moved forward. Relieved yet tense, Troy looked back to see Truitt’s loop circle the steer’s back legs.

They turned to face each other, pulling the rope taut, and the clock stopped.

“Whoo! That had me on the edge of my seat. Just look at that, folks!” the announcer boomed over the crowd. “Even with Troy’s horse almost taking a spill, team Lucas just edged their way to first place with a four-point-eight-second score! Let’s see if these two local boys can hang onto their lead to win this thing!”

The crowd clapped and cheered. Troy and Truitt both removed their hats and waved them to the crowd.

A flash of red by one of the railings caught Troy's eye and he saw Lark cheering for him. She must have left her food truck just to watch him. When she blew him a kiss, he smiled and pointed his hat directly at her before he settled it on his head and rode over beside Truitt.

"Man, I thought you and Indy were going to bite it out there," Truitt said as they rode to the area where the other team ropers waited to see who would win the event.

"You weren't the only one." Troy patted Indy's neck. "You did good, Indy."

The horse shook his mane, as though he agreed with him. Troy and Truitt both chuckled and watched the other teams rope.

They ended up coming in third, beaten out by two-tenths of a second for second place and three-tenths for first. Although Troy was disappointed they hadn't won, he was happy they'd placed, and pleased they'd done so well even with Indy almost taking a slide in the grass.

Troy and Truitt had just seen to their horses when Birch Barton ran over to them. "Cooper is looking for you two. He needs some help."

"With what?" Troy asked in a dubious, hesitant tone. If Cooper wanted their help, it most likely meant they were about to be humiliated in front of the crowd.

"He didn't say. Come on." Birch led the way to where Cooper had gathered a group of cowboys, mostly his friends.

"We're going to have a little competition while they get set up for bull riding. I need six teams of three. Let's go." Cooper ran into the arena, and Troy, like the other cowboys, reluctantly followed. He saw Truitt talking to Chase Jarrett, then the two of them joined him.

"Chase will be on our team," Truitt said as he joined the line Birch helped Cooper form. Each team was handed a small folded square that looked like a white cotton towel.

"Cooper? What craziness are you getting up to down there?" the announcer asked as Cooper motioned to two

cowgirls on horses at the far end of the arena.

“We’re gonna have us a calf-dressing contest.” Cooper turned to the announcer’s box. “Want to come down and give it a try?”

“No, I do not,” the announcer said with a laugh. “Tell me how this is gonna work.”

“Well,” Cooper said, drawing out the word until it sounded like it was four long syllables, “those purty gals down there are going to turn six calves loose. The cowboys, working in teams of three, have to catch a calf, hold it still long enough to put those bloomers on the back end, then get it across the finish line right here.” Cooper sprinkled white powder across the arena grass. “First team across the line gets Lasso Eight gift cards and a free meal from Bud’s Spuds.”

Troy perked up at the mention of Lark’s business. It was smart of her to donate the free meals and get her name mentioned, but she seemed to own more than her share of business savvy.

Truitt wagged an eyebrow at him, as though he could read his thoughts, then he tipped his head toward the stands where Lark sat next to Jessie Jarrett in the seat Chase had vacated. The sight of her holding little Jayla Jarrett did something strange and unexpected to Troy.

He’d never allowed himself to think about having his own children. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing a wife and leaving a baby without a mother like had happened to him when his mother had died. He knew medical advances continued to change the odds of that ever occurring, but he had always told himself he’d spend his life alone.

For the first time in his life, he considered what it would be like to have a wife and family of his own. A picture of Lark holding a red-headed baby with his blue eyes left him distracted, but a shove forward by Truitt quickly brought him back to the moment.

“On your mark. Get set. Go!” Cooper yelled.

The two cowgirls released the calves into the arena while the cowboys ran toward them. Troy had already concluded he'd be better at catching the calf than trying to dress it, so he lunged toward one and wrapped an arm around its head. It kicked with both back feet, hitting him square on the thigh, then ran off before he could get a better grip.

“Grab it, grab it!” Tate Morgan yelled as he ran by with Cort McGraw and Kash Kressley.

Rather than join the fray, Troy stood perfectly still, watching and waiting. When a calf raced past him, he grabbed it before it could escape. “Tru! Get to it,” he yelled as the calf, which was more the size of a half-grown steer, bawled and bucked against him.

Truitt and Chase ran over and unfurled the white cotton which turned out to be an enormous pair of granny underpants. Troy might have laughed if he hadn't been singularly focused on keeping from getting hit with a hoof in the face.

“Over the tail. Over the tail!” Chase yelled, trying to help Truitt stuff the calf's tail inside the voluminous drawers.

“Is it dressed?” Troy asked, unable to look back with the calf determined on escaping.

“Yep, let's head to Cooper,” Truitt said, taking one side of the back end while Chase flanked the other.

Trying to force the calf to move where they wanted it to was like trying to drive a car with no steering wheel. Troy dug in his heels and tugged while Chase and Truitt pushed, but the calf seemed to be made of part slinky for the way it could twist and contort all while getting further away from the finish line.

“Grab the back legs,” Troy said, mugging the calf close to his side, then picking up the front of it. Cooper never said they had to walk the animal across the finish line and carrying it seemed like a faster alternative even if he felt like he was about to give himself a hernia.

“Run!” Truitt shouted as the three of them attempted to carry the writhing, protesting calf to the finish line. They were

almost there when the calf decided to let loose a load of manure.

Chase gasped in surprise, and he and Truitt dropped the back legs at the same time. Without their help to hold the calf, Troy lost his hold and went down with the calf on top of him.

When a buzzer sounded, Troy slowly rose to his feet, looked down at the manure covering him and that on Chase and Truitt, then shook his head. All that work and mess for nothing.

“Our winners are team five. Give it up for the King Penny Ranch crew. Good job, guys!” Cooper high-fived all three of them and gave each one an envelope, then they all cleared out of the way so the bull riding could begin.

“You miss riding bulls?” Troy asked Chase as they walked out of the arena and headed for the restroom to wash up.

“I do, but not as much as I love being home with Jessie and Jayla. My two girls make my life far better than it ever was when I was riding bulls.” Chase started to slap Troy on the shoulder and stopped before he splatted him with more manure. “What about you? Any plans for you and Truitt to settle down?”

Truitt’s head shook so fast and hard he almost dislodged his hat. “No. Don’t even talk like that around me. Something contagious might stick, and then where would I be? No, thank you. I like being single and free to do as I please just fine.”

Troy grinned at his cousin, then back at Chase. “What he said.”

Chase chuckled as they washed their hands and cleaned up as best as they could, then left the restroom.

“Seems to me there’s a sweet little red bird who’s caught your eye, Troy.” Chase pointed toward Lark’s food truck where she and Allie waited on customers.

Troy’s gaze landed on Lark, thinking she got prettier every time he saw her.

She did look tired, though. He knew she'd been putting in crazy hours all week. She'd managed to find three additional employees to work for her during the Round-Up, but one had already quit, and she wasn't certain the other two would work out. At least she still had Allie and could depend on her help on the weekends.

"Isn't that right?" Chase asked, nudging him with his elbow.

Since Troy had no idea what Chase had said, he grunted in response, ignored the teasing guffaws trailing behind him, and made his way to Lark's booth.

Her green eyes sparkled as he stepped up to her back door.

"Hey, you," she said in that silly greeting he'd not only come to expect but adore. She leaned over and kissed his cheek, then wrinkled her nose as she stepped back. "There were a lot of cowpies out there."

Troy nodded in agreement. He should have run when Birch had come looking for them instead of quietly going along with Cooper's idiotic plans. Experience had taught him he'd either be humiliated, tormented, or something equally as awful if he participated. Manure smeared all over his favorite shirt was right up there at the top of the list.

"How are things going this afternoon?" he asked.

"Good," she said, moving around Allie and taking a package of Spuddy Bites from the freezer. "Will this hold you for a little while until I get caught up on orders?"

"Sure," he said, taking the bag from her with a smile. "Just text me when you're ready to close down, and I'll help."

"You don't have to do that."

Troy smiled at her, wondering what she'd do if he pulled out the pins holding her hair back and buried his hands in it. Now wasn't the time or the place for such thoughts. "I'm always happy to help you, Songbird."

Before he gave into one of his urges to hold her, touch her, or kiss her, he took the sweet treat and wandered off to his horse trailer. Grateful he'd packed extra clothes, he ate the candy, then changed into a pair of worn but clean jeans and an older shirt that was faded, but presentable. He had a few friends who needed him to remove the ice nails from their horse's shoes. While he worked doing that, he thought about the rodeo, the fun he'd had, and how much he'd missed spending time with Lark. Even though they were both at the Round-Up, he'd hardly had a chance to see her.

Lark had been flooded with a steady stream of business each day. Evenings, she'd left as soon as she could and headed home to prep additional food. Other than the time he spent helping her clean up and shut down the truck each evening after the rodeo, they'd not spent any time together.

Additionally, Troy was so far behind with work at the ranch, he had no idea when he'd get away to see her, even if she had the time.

From what he knew, she had plans to attend farmer's markets in the next few weeks, and there were a couple of big events where she'd park her food truck outside the venues. She had mentioned a hot air balloon festival coming up, and he toyed with the idea of asking if he could go along with her. He'd never really seen one up close and always wondered what it would be like to ride in one. But if he wanted to do that, he'd have to work some long, long hours at the ranch to get caught up on work.

Troy had just finished with the last horse and returned his farrier kit to his pickup when he received a text from Lark.

Finishing up for the evening. What can I cook for you before I shut everything down?

Troy sent a quick response, stopped to wash his hands in a restroom, then headed back to her food truck.

She was just sliding his patty melt off the griddle and into a food tray when he arrived.

“Perfect timing,” she said, handing him the tray and a large Dr Pepper as he stood at the back of her truck. “I’m so proud of you and Truitt. You two did great today. Congrats on taking third place.”

“Thank you. We’re both happy with it, considering some of the amazing teams we beat out to get there.”

Lark patted him on the shoulder. “You should be proud. It was great to sneak away for a minute to watch you. I thought for sure Indy was going to fall, but I’m so glad he didn’t.”

“You and me both,” Troy said, then sat on the back step and dug into the food while Allie and Lark started cleaning up and putting things away.

Truitt wandered over and gladly accepted the last tray of tater tots with leftover brisket, beans, and shredded cheese melting over the top. He plopped onto a big Tundra cooler Lark had behind the food truck and talked animatedly about funny stories or things he’d heard from their friends.

“I heard Tally tell Gage that if he intended to ride home inside the vehicle with her, he needed to change into something that didn’t stink so much. Last I saw, he and Trevor were heading for the Lasso Eight tent to get something to wear.”

Troy grinned. “I’m surprised Gage didn’t just peel off his clothes and climb into the rig anyway.”

Lark’s eyes widened. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, don’t be so sure.” Truitt winked at her. “I’ve seen him do worse, but then again, that was before he married Tally. I think she’s domesticating him.”

“She does seem to have tamed him a bit,” Troy agreed.

“Huh. Imagine that. A wild cowboy meets a girl, falls in love, and starts acting like a civilized human being. Oh, the tragedy of it all,” Lark said with mock despair, pressing the back of one hand to her forehead.

Troy and Truitt both snickered and finished their meal.

“That was delicious as always, honey,” Truitt said, leaning inside the truck to kiss Lark’s cheek. “If you need help, you know how to reach me.”

“I do, and you’re welcome. Have fun tonight.”

Truitt tugged on his hat, then winked at her again. “You know I will.”

He hurried off, and Troy tamped down the urge to punch his cousin for calling Lark honey right along with kissing her cheek. Truitt called any female he liked who was out of diapers and not yet dead *honey*. And he was a cheek kisser. Someone who kissed babies and great-grandmas as well as women of all ages, shapes, and sizes.

However, knowing that didn’t make Troy like Truitt’s lips getting close to Lark’s. Not that he had any claim on them. Not yet. Maybe never, at the rate he was going.

Concluding he was tired and needed some quiet time to get his head back on straight, Troy jumped right in to helping Lark get the food truck ready so she could drive it home.

“Do you need help driving your SUV back home?” Troy asked after Allie had called it a night and left.

“No. Danny dropped me off this morning. Robin had no interest in coming, but Danny wanted to check out all the vendor booths.” Lark sighed, as though she couldn’t quite hold it in. “I feel bad for him. It seems to me they always do what my sister wants to do, not things that Danny enjoys. Robin is not familiar with the concept of compromise. When I get married, if that day should ever come, I intend for my husband and me to be partners and to make compromises. Don’t you want to do that when you love someone?”

Troy shrugged. “I always thought so, but what do I know? The last girl I dated longer than a few months told me I was beyond hopeless and deserved to end up alone with only a weathered old cow dog to keep me company.”

A frown creased Lark’s otherwise smooth brow. “That’s just mean. You deserve every happiness in the world, Troy. You’re one of the nicest, kindest, most thoughtful people I’ve

ever met. Anyone who tells you differently isn't worth your time."

"Thank you," he said softly, touched that she thought those things about him. He wasn't good at expressing himself or talking about feelings, but he decided to give it a try. "You're a generous, caring, sweet woman, Lark. I hope you always stay that way."

Moisture gathered in her eyes as she blinked at him a few times, then she released a choppy breath and grinned. "Look at us, getting all sappy. It must be exhaustion talking. When I fall into bed tonight, I might not wake up until Monday."

"I wish I had that luxury, but we've got water to move in the morning, and it's time to start getting ready to plant the winter wheat."

Lark gave him a long glance as she wiped off the counters, then tossed the rag in a bucket with others that she'd wash. "I hope you at least get a few hours to rest tomorrow, Troy. You'll go to church with your grandmother, won't you?"

"Yep. So will Truitt, or he'll get an earful about it. I have a feeling he'll be late getting home, though."

Lark rolled her eyes as though she had something to say about Truitt's running off with his friends and leaving Troy to handle the workload, but Troy didn't begrudge his cousin the time he took to blow off steam.

"Will you text me when you get home, just so I know you made it safely there?" Troy asked as Lark stepped out of the food truck and locked the door.

"I will." She wrapped her arms around his waist and gave him a hug, her head resting against his chest.

He settled his arms around her, pulling her closer, wishing he didn't need to tell her goodbye. When she lifted her head, he brushed a kiss over her lips, then walked her around to the driver's door. "Be careful in this crazy traffic."

"I will," she said, trailing her fingers along his jaw before she pressed another quick kiss to his lips, hopped into the food truck, and left with a wave.

Troy wandered over to his pickup, debating if he should let Truitt give him those step-by-step instructions after all.

Chapter Fourteen



Elbow-deep in a no-till drill, Troy was trying to figure out what was wrong with the stupid thing. Even though it was barely six in the morning, he'd already been up for two hours.

He and Truitt were in a rush to get the winter wheat planted before it rained next week. After that, they needed to make repairs to the feedlot, and then get the ranch ready for winter.

The last thing they needed was one of the seed drills to break down when they were ready to use it.

He'd just dropped a wrench on the floor of the shop and was reaching for it when his phone rang. With grease smeared all over his hands, he used a rag to answer it and hoped he didn't get his phone grease smeared.

"Good morning, Songbird," he said, as he glimpsed the identity of the caller. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Hey, you," Lark said, making him smile. "I talked myself out of calling four times already, but I'm desperate. Allie can't help me today. She had an allergic reaction to something she ate yesterday and is recuperating today. I can't

ask Mom for help, and Robin is less than useless. Jay and Rachel can't drive down, and all my temporary help from the Round-Up has already quit, informing me they aren't accustomed to such hard work. I didn't know who else to call."

Troy wasn't sure what it was she wanted or needed, but he'd do anything he could to help her. "What can I do?"

"I know you and Truitt are so busy, and I have no right to ask, but would you please, please, please consider going with me today as my assistant, or hired hand, or sous chef, or whatever title you'd like me to give you? I can't possibly do everything by myself at the balloon festival."

"Okay." Troy didn't have to mull over the options. If Lark was desperate enough to ask him to be her helper, she was in dire need of assistance. He'd just have to make up the time he was going to be gone another day and hope Truitt and Grammy understood.

"You agreed too easily, cowboy. You should have at least made me beg a little."

Troy chuckled. "Begging isn't necessary. If you need my help, then I'll come. What time do you need to leave?"

"An hour. Can you be here by then?"

"Sure. I'll clean up and meet you ..." He realized he had no idea if she was at home or her parents' farm. "Where am I meeting you?"

Lark laughed. "I'm at my house. I drove the truck over here last night knowing I'd have to leave early this morning. It's an hour's drive to the festival, and I'll need an hour to get set up before they open."

"Right. I'll hurry. Bye, Songbird."

Troy used a paper towel he yanked off the spool they kept above the workbench to grab his phone then raced out of the shop toward the house. Inside the mudroom, he kicked off his boots and tossed his greasy shirt and jeans into the basket of clothes that needed special attention before they were washed

to remove stains, then made a dash through the kitchen to his room.

“Troy? What are you doing?” his grandmother called as she stepped back from the open door of the refrigerator.

“Lark needs help. Grabbing a shower. Then I have to go,” he yelled on the way to his room.

He showered, shaved, and dressed in less than ten minutes. After stuffing his wallet in his pocket and grabbing his keys, he hustled back to the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry to just run off and leave everything today, but Lark couldn’t find anyone to help her. She’s going to the hot air balloon festival, and it’s going to be a big crowd.” Troy guzzled a glass of milk and accepted the paper bag his grandmother handed to him.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Grammy said, offering him an understanding smile. “You go help your girl, and don’t worry about things here.”

“I’ll try to get the drill fixed when I get back. I think the event ends at eight, so I should be home before ten.”

His grandmother shook her head. “Go, baby. Go have fun and don’t worry about today. If Truitt doesn’t get to the repair today, it will be there tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Grammy. You really are the best.” Troy gave her a one-armed hug, snagged his phone from where he’d left it on the bench by the door, and jogged outside.

“Dude! Where are you going?” Truitt called as he loped over from the direction of the barn.

“Lark needs help. I’m so sorry to bail on you and Grammy today. I promise I’ll finish the repair work when I get home.” Troy tossed his cousin an apologetic look as he hustled to his pickup and opened the door. Truitt had many skills and talents, but mechanic work was something he preferred to avoid when possible.

“Don’t worry about it. Have a great day with Lark,” Truitt said as Troy set the bag his grandmother had given to

him on the console. “Maybe, you know, being trapped inside the food truck with her all day, you might get around to actually kissing her.”

Troy was in no mood for his cousin’s teasing as he slid behind the wheel. He glowered at him and started the pickup. “Text me if you need me to bring anything back from town.”

“We’ll be fine, Troy. Have fun and don’t feel guilty for being gone. Seriously, it’s fine.”

With a nod, Troy shut the door of the pickup, fastened his seatbelt, and left in a rush. Since it was early and there were hardly any other cars on the road, he exceeded the speed limit and arrived at Lark’s place five minutes earlier than he’d anticipated getting there.

She waved at him from the front window when he pulled into her driveway and parked. The food truck was in front of her house on the street. He wondered if the neighbors noticed it or cared. Likely not, or Lark wouldn’t have left it parked there all night.

Troy grabbed the bag of food his grandmother had sent, got out, and hurried over to where Lark stood on the top step trying to balance what appeared to be a small soft-sided cooler, two thermal cups, and a bag he knew held her tablet and card reader for taking electronic payments while closing the door.

“Is that everything?” he asked, taking the computer bag and the cooler, and then reaching for one of the thermal cups.

“Almost. Take the blue one. It has coffee. The red one has tea,” she said, glancing down, then at him. “I forgot my purse. Here are the keys to the truck.” She dropped a key ring on his outstretched index finger, and he walked down the driveway and around to the driver’s side door. He’d just unlocked it when he felt someone watching him. He looked over to see a little imp with brown pigtails studying him from the yard across the street.

“Hi,” he said, offering the child a friendly smile.

“Are you stealing Lark’s truck?” the child asked.

“Nope. She gave me the keys.” He jangled them on the key ring. “We’re going on an adventure today.”

The little girl’s eyes widened. “You are? I love adventures. Can I go?”

Troy grinned but shook his head. “Not this time. We’ll be gone all day and I’m sure your mom and dad would miss you.”

The child shrugged. “They won’t. They’re busy with my new brother. He looks like a really ugly puppy, only without fur.”

Troy did his best not to laugh. “I bet he’ll grow out of it.”

The little one sighed and scrubbed her toe in the grass of the lawn. “That’s what my dad says, but I’m not so sure.”

With a solemn nod of commiseration, Troy glanced up as Lark rushed out of the house and shut the door behind her, arms laden with her purse, thermal travel mug, and a huge plastic bag full of napkins and paper towels.

“Ready?” he asked, stepping around the truck.

“Yep. You wanna drive?” Lark asked as she set the napkins and paper towels in the back.

“Sure,” Troy said, thinking how fun it would be to drive the old truck. He smiled at the little girl across the street. “You have a fun day with your new brother.”

“All he does is sleep, eat, and make stinky diapers,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “But I’ll try.”

He heard Lark choke down a laugh as he waved to the child and got into the truck.

“I see you met Bethany,” Lark said as she settled into her seat. “Her parents have a three-week-old newborn. She hasn’t yet decided if she likes him or not.”

“She’ll come around,” Troy said, hoping it was true. Siblings were very important in his book, whether they were directly related or came through a series of unexpected, unfortunate circumstances. He couldn’t even begin to imagine

how hard his childhood would have been if he hadn't shared it with Truitt.

"I hope so. I've taken over a few meals. Did she tell you the baby looks like a hairless puppy?"

Troy grinned as he turned onto the road that would take them to the freeway. "Sure did."

Lark smirked. "She wouldn't be wrong. I've seen cuter babies, but then again, I'm a bit prejudiced after my nephews arrived. In my opinion, they are the most adorable little boys in the world."

"No bias there at all, Auntie Lark." Troy tossed her a silly grin. "I look forward to meeting your nephews."

For a moment, Lark stared at him, like she was searching through her catalog of memories for a time when he had met Robin's sons. "Wow. I really thought you'd seen them, but I guess anytime you've been around my family, it's been all adults. You'll have to come over sometime when I'm babysitting them. They are exhausting but so cute."

"That's not really talking me into it," he teased. "Tell me more about today. I know nothing about taking orders or running a food truck. I'm bound to make a bunch of blunders."

"I don't care, Troy. You absolutely can't be worse than my mom, and she was my next phone call if you couldn't help." She placed a hand on his arm. "Truly, I'm so grateful you agreed to help me out. I owe you big time for this. Weren't you going to work on a tractor or planter today so you could start planting wheat?"

"That was the plan, but it will all still be there later. It's supposed to start raining next Thursday, so, as long as it is all planted by then, we'll be in good shape. Truitt will keep working in the fields while Grammy tries to catch up with her canning. She's making blackberry jam today and canning green beans."

"I bet her jam is delicious. The few things I've tasted she's made are so good."

Troy smiled at her as they merged with traffic on the freeway heading west. “She says the same about you. Speaking of which, Grammy gave me a bag of food before I ran out the door. I don’t know what’s in it, but I’ll share.”

Lark picked up the bag he’d set on the floor between them. “Looks like you’ve got homemade biscuits with ham and two fresh pears.” She pointed to the cooler box by her feet. “I packed lunches for us along with snacks. I’m sure you are sick to death of eating my tater tot concoctions.”

Troy chuckled and shook his head. “That won’t ever happen. I love meat and potatoes, period. Your tater tots are so good, and the meat you serve with them, whether it’s the pulled pork or the brisket, or even the patty melts, is always amazing. You’ll be sorry you asked me to help today. I’ll likely eat too many of your profits.”

“Nope. I don’t believe it.” Lark handed him one of the biscuits, then bit into the other.

On the way to the festival, they talked about everything and nothing. Troy realized he felt at ease with Lark, like he could talk to her about anything, even if thoughts of kissing her—loving her—left him so rattled he could hardly think straight.

Friendship with Lark was easy, comfortable, and natural. Moving beyond that terrified him. He thought she might be experiencing the same feelings of reluctance to do anything that might jeopardize an amazing friendship that he didn’t want to ever end.

Of course, Truitt and Grammy razzed him about “his girl” all the time. So did his friends. He was sure Lark was also teased by her family about him being her boyfriend. However, other than a few light kisses, they hadn’t moved into boyfriend/girlfriend territory, had they? Did it count as being there when he could think of nothing else at night beyond how much he wished Lark were there with him, so he could hold her close and love her?

Frustrated with his thoughts, and his inability to keep from wishing for things he knew would never come to pass, he

took the exit Lark pointed to and followed the signs to the hot air balloon festival.

The colorful balloons were spread out across a field, getting ready to lift off, while others already dotted the skies above them.

Troy leaned forward and looked upward before he turned onto a side road when he saw a vendor entry sign on a post. “This is so cool,” he said, glancing between the road and the balloons floating overhead.

“It is neat. I did this event last year, and it was a lot of fun, but so busy. Jay and Rachel drove down last year to help, but they both have jobs they can’t get away from, and they’re already working on mid-term projects. Honestly, Troy, you saved my bacon today.”

“You know how much I love bacon,” he said, waggling his eyebrows as he pulled up to a gate manned by a woman with a clipboard. She offered detailed instructions about where to park, then gave Lark an exhibitor packet. Troy pulled through the gate and made his way to Lark’s vendor spot.

Working together, it didn’t take the two of them long to get everything ready. He’d stepped inside after setting two of her big coolers behind the food truck to find Lark rummaging through a stack of Bud’s Spuds shirts.

“I think I have one in your size. Maybe,” Lark said, lifting a pink one, then shaking her head. “How have I not given you one of my shirts before now?”

“I’m guessing because you don’t have one that will fit me.”

“Ha! I bet this one will work.” She held up a light blue shirt with the Bud’s Spuds logo and handed it to him. “Give it a try.”

Troy had his doubts the shirt would fit, but he decided he’d humor Lark. He pulled out his shirttails, unbuttoned his shirt, and slipped it off, then yanked on the T-shirt. It was tighter than he preferred to wear but not uncomfortable or binding.

“What do you think? Does it fit?” he asked, then struck a pose with his muscles flexed.

He’d only meant to tease Lark, but she stood with an apron dangling from her fingers as she gaped at him. For the length of several heartbeats, he was certain she didn’t even blink.

Appearing flustered, she handed him the apron. “It fits,” she said, eyeing him for a moment before she rushed out of the food truck with her cheeks aflame.

Uncertain if her attention to his anatomy was bad or good, he tied on the canvas waist apron that looked like something someone might wear at a hardware store with two big pockets in the front. Troy glanced around and started filling the napkin dispensers as Lark returned to the food truck.

“Thanks again for helping me today, Troy,” she said as she tied on an apron.

“Anytime, Songbird.” He looked over at her as he made sure the condiments were well stocked, wondering what had upset her earlier and what the day might bring.

Fifteen minutes later, Troy was shredding lettuce for the taco tots when he heard Lark suck in a gasp.

“What is it?” he asked, expecting to see blood gushing from a cut on her finger or something along those lines. Instead, she pointed to a food truck setting up across from them.

“Oh, no,” Troy muttered, watching as Kyle Rearden, the Totinator, stepped out of the truck like a king who had just arrived to greet his loyal subjects.

“This won’t be good,” Lark whispered before she returned to chopping onions and peppers.

The event opened, and people began to wander around. The moment the first customers headed toward them, Kyle stepped forward and motioned to his food truck.

“Want the tastiest spuds in the state? Get them right here. The Totinator knows how to serve up the best tots in the

world. Don't let the competition fool you." Kyle pointed at Lark's truck with a sneer.

Troy was ready to march outside and knock the idiot into next week, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. Much to his surprise, he watched as Lark washed her hands, then walked outside and over to Kyle.

"Mr. Rearden, there will be ample customers for both of us, but it might be nice to get through the festival without finger-pointing and name-calling. Can't we just be nice neighbors today?"

"Afraid my food is far better than yours?" Kyle said in a loud voice, drawing attention from everyone in the immediate vicinity. "I can cook you under the table any day. Besides, Bud's Spuds is a stupid name for a business. Why don't you pack it up and head home where you belong? Today is my turn to be the big hit of the show."

Lark looked like she wanted to either slug the guy or give him an earful. Instead, she offered the jerk a polite smile. "I hope you have a good day," she said, then returned to her food truck with her head held high.

Troy was so proud of her, proud that she chose to take the high road instead of telling Kyle what she really thought of him. He watched as she inhaled a few deep breaths as she stood on the steps of the food truck.

"You know, some people think getting all up in somebody's face, spouting opinions and spewing venom is brave and strong. To me, true strength is offering kindness to someone when they don't deserve it." Troy gently squeezed her hand as she moved inside the food truck. "You are one strong lady, Lark Gibson."

She wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug, and he felt the warmth of her breath on his neck as she sighed. "I'm not strong. I really want to go out there and kick him where it hurts, jab him in both of his beady eyes, and maybe dump a gallon of ketchup over his head."

Troy chuckled softly. “And the fact that he’s unharmed and ketchup-free is why I admire you, Songbird. Most people wouldn’t show your restraint or compassion.”

Lark pulled back from him and tipped her head toward the Totinator. “If he pushes things too far today, will you go over there and clobber him for me?”

Troy flexed his muscles again and grinned. “Just say the word.”

Lark’s gaze roved from his biceps to his chest as her cheeks turned pink again. The way she studied him, with something that looked like yearning, made him think maybe she liked him, at least a little.

“You’re a good friend, Troy. Thanks.” Lark kissed his cheek, then they got back to work.

Troy felt like a fish out of water as he listened to all of Lark’s instructions and began taking orders. Despite Kyle’s attempts to steal customers and bad-mouth Lark’s food, they soon had all the business they could handle.

By noon, Troy felt as though his nerves had been strung on barbed wire and every sound and movement pricked them. It was one thing to occasionally step into the food truck with Lark or to help clean up at the end of the day. It was completely different to spend hours in the confined space, bumping into her, brushing against her, breathing in the soft fragrance of her hair as she leaned over and around him. He’d known she was curvy, but having those curves touch him every few minutes was about to scramble his brains like a pan full of Grammy’s breakfast eggs.

When Lark turned around to grab more cheese from the fridge and her chest brushed against his, he spiraled into a sensory overload. Every square inch of his skin felt like it was tingling while the blood thrumming through his veins could have been made of lava from the consuming heat he experienced.

For a moment, he considered hauling Lark into his arms and losing himself in the passion he felt building for her.

Would she return it or slap his face?

From the way her cheeks had turned rosy several times when they'd inadvertently bumped into each other, he pondered if she felt the same turbulent emotions. Maybe it was nothing and he was reading into the situation.

Before he lost his mind and took her in his arms, he drank a big gulp of cold Dr Pepper and returned his attention to taking orders from the customers waiting in line.

It had taken crunching his way through two cups full of ice and a fully loaded Arctic Spud for him to cool down, but he finally managed to get control of his longing to savor Lark's sweet lips. He'd just returned from the restroom when Lark's phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID, rolled her eyes, and answered the call.

"How are things with the warden?" she asked as she flipped over meat for a patty melt order.

Troy couldn't hear what was said on the other end of the line, but Lark stiffened as a look of pure fury settled on her pretty face.

"She what? I will drive over there and shoot her myself. I am telling you, Robin, you have got to find a new babysitter. That woman ought to be tarred and feathered and left for the coyotes to tear apart. If you don't find someone else soon, I'll give up my food truck business and my dreams to watch the boys. Do you really want that burden weighing on your already guilty conscience?"

Troy knew Lark didn't hold any fondness for her sister, but she adored her little nephews.

She exchanged a few more words, said goodbye, then sighed, her rigid posture slumping forward. "I can't bear the thought of someone taking such poor care of those sweet babies."

His brow furrowed. "Your nephews?"

"Robin has had a terrible time with childcare for her boys. If she finds someone good, she drives them nuts the first week, and they refuse to let her bring the kids back. The only

ones who don't seem bothered by her demands and craziness are the ones who shouldn't be providing care in the first place. Robin started taking Josh and Jeremiah to a new babysitter last week, but the woman leaves the kids in a basement room with no windows. According to Robin, even with the kid-sized furniture, the space is small and cramped. My sister didn't find it amusing when I told her she's taking the kids to prison every day."

Troy tried to hold in a chuckle but failed. "I could see why she wouldn't see the humor in that."

Lark nodded. "I know, but honestly, it's a nightmare. Robin picked up the boys early yesterday. The lunatic watching them had the baby in solitary confinement by placing the playpen upside down over the top of him."

"Guess they were keeping him in the box," Troy deadpanned.

Lark glared at him, then grinned. "It's not funny, Troy. Not at all. I love those boys so much. If anything happened to either of them, I would die. Just flat out die. If she can't find someone—anyone—better to watch the kids, I guess I'll have to park my food truck for a while and get used to the idea of puppy cartoons and dirty diapers."

"Are there any relatives who could help watch them?"

"You're looking at her. Danny's parents both work, and he's an only child. His grandparents live in Arizona. Mom and Dad are so busy with the farm. Robin doesn't really have any friends to speak of who could watch the boys. That leaves me." Lark sighed again. "I would do anything for Josh and Jeremiah, but I hate the thought of walking away from my business and dreams."

"I'm sure it won't come to that." Troy offered her a gentle pat on the back, afraid if he hugged her, he'd end up kissing her, and the customers waiting in line wouldn't appreciate the delay.

Lark returned to filling orders, but when they had a lull, she handed him a salad she'd made at home and brought

along. Troy looked at the assortment of greens loaded with colorful veggies then over at the griddle, where she had two beef patties cooking.

“You are hopeless,” she said, adding grilled chicken to the salad. “Eat that, then you can have a patty melt. I have a feeling you don’t eat as many vegetables as you should.”

“Don’t potatoes count as a vegetable?” Troy teased.

Lark shook a fork at him before she speared a piece of cucumber from the salad. “Goodness, no. Do we need to have a discussion about starches, carbs, proteins, and the food pyramid?”

“Goodness, no,” he said, mimicking her before he took a bite of the salad. It did taste fresh and delicious, even if there were things in it he wasn’t sure he could identify.

“Tell me more about your family, Troy. You’ve mentioned your grandparents raised you and Truitt, but that’s about all I know. Do you have a big family tree?”

Troy wiped his mouth on a napkin and shook his head. “Nope. My family tree is more like a splintered fence post that’s been left to rot from the bottom up.”

Lark gaped at him, then shook her head. “That’s an interesting way of describing one’s family, although I don’t believe it. Your grandmother is the sweetest lady, and Truitt is a great guy. You’ve never really talked about your parents or your grandpa.”

Instead of answering, Troy looked at the order counter in hopes customers would save him from delving into something he’d rather not discuss. With no one in sight, he took another bite of the salad and chewed before he glanced at Lark.

She plopped onto one of the two stools she could fold up and shove out of the way, then pushed the other one toward him with her foot.

“Take a load off, and then you can tell me why a simple question made you clam up even more than normal.”

Troy eased down on the stool he wasn't sure would hold his weight and looked at Lark as she forked another bite of her salad.

“My grandfather was the strong, silent type. Never said anything if he didn't have to.”

Lark wagged a forkful of lettuce at him. “Sounds like someone I know.”

He shrugged. “A little, I suppose. Grammy says I take after him and that Truitt and I look a lot like our dads.”

“I assumed you might, considering how closely you and Truitt resemble each other.” Lark rose and made a patty melt, setting it on the counter by Troy. He shoved in his last bite of salad, set the container aside, and looked back at her while the patty melt cooled enough to eat.

“Long story short is that my mom died a few weeks after I was born from complications from the birth. That's all anyone has ever told me. If you need more detail than that, you'll have to ask Grammy. I've Googled information about it, but I have no idea what half of it means. It doesn't change the fact that my arrival in the world ended my mom's life. Things like that aren't supposed to happen with modern medicine, are they?”

Lark set aside her salad and took his hands in hers, gently holding them. “It's not your fault, Troy. It's likely not anyone's fault, just something that happened. I'm truly sorry you had to go through your childhood without your mother. Even though my mom sometimes drives me batty, I'm grateful every day to have both of my parents.”

Troy nodded. “You're fortunate to have them and your siblings.”

“After your mom passed, is that when you went to live with your grandparents?”

“Yeah. My dad and Uncle Wes were both in the military. Marines. They served in different battalions, but both were boots on the ground. I lived with my grandparents, and anytime he could get home for a visit, Dad did. I have a few

fuzzy memories of spending time with him, like going fishing, and him taking me to see Santa at the mall. In my childhood mind, Dad was even bigger and better than Paul Bunyan. Dad was killed overseas during a covert operation when I was five. Uncle Wes died in similar circumstances six months later. Truitt's mother couldn't handle her grief and left him with us at the ranch. She died of a drug overdose a year later."

Tears glistened in Lark's eyes when Troy chanced a glance at her. "I'm so sorry, Troy. I had no idea. You and Truitt have gone through so much at such a young age."

He shrugged. "Well, we had our grandparents and each other. Although we sometimes might wish things had turned out differently, I wouldn't trade growing up with my best friend or my grandparents." Troy cut off a bite of his patty melt. "I know it sounds crazy, but I still miss them all, especially my grandpa. Losing him was hard."

"And that's when you dropped out of rodeo, isn't it?"

"Yep." Troy took a bite of food, trying to think of a topic less maudlin than his sad past. Pretty much anything short of discussing cemetery plots would fit the bill.

"You're a good man, Troy Lucas. Don't you ever let anyone tell you different."

Before he could reply, someone stepped up to the counter and placed a large order. Between filling orders, Troy managed to eat his patty melt and a bag full of Spuddy Bites Lark handed to him with a wink. He thought about tossing the candy aside and feasting on her lips instead, but the line of customers might have complained.

By the time the event wrapped up for the evening, Troy felt like he'd been run over by a herd of stampeding buffalo. He'd rather move twenty miles of handline in hundred-degree heat than spend all day smiling at and talking to customers. He much preferred solitude to constant chatting.

Lark insisted on driving home, and Troy was too tired to argue. He forced himself to stay awake by drinking another Dr Pepper.

“You heard about my family today. Tell me more about yours.”

She glanced over at him as she entered the freeway. “Not much to tell. You’ve heard about my great-grandparents starting the potato farm, why my mom gave us all bird names, and how my grandma inspired me to want to become a chef.”

“True, but you never told me how you ended up back here with a food truck.”

Her smile melted as her fingers tightened around the steering wheel. He reached over and placed a hand on her arm. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to.”

Lark acted as though he hadn’t said anything as she pointed to the vehicle in front of them. The taillights kept blinking on and off.

“What is that dude trying to do? Send a Morse code signal for help with his taillights?” Lark asked as she pulled into the passing lane.

“Too bad I don’t know Morse code or I’d interpret it for you,” Troy said as she passed the car with a little old man behind the wheel. He was so ancient and shriveled, he could hardly see to drive. “He should not be out on the freeway.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Lark’s hands relaxed slightly as she passed another slow-moving car. She glanced over at him and released a long breath that sounded like it had escaped from her soul.

Troy had no idea what to say, so he remained silent.

“The food truck was me not giving up.”

He frowned, confused. “Giving up? On what?”

“Myself.” Lark looked at him, then focused her gaze out the windshield. “When I moved to Seattle, I was so full of myself, my dreams, and my plans to be the next big thing. I excelled at school, always got high grades, and loved every minute of it. I graduated at the top of my class and got a job working at a restaurant where the chef was incredible and

served as a mentor to me until she left on maternity leave and never returned. I ran into my favorite teacher from culinary school one day, and he suggested I spend time in France as part of an exchange program, so off I went to Paris. It was glorious.”

Troy could picture her sitting on a sunny balcony sipping a fancy drink from a tiny china cup and enjoying every minute of it. She was even further out of his league than he’d anticipated. A homebody like him couldn’t begin to compete with Paris.

“What happened?” he asked, sensing the story was about to take a turn for the worse.

“Mylan Dumas happened.”

“Is that a drink or something?” he asked, uncertain if Mylan Dumas was a person, place, or thing.

“He’s an *or something*, for sure.” Lark smiled at him, but he saw the pain in her eyes before she looked back at the road. “Mylan was also a culinary student. I thought he was so suave and sophisticated. We started dating, and when it was time for me to return to America, he talked his way into coming with me. Mylan and I both got jobs at a fabulous Seattle restaurant. Everything was great until it wasn’t. I thought he shared my passion for food. Turns out, he just wanted to be applauded and lauded without putting in any work. I kept a notebook with recipes I was developing, working toward the day I could open my own place. The chef where we worked had even let me try out a few of them there, although Mylan tried to take the credit for them. That’s when I broke up with him and started looking for a new job. One night, after the restaurant closed, I wasn’t thinking and took a shortcut through the alley. A man in a ski mask attacked me, beat me up, and stole my bag. Inside it were the knives my parents had given to me as a graduation gift and a notebook that contained all the recipes I’d developed. I’m convinced the man who did it was Mylan.”

Troy gaped at her, wondering how anyone could hurt her. She was so beautiful and good and kind. “Did you go to the police?”

“I talked to them as soon as I was able. One of my coworkers heard my screams and arrived on the scene minutes after Mylan ran off. I was transported to the hospital. The police found my bag in a dumpster a block away. My wallet, phone, and everything else was in there except my recipes and knives, which made me even more convinced it was Mylan. When police went to his apartment, he’d already cleared out and left on a flight to France.”

Troy wondered what sort of international incident it might create if he booked a flight to Paris and taught Mylan Dumas a lesson about how to treat a lady.

Lark placed her hand over his. Until she touched him, he’d been unaware that he’d clenched his fingers into a fist. “Please don’t say anything to my family, Troy. None of them know what happened. I just couldn’t bear the thought of lying in a hospital bed listening to Mom and Robin telling me ‘I told you so’ over and over again.”

“You mean to tell me you never let anyone know, not even Jay?”

Lark shook her head. “Especially not Jay. Even though he’s younger than me, he seems to have a need to protect me. He’d have done something stupid. It was just a few broken ribs, a sprained wrist, and a cracked collarbone. I had bruises from head to toe, though, and looked like a leftover prop from a scary movie. It took a while to recuperate, but when I went back to work, I jumped at every noise and felt lost without my recipe book. The knives I could replace, but the recipes I’d worked on for years. I’ve attempted to recreate some of the recipes from memory, but have only succeeded in duplicating a handful of them. Anyway, I tried to return to normal, but I finally realized I never would. Not there. Not when I no longer felt safe. I needed out of the big city, so I came back here and bought the food truck with my savings. I decided I’d give myself two years to see if I could do well enough to save the money to open a restaurant in Portland and start over.”

“Seems to me you’re doing a great job of it, Lark.”

She smiled at him, and his heart felt like it melted into a syrupy pool. “Thanks, Troy. I have another month to get where I want to be financially if I want to follow through with my plans to head to Portland in the spring. Worst case scenario, I spend another year here, saving every penny I can, before heading to Portland. I meant what I said to Robin earlier, though. If she can’t get the babysitter thing figured out, I would drop everything and take the boys. The only thing is, Robin does nothing at the office other than pretend to be second in command. She has no idea how any of it works. She never worked in the fields or the office as a kid. She could no more tell when a potato is ready to be harvested than she could give instruction on how they’re distributed. The truth is that she hates being tied down and can’t stand the thought of being a stay-at-home mom. If she pretends to be working, it gives her an excuse to leave the boys so she can go get her hair or nails done or go spend Danny’s hard-earned money on things she doesn’t need.”

“It sounds like this is something your sister and brother-in-law need to figure out without derailing your plans and future. You’ve worked too hard to give up now. You’re going to make your goal and keep your business growing.” Troy cast a glimpse at Lark, hoping he hadn’t spoken out of turn. It pained him slightly to encourage her to chase her dreams when they’d take her to Portland, away from him.

“Thank you. I needed your pep talk.”

He smirked at her. “You might want to figure out the employee situation though. Surely there are more college kids who need part-time work, or even some stay-at-home moms who might enjoy a day of work now and then.”

“That’s a great idea, the stay-at-home mom thing.” Lark exited the freeway, and it wasn’t long until she parked at her house.

Troy helped her carry things inside, then lingered in the doorway, hesitant to leave. “Will you need help at the festival tomorrow?”

Lark shook her head. “No. Allie texted that she’s feeling fine now, and Birch can also work tomorrow, so I’m covered. She walked with him to his pickup. Dusk had settled around them, but with the streetlights glowing brightly, there wasn’t any privacy should her neighbors choose to watch out the window.

Regardless, Troy couldn’t leave without at least giving her a hug. He wrapped his arms around her and felt a sense of satisfaction when she rested against him, as though she drew strength from him.

“Thank you so much for today. I couldn’t have done it without you, Troy.”

“My pleasure, Songbird,” he said, leaning back and brushing a wayward curl away from her cheek before his knuckles skimmed over her smooth, soft skin. “Call me anytime I can help.”

“I will,” she said, then stood on her tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips before she turned and ran inside the house.

Troy blew out a frustrated breath and slid behind the wheel of his pickup. It was time to come up with a tactical plan. Otherwise, he might never get to kiss Lark the way he dreamed.

Chapter Fifteen



“Who’s that?” Truitt asked as dust rolled up their lane before the two of them had even had a chance to go in for breakfast Monday morning.

Troy turned off the water that filled the tank for the horses by the barn and watched as an SUV stopped at the end of the front walk in the golden early morning light.

“No way,” he said, breaking into a trot as Lark got out of the vehicle and waved.

If fantasies came true during daylight hours, Troy was certain he’d just fallen into one. Lark was dressed in worn jeans with a hole in the knee, a pair of dusty cowboy boots, a T-shirt that hugged her curves, and her hair in a long braid that fell over one shoulder like a silky rope.

“Hey, you,” she said, smiling at him as she bent down to pet the dogs. Troy felt a spurt of jealousy that Lotus and Lew received more affection from her than he’d managed to get.

“What are you doing out here, Songbird? Did you get lost on the way to your folks’ farm?” Troy teased, trying to think

of a reason she'd be at the ranch so early in the day and dressed like a farm girl.

"I did not get lost, smarty, but I thought I'd come help you guys today since you've been more than generous in helping me." Lark took a ball cap with a Bud's Spud logo out of her vehicle along with a pair of leather gloves that appeared to have been well worn.

"What do you mean come help us today?" Truitt asked as he jogged up beside Troy. "You know how to drive a tractor?"

She nodded. "As far-fetched as it might seem, I do know how to drive a tractor. Troy mentioned you're trying to get the wheat seed planted before it rains. If you have a tractor I can drive, I can help. I've helped plant potatoes almost every year since I was big enough to steer the tractor."

"Well, hot..." Truitt grunted when Troy elbowed him in the side before he could finish what he started to say.

Troy smiled at her, still wondering if he was dreaming. If he was truly awake and Lark could drive a tractor in addition to being beautiful and sweet and an amazing cook, he might have to rethink his plans to remain single. "That's great, Lark. Come on in the house. We were just about to head in for breakfast."

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she glanced at them with trepidation in her expression. "I should have called or waited to come after you'd eaten, but I did bring a few things."

Truitt looked like an eager puppy as Lark settled the ball cap on her head, stuffed the gloves she held in a back pocket of jeans that fit her like a second skin, and opened the back door of her SUV. She lifted out a basket fragrant with cinnamon and handed it to Truitt, then started to heft a cooler.

"Let me," Troy said, nudging her aside and lifting the cooler. His mouth watered at the thought of more of her smoked brisket.

As though she could read his mind, she tipped her head toward the cooler. "I brought some brisket and pulled pork and a few salads. I hope that's okay."

“That’s better than okay.” Troy watched as she grabbed a tote bag and slung it over her shoulder and then followed Truitt up the walk and inside the front door. He sure enjoyed the view of her in those snug jeans. When she worked in the food truck, she usually left her T-shirt untucked, and it hid a good portion of her figure. He’d seen her dressed in nice clothes, but something about those old jeans, worn in all the right places, made his heart beat a little faster as he trailed her inside the house.

“Grammy! We’ve got company,” Truitt hollered as they walked through the entry foyer.

“Well, bring them on in. Breakfast is ready,” Grammy called as they walked past the great room into the kitchen.

Troy watched his grandmother’s eyes light with delighted surprise when she realized the guest was Lark. Hurriedly wiping her hands on her apron, Grammy rushed around the counter and pulled Lark into a hug.

Lark returned the embrace with equal enthusiasm. “Hi, Mrs. Lucas. I apologize for imposing, but I thought I’d come help drive a tractor today. Will that be okay?”

“Better than okay, darling. Have you eaten yet?” Grammy asked, looking like someone had presented her with an unexpected gift.

“I haven’t, but I did bring along a basket of pumpkin muffins. I was experimenting with recipes yesterday.” Lark took the basket from Truitt and handed it to his grandmother. “I also brought along some brisket and pork and a few other things. My grandma always said it was important to never show up empty handed.”

“Well, you can show up here anytime you like,” Grammy said, giving Lark a one-armed hug as she placed the basket of muffins on the counter.

Troy set the cooler on the floor by the sink. Lark opened it and began removing foil-wrapped packets of meat, two bowls of salads, and a container filled with baked beans.

“Lands sakes, Lark, it looks like you brought enough for two meals!” Grammy exclaimed as she took the meat from Lark and stowed it in the refrigerator.

“Are there any Spuddy Bites?” Truitt asked, leaning over Lark’s shoulder.

“I thought you weren’t a fan of coconut,” she glanced back at him with a grin.

“I’m not, but they are so good.”

Truitt’s pleading expression made her laugh as she handed him three bags of the treats.

“Score!” Truitt popped one of the candies into his mouth before Grammy snatched the bags from him with a scowl.

“No candy before breakfast. Now, go wash up.”

Truitt pretended to pout as he walked out of the room. Troy went into the mudroom and left his hat on a hook by the door, then washed his hands in the sink there before returning to the kitchen to see Lark setting what looked like a cobbler on the counter.

“Troy, honey, set Lark’s things on the bench in the mudroom. I’ll pour the juice, then we can eat,” Grammy ordered as she lifted a casserole from the oven. “I woke up this morning in the mood for an egg and ham casserole. I’d planned to serve it with toast, but, Lark, your lovely muffins will be such a welcome addition to the meal.”

“I’m glad I could contribute, Mrs. Lucas.” Lark didn’t wait to be asked to help. When Grammy set a pitcher of orange juice on the counter next to four juice glasses Truitt had gotten out of the cupboard, Lark filled them and placed them in front of the four plates lined up on what Grammy called the eating bar.

Troy filled two tall glasses with milk for him and Truitt. He held the jug out toward Lark, but she shook her head.

After sliding the glasses across the counter, he stood behind the stool where he usually sat and seated Lark. Grammy offered a blessing on the meal, adding a word of

thanks for Lark's presence with them that made Troy smile as he said amen.

The conversation was lively as they ate. Troy and Truitt discussed what fields they planned to seed that day.

"Have Lark use my tractor," Grammy said as she finished her breakfast and carried her dishes to the sink.

"Are you sure, Grammy?" Troy gave his grandmother a questioning look. Even if Lark had experience running a tractor, he'd bet his best hat it had been a long time since she'd driven one. His grandmother loved the tractor they all referred to as hers. It had been a gift from his grandpa to her on their last anniversary before he'd died.

"Positive. You boys put her in the Kenworth field." Grammy gave Troy and Truitt commanding looks before she turned to Lark. "The neighbor we bought that ground from was named Kenworth. If you get tired of riding the tractor, you just call the house phone and I'll come get you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lucas," Lark said, smiling sweetly as she carried her plate and glass to the sink. "I'll help with the dishes."

"I won't turn you down. You can help me while the boys go get things ready," Grammy said, then glanced over her shoulder at Troy and Truitt as they split the last pumpkin muffin.

Troy wasn't a huge pumpkin fan, but the muffins were so moist and packed full of spicy flavor, he could have easily eaten two or three more of them. He popped the last bite of muffin in his mouth, drained his glass of milk, then carried his dishes over and set them inside the dishwasher.

"We'll be ready in about fifteen minutes." Troy considered giving Lark a kiss on her cheek, then thought of all the teasing he'd have to listen to from Truitt. Instead, he placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze before he backed away and rushed outside.

Truitt caught up with him halfway to the equipment shed. "Do you think she really knows how to drive a tractor?"

“Probably. Lark wouldn’t lie, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s been a while since she’s driven one.” Troy motioned for Truitt to start their grandmother’s tractor while he walked over to an older seed drill they didn’t use unless they needed Grammy’s help seeding the wheat. They always stored their equipment ready to use, so it didn’t take him long to hook it onto the tractor once Truitt backed up to it.

“Grammy can see the Kenworth field from the kitchen window. She’ll keep an eye on Lark,” Truitt said as he hopped off the tractor. “Maybe you should ride a few rounds with Lark just to be sure she can handle it. Then, you know, maybe spend a few minutes kissing her in thanks for her help.”

Truitt ducked to miss being hit with the gloves Troy tossed at him, then laughed as he ran out of the equipment shed and headed toward the ATV he’d drive out to the field where he’d left the tractor he’d be riding all day.

Troy gathered his gloves and drove the tractor to the house. Lark jogged down the back steps, waved at his grandmother who stood at the mudroom door, then hurried over to Troy. The thick, red rope of her braid swung over her shoulder and made him grin as he watched it bounce with each step she took.

He swung down to the ground, ready to give Lark a hand, but she shinnied onto the tractor like she’d done it dozens of times. Troy grinned as he climbed up and stood beside her while she settled onto the seat.

“Nothing runs like a Deere,” Lark said, smiling like a giddy child on Christmas morning as she gripped the steering wheel. “It’s a 6130M, right? They are great utility tractors. My dad used to have one like this.”

“It gets the job done,” Troy said, uncertain whether to be impressed or downright awed that Lark was familiar with the tractor and knew the model. “My grandpa bought it for Grammy the last anniversary they celebrated before he passed. He got it at a farm foreclosure auction for pennies on the dollar. Most people prefer an enclosed cab these days. Since it’s open except for the windshield, no one seemed to want it.”

“I don’t mind the fresh air,” Lark said, bouncing slightly on the seat as she put the tractor in gear. “Where are we heading?”

“Down the driveway. There’s a dirt lane to the left.” Lark drove carefully, keeping the speed somewhere between not too slow or too fast. When Troy motioned to the lane, she turned on it and slowed as they bounced across a few ruts into the field.

“I’ll ride the first round with you, then turn you loose.” Troy bent down so his mouth was closer to her ear as he gave her directions on how to seed wheat.

“Thanks,” she shouted to be heard above the tractor noise. “I figured it wouldn’t be all that much different from planting potatoes.”

Troy remained silent as she started down the outside edge of the field. Lark glanced behind her frequently to make sure her row was straight. She had no trouble turning at the corner and continued driving the tractor like she was an experienced farm hand. It was obvious she knew what she was doing and didn’t require him to oversee her work.

Yet, as he rode beside her, pressed close together with her alluring fragrance drifting in the dusty air, Troy couldn’t help but want to spend the day right there with her.

When she’d made one complete loop around the field, she stopped the tractor and glanced up at him, her expression showing her expectancy.

Despite his yearning to stay with her, he had work to do, and so did she.

“Great job, Songbird. I’ll leave you to it. We’ll go in to eat at noon, but if you need a break, just cut across the pasture there.” He pointed to the corner of the fence on the far side of the field that connected to one of the horse pastures. “The horses won’t bother you. If you have a problem, just call my cell phone or the house phone.”

“Will do, boss.” Lark grinned at him, looking eager to get back to the dusty, dirty work.

Troy kissed her lightly on the mouth, then hopped off the tractor. Before he changed his mind and went back to give her a kiss like he longed to share with her, he jogged across the field, hopped the fence, and ran across the pasture. He had a field to seed and no time for getting lost in his thoughts of a beautiful woman who continued to surprise him each time he saw her.

Chapter Sixteen



Lark made the final pass across the field she'd spent all day seeding with wheat. Gritty dirt coated her skin from head to toe, but she didn't care. She'd had a great time outside in the autumn sunshine and fresh air.

She might not have spent a lot of time working on her family's potato farm growing up, but one thing she loved was driving a tractor through a field. Since her father had started letting her help plant potatoes, the only year she'd missed was the spring she'd been in Paris. It was odd, she knew, given her preference to stay inside cooking, but there was magic in planting something in the soil, knowing it would grow. It made her feel connected to her past and gave her a great sense of accomplishment.

Then there was the whole fun factor of driving the tractor.

She'd worn earbuds all day to block out the tractor noise, listening to audio books she never had time to read. As she drove the tractor out of the field and headed toward the house, she watched Truitt ride up to the barn on an ATV.

The two times she'd been at Dusty Hills Ranch, it had been dusk, and she hadn't been able to see much.

Today, though, with the sun shining brightly in the clear blue sky, she'd been able to see the ranch that had been in Troy's family for generations. His comment from the other day about his family tree being more like a rotten fence post made her smile. She knew it wasn't true. His grandmother was a jewel, and Truitt was an amicable sweetheart.

The ranch looked well taken care of with the outbuildings all painted and nary a weed in sight. The fences were strong and straight, and even the animals looked happy to reside there.

Lotus and Lew barked as she drove the tractor over to a large three-sided shed where she could see farm equipment and parked near the building. It was only about thirty feet from a big shop. Inside, through the open door, she could see someone had taken apart a combine. From what she'd observed, Troy seemed more mechanically inclined than Truitt, although she knew they both did whatever they needed to on the ranch.

Lark hopped off the tractor, tucked her gloves into her back pocket, and knelt to pet both dogs. Lotus licked her cheek, making her laugh as she pulled her head back, avoiding a slobbery tongue on her mouth. She gave each dog another affectionate pat before she stood and headed toward the house.

She was halfway there when the rumble of an ATV drew her gaze to the lane behind the barn. Troy appeared and waved at her as he drove over to the barn and parked.

"Hey, you," she said, when he jogged over to her and gave her a long, perusing glance. She was a sweaty, dirty mess. Lark could even feel dirt inside her socks and places she didn't want to think about. When she removed the sunglasses she'd worn all day, she knew dirt circles would rim her eyes. Despite all that, though, one look from Troy made her feel beautiful.

"Hey, Songbird. You doing okay?" Troy asked as they headed toward the house. "I see you finished the field."

"I did. It was fun, Troy. Thanks for letting me come out and play farmer for the day."

He chuckled. “You’re welcome to come play with whatever you like whenever you like.”

Lark narrowed her gaze as she looked at him to see if he was implying something that had nothing to do with running a tractor and decided he hadn’t meant anything untoward. She should have known that Troy Lucas—upstanding, awesome, and always a good guy—would never intentionally say or do anything that made her uncomfortable.

“Seriously, Lark, we appreciate your help so much today. Can we at least pay you for your time?” Troy asked as they walked across the backyard.

She scoffed and stopped as they reached the porch steps. “Now you’re just insulting me, Troy. You’ve helped me more times than I can count, not to mention how nice Truitt and your grandmother have been to me. This is my way of saying thank you. I could work for you all week and still feel like I owe you a debt for your help and kindness.”

Troy shook his head. “No. Not at all. You don’t owe me anything. I helped you because I wanted to.”

“Exactly. I’m here today because I want to be. Honestly, it was fun. I usually only get to drive a tractor for a few days in the spring, so this was great. Thanks for letting me stay and giving me a chance. I’m sure you thought I’d make a mess of your field, but I hope it’s how you wanted the wheat planted.”

“It looks great, Lark, and we all appreciate your help. Grammy was so happy to be able to stay inside and work on more canning today.”

“I saw she canned pears this morning. What was she working on this afternoon?” Lark asked as Troy held open the door into the mudroom and she stepped inside.

“Corn. One of her friends brought a big gunnysack full of corn to church yesterday, so I think that was her plan.” Troy stood in the open door. “I have a few chores to see to before I come in for supper. Go on into the kitchen. Tru and I’ll be in soon.”

Lark watched as he turned and hustled toward the barn before she stepped back outside and brushed off all the dust she could. She toed off her boots, peeled off her socks, and shook each leg before she returned inside, setting her boots just inside the door. She let her sunglasses dangle off the neck of her T-shirt, removed her ball cap and left it with her boots, then headed to the kitchen.

“Oh, my stars,” Grammy said, grinning at her. “You look like you’ve been caught in a dust storm, sweetheart. How did it go out there?”

“Good, Mrs. Lucas. I had fun. At first, I was sure Troy and Truitt thought I didn’t have any idea how to turn on a tractor, let alone run the seed drill, but it didn’t take long for them to decide I could handle the job,” Lark said, smiling at Troy’s grandmother.

Wendy Lucas might be getting older, but she was still full of vitality and beauty. Honestly, if Troy hadn’t told her his grandmother’s age, Lark would never have assumed her to be in her seventies. Her dark brown hair was shot with streaks of silver near the temples, but even a few wrinkles couldn’t hide the fact she’d once been a young, beautiful woman. It was easy to see where Troy and Truitt got their smiles and the shape of their noses.

“Call me Grammy, or Wendy if you’d rather. Mrs. Lucas seems too formal.” Grammy said, continuing to smile at her. “I’m glad you had fun and showed those boys a thing or two about what girls can do. You are the first girl either of them has brought to the ranch since ... well, come to think of it, you’re the only girl who has come out to the ranch.”

Lark wasn’t sure what to make of that fact and abruptly changed the subject after retrieving the tote bag she’d carried in earlier. “I brought a change of clothes. Would it be okay if I clean up before we eat?”

“Of course, sweetheart. After a day in the fields, I always feel like I have dirty grit embedded in every square inch of my skin.” Grammy wiped her hands on a towel, then led the way back into the hallway that went to the mudroom. She opened a

door Lark had assumed went to a closet, but when she followed Grammy inside, it led into a spacious master suite with a bank of windows that had a great view of the horse pasture.

“Oh, this is lovely,” Lark said, looking around at the antique furniture and the handmade quilt on the bed. “Your house is a beautiful home, Mrs...” Lark stopped herself and gave the older woman a sheepish grin. “Grammy.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Grammy flicked on a light in a large bathroom that had a tiled walk-in shower and a long vanity with double sinks. “No rush. Supper won’t be on the table for another thirty minutes.”

“Perfect,” Lark said, watching as the woman took two fluffy white towels from a narrow linen closet and set them on the vanity. “Thank you for this.”

“No thanks necessary. We’re the ones who are grateful to you for coming out to help today. Troy has been so worried about getting the wheat in before it rains. Honestly, driving the tractor all day wears me out and makes my neck ache, so you saved me an evening of smelling like menthol from the arthritis cream I use.”

“My pleasure. I noticed the forecast is for rain to start on Thursday and continue all weekend.” Lark hadn’t been overjoyed by the news they were going to have several days of rain. She’d planned to take her food truck to farmer’s markets on both Friday and Saturday, but if it was going to rain, she might as well stay home. She’d learned the hard way people didn’t come out on cold, rainy days, and the few that did wouldn’t linger long enough to buy anything from a food truck.

If she didn’t have to spend tomorrow making food for the weekend, she could help at Dusty Hills Ranch. She certainly wouldn’t mind spending another day on the tractor. Even though she hadn’t been with Troy except when they’d eaten and the few minutes he’d ridden with her, she’d felt near to him just being at the ranch.

“We could sure use the moisture, especially with the wheat seed in the ground, but I hope it waits until the boys finish planting,” Grammy said, drawing Lark back into their conversation. “Take your time, Lark. Just come to the kitchen when you’re ready.”

The woman closed the bathroom door and left Lark to clean up. The shower revived Lark’s tired muscles and left her feeling clean and refreshed. She buried her nose in the towels that smelled of sunshine before she dried off and squeezed all the water she could from her hair. She squirted a little cream into her hand from a tube of hair product she’d brought with her that helped keep her curls from turning into tangled frizz. She ran the cream through her hair, then combed the thick tresses, letting it hang to dry. She didn’t bother with any makeup. Troy had already seen her without any, and to put it on now seemed rather silly.

She slathered her skin with her favorite lotion, dressed, then tucked her dirty clothes inside a garbage bag and stuffed it into her tote before she carried it to the kitchen. After retrieving her dusty boots and socks, she tucked them into a second garbage bag, dropped them into the big tote, and left it by the door.

“What can I do to help?” Lark asked as she returned to the kitchen.

“Not a thing, sweetie. Everything is ready,” Grammy said, motioning for Lark to have a seat at the counter. Troy and Truitt had both taken showers, evidenced by the water droplets clinging to their thick hair and the lack of dust on their clothes or faces.

Troy held out the barstool for her as he’d done at breakfast and lunch. For lunch, they’d eaten lasagna Grammy had served for dinner the previous day with a green salad and brownies for dessert.

Lark could have eaten half a dozen of the brownies but had limited herself to one. When she’d headed out the door to return to the field, Grammy had given her a second brownie

wrapped in a napkin along with an insulated thermos full of ice water.

It looked like their evening meal would be the food Lark had brought. The meat had been warmed up and steamed in the pans. There were yeasty-smelling buns to eat with it, as well as fresh corn on the cob, and the two salads and baked beans Lark had brought.

“Grammy makes the best buns for burgers and sandwiches,” Truitt said as he held out his grandmother’s stool and waited as the older woman took a seat.

“They look delicious,” Lark said, settling onto the stool between Troy and Truitt. Troy’s fingers brushed over her shoulder and made her skin tingle from the brief contact.

Troy offered a word of thanks for the meal, then they all started passing dishes.

“What’s this salad?” Troy asked, holding a serving spoon poised above the bowl in his hand as though he hadn’t yet decided if he’d try it.

“It’s just cucumbers, fresh tomatoes, chopped parsley, and thin slices of celery in a balsamic dressing finished with feta cheese crumbles.” Lark took the spoon from him and gave him a generous serving. “It’s good for you. Eat it.”

Troy gave her a dark look as she spooned a serving for herself before passing the bowl to Truitt. He looked around her as Troy took a bite of the salad, chewed, and gave his cousin a nod. “It’s not half bad.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Grammy said, rolling her eyes. “I promise, Lark, I tried to raise them up right, but a grandmother can only do so much.”

Lark laughed. “Other than their aversion to vegetables, they seem to be okay. Maybe not even half bad.”

Grammy winked at her, and they all laughed.

Lark asked them about their neighbors and people who lived in their community. She’d forgotten both the McGraw and Morgan families resided in the area, and they talked about

how cute their children had been the day of the Lasso Eight photo shoot at the Jarrett's ranch.

Truitt mentioned a neighbor getting ready to retire and a new family who'd bought a run-down ranch a few miles away.

"The Mossman family is talking about expanding their dairy. I kinda hope they don't," Troy said as he helped himself to another roll and piled brisket on it before adding a generous squirt of barbecue sauce. It made Lark happy to see him enjoying the food she'd made.

She helped herself to another bun and added meat to it.

Truitt hadn't exaggerated when he said his grandmother made the best buns. They were light, airy, and wonderful. She'd have to ask the woman for her recipe.

"Why don't you want the neighbor's dairy to expand?" Lark asked, curious because it seemed out of character for Troy to say anything that leaned toward negativity.

"The smell for one thing," Truitt said, snarling his nose.

"You mean you aren't fond of the aroma of a poop lake on the morning breeze?" Lark asked before she bit into her sandwich.

Truitt snorted iced tea out his nose while Troy coughed into his napkin.

Grammy giggled. "I've never heard it called that, but when it rains and that runoff from the feedlot pools, it does look and smell like a poop lake."

When he stopped coughing, Troy offered Lark a stern glare. "You shouldn't say things like that when I'm eating. I might choke to death."

"Nope. I know how to do the Heimlich maneuver. You're safe," she said, then whacked him once on the back before she returned to her sandwich.

Truitt gave Troy a look she couldn't begin to interpret and chose to ignore as they continued their lively conversation.

An hour later, after they'd enjoyed the apple cobbler she'd brought, warmed so vanilla ice cream would melt over the top, Troy carried out her cooler and tote bag, setting them in the back of the SUV.

He led her around to the driver's side of the vehicle and opened the door to block their view from the barn or the house.

"I'm really glad you came out today, Songbird," he said as he braced his hands against the SUV, hemming her in with his solid form as she stood in the open door.

He smelled fresh and clean as his body heat radiated around her. She tipped her head back and watched a storm of emotions flicker through his eyes. Rather than try to decipher it, she leaned forward until she was so close to him that the warmth of his breath caressed her face.

"Troy," she whispered, not certain what she wanted from him, what she needed. The only thought flitting through her mind was how much she longed for him to hold her, to love her.

Before she came to her senses and left, she reached up and pulled his head down to hers, kissing him tenderly. It took only a second for Troy to wrap his arms around her, lift her off her feet, and kiss her with a passion she'd never even imagined existed. What started as something gentle and tender soon turned demanding and ardent as his lips captured hers in one scorching kiss after another.

"Give her something to come back for tomorrow!" his grandmother finally yelled from inside the house, causing them both to suck in ragged gulps of air.

Troy mumbled something under his breath too quietly for her to hear, but she understood his frustration. After weeks, they'd finally kissed only to have his grandmother interrupt them. It was probably for the best. If they'd been alone, Lark thought they might have remained with their lips locked together for hours on end.

“Are you sure you want to come back tomorrow?” Troy asked as he gave her one more hug before he set her on her feet.

“Positive. Rain is bad for business. Financially, I’ll be further ahead if I don’t go out this weekend. I’ll come help you tomorrow. As far as I know, I should be free on Wednesday too.”

“Thank you. It’s a huge help having you here, Lark. You impressed us all today, and it wasn’t just with your tractor-driving skills. The food was amazing and so thoughtful of you to bring. You don’t have to do that again tomorrow, though.”

Lark shrugged and slid onto the seat of her SUV. “It’s no trouble, Troy. I have food in my freezers. All I have to do is get it out to thaw. What would you like tomorrow? Italian? Cuban? Mexican?”

“Surprise me, and thank you, Lark. Since you’ll be free this weekend, would you be interested in going out Friday night?”

She blinked at him in surprise. “You mean on a real date? Just us? No friends? No relatives? No events? No rodeo? No staying home to eat? Just the two of us at a dinner and movie kind of thing?”

Troy grinned and bent down, kissing her on the nose. “Exactly that kind of thing. How about you choose the movie? I’ll figure out a place to eat.”

“Deal,” she said, bracketing his face and pulling him back for one more kiss. When she let him go, she felt a blush heat her cheeks, but she didn’t care. “You’re pretty good at that kissing thing for a guy who claims he doesn’t date much.”

“You’re amazing at it for a girl who claims she’s going to be married to a restaurant for the rest of her life.” His eyes twinkled with humor. “I think we should test out kissing again tomorrow, just to make sure we have it down.”

“Agreed.” Lark grinned and started the SUV. “I’ll be here about the same time tomorrow.”

“See you then, Songbird. Text me when you get home.”

“I will.” It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she loved him, but she wouldn’t. She couldn’t. Not when she wasn’t certain what she wanted to do with the knowledge or with him.

Chapter Seventeen



Lark added a final swirl of frosting to the cake she'd baked specially for Troy. He seemed to love sweets, and she wanted to see what he thought of her latest creation. After sprinkling candied pecans over the top, she set the cake in the refrigerator, then cleaned up her already tidy kitchen. She made one more pass through her house to ensure everything looked good before she hopped into the shower to get ready for her date with Troy that evening.

After dinner and a movie, she thought they could come back and enjoy dessert. Lark wouldn't complain if he wanted to kiss her again like he had each evening at Dusty Hills Ranch.

She'd gone out to help plant wheat seed on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and had a great time all three days. Admittedly, by the end of the day Wednesday, her backside had been sore from bumping along in the tractor, and muscles she didn't frequently use had ached in protest, but overall, she'd enjoyed every minute of it. Driving the tractor and planting wheat seed had been fun, but it was more than that. She'd loved spending time with Troy and his family.

Truitt was full of mischief and teasing and somehow managed to keep everyone laughing. To her, he seemed like a fun-loving brother who always did his best to lighten the mood.

Mrs. Lucas, or Grammy as she preferred to be called, was welcoming and genuine, and made Lark feel right at home. The two of them had exchanged recipes and shared tips for kitchen shortcuts. Lark had even promised to show Grammy the commercial kitchen she rented on Tuesday afternoons and offered to help her bake quick breads for her church's bake sale coming up in November.

The time Lark had been able to spend with Troy at the ranch had been almost magical. Not that they'd had much time together during the hectic planting days, but they had lingered for a few stolen moments each evening before he told her good night and she headed home.

Wednesday evening, he'd suggested they go for a walk, and they'd ended up behind the barn where no one could spy on them. The kisses they'd exchanged had been so full of heat and passion, Lark had been surprised the sparks popping around the two of them hadn't set the pasture grass aflame. The kisses had started out so gentle and sweet, but each kiss had led to one more impassioned, full of raw hunger, until she thought she'd be consumed by them.

With Troy's brawny arms wrapped around her, Lark could forget there was anything else in the world beyond the quiet man who'd stolen her heart. He was solid and strong, yet tender and kind. Part of her attraction to him was that he had no idea how appealing he truly was. The day he'd taken off his western shirt and pulled on a form-fitting Bud's Spuds shirt at the hot air balloon festival, Lark felt like she might hyperventilate. He could have been posing for gym membership ads with that chiseled physique, but he seemed clueless to the effect it had on her. All she had to do was close her eyes to see him like he'd been that day in her food truck.

Beyond his good looks, Troy was someone she could trust completely without a speck of fear that he'd hurt or betray her.

When it had been time for Lark to leave Wednesday evening, Troy had seemed to have as much difficulty as she'd experienced at letting go and saying good night. The more time she spent with Troy, the more she liked him—loved him, if she cared to admit it.

What was she going to do with the cute, caring cowboy?

A few months ago, her only thought had been to make her food truck a success to earn enough money to move to Portland to start over. At the ripe old age of twenty-five, she refused to be considered a washed-up wanna-be chef.

Then she'd met Troy, and everything had changed.

She couldn't even say when or how it had happened, but somewhere between the moment at the fairgrounds when the steer had knocked her onto the grass and she'd looked up into Troy's gorgeous blue eyes, to the day he'd driven her SUV home after the Walla Walla fair, she'd fallen for him. Fallen hard.

Her problem was deciding what to do about it.

Maybe nothing.

After all, her intention had been to come back to a place where she felt safe, build a successful food business, then return to big city life once she'd gained enough experience and made sufficient money to open her own restaurant. She would never feel at ease in Seattle again, but Portland was close enough she could drive home to visit often. Despite how much Robin annoyed her, she adored her nephews and didn't want them growing up thinking she was barely more than a stranger.

However, thoughts of moving anywhere and not seeing Troy again made an ache swell in her chest. She didn't want to tell him goodbye. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Until she could figure out what she wanted for her future and how he fit into it, she decided to just enjoy each moment with him that came along and treasure it as a gift. Like the date they were going on tonight.

She'd picked out a movie she thought they both would enjoy based on movies they'd talked about. The cartoon

looked like it would be cute and funny with superhero animals as the stars. Troy hadn't mentioned what he had planned for dinner, so she had no idea what to wear.

Frantically flipping through the clothes in her closet, she finally settled on a maxi dress with a tiny floral print, a denim jacket she'd gotten at the Lasso Eight photo shoot, and a pair of closed-toe canvas wedge shoes she'd purchased in Paris and loved. The outfit wasn't overly dressy but dressed up enough that if they went somewhere nice, she could take off the denim jacket and fit right in.

Lark spent five minutes considering how to fix her hair and finally gave up. She added a few chunkier curls with a flat iron to the springy coils and patted them into place with styling cream. She applied more makeup than she usually wore, then gave herself a spritz of her favorite perfume.

Quickly tucking her phone, wallet, and a few essentials into a small purse, she left it and her jacket by her front door and glanced outside. It had been raining nonstop since early Thursday morning, but it appeared the sun was trying to peek through the oyster-hued sky.

As she looked outside, a blur of movement caught her eye. Had someone been sneaking past her window? The thought of anyone trying to break into her house made her heart jump into her throat.

Frightened but determined to be brave, Lark opened the door and stepped outside. She didn't see anything and concluded she'd imagined the whole thing. Just to give herself assurance, she walked through the house and opened the back door. No one had scaled the fence and hidden among her herbs, so she returned inside, locked the back door, and drew the blinds over it. She'd just returned to the front room when she caught a glimpse of something big and black running through her yard. Probably a dog, but none of the neighbors had canines that large.

She flung open the door in time to see three black Angus heifers wandering from yard to yard, snatching up mouthfuls

of grass and flowers as they munched their way down the block.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Lark said, closing the door behind her lest one, or all of them, decide to run into her house.

She wasn’t exactly dressed for chasing wayward livestock and had no idea to whom they belonged. The city limits were less than a mile away, but perhaps whoever owned the bovines was searching for them.

Lark saw little Bethany come outside across the street and worried the child might get hurt. She rushed over to her, settling her hands on the child’s shoulders. “Bethany, sweetie, you need to go back inside. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Are they big dogs?” the child asked as she walked over to the front door.

“No. They’re cows, and they’re lost. I’m going to see if I can help them find their way home, but they’re probably scared, so they might kick and jump a little if they get spooked.” Lark nudged Bethany inside the house. “You stay inside where it’s safe.”

“Okay,” Bethany said, looking like she’d much rather remain in the front yard and observe whatever might happen next.

Once the child shut the door, Lark turned and saw the three heifers had moved down the street to graze on the lawn of one of the elderly neighbors who only got around with the help of a walker.

Lark tried to approach the animals slowly, having no idea what she’d do with them if she could manage to catch them, then she recalled the house on the corner had been recently vacated. The big backyard was fenced. Perhaps she could run the heifers in there until their owner could be located.

As she stepped into Mrs. Jamieson’s yard, the elderly woman opened her door and waggled a phone at Lark. “I called the cops, Lark, but I can’t hear a word they’re saying.”

The heifers spooked at the old woman's shrill voice and ran into Bethany's yard.

Lark rushed up the steps and took the phone the old woman held out to her. "Hello?"

"This is the Richland Police Department. Mrs. Jamieson called 9-1-1 and said there are wild animals running loose in your neighborhood. Can you confirm that, please?" a voice asked.

Lark watched the heifers destroy a row of plants in a matter of seconds. "There are three black Angus heifers loose on our street. We're about a mile from the city limits. I'm assuming they got loose and found their way here. They appear healthy and well-fed, but they are making a mess of the yards and seem a little on the wild side. There's a vacant house with a fenced yard on the corner. I was thinking of trying to herd them in there to keep them contained until someone can haul them off."

"I can't tell you to do that at the risk of injury to both you and the property."

Lark took that as close enough to permission to do it. "Okay. I understand, but will try to get them contained in the backyard. The house is on the corner." She rattled off the address and promised to stay on the phone until help arrived.

She walked down the street to the vacant house and opened the gate to the backyard. The previous residents hadn't been gone all that long, so the grass was still green, if not a bit overgrown. Lark returned to find the heifers in her yard stripping the leaves off a rosebush.

"You three are more like goats," she said, working her way behind them and waving her arms, finally getting them to move. She'd managed to drive them across the street and past Mrs. Jamieson's yard when a dog barked from behind a fence and all three bovines scattered.

"What's going on?" the 9-1-1 operator asked.

"A dog barked at them. I'll try to get them corralled again." Lark spent several minutes running up and down the

street behind the heifers. Every time she got close to the gate, something or someone would spook them, since a few of the neighbors had come out to help, although none of them had apparently ever been around cattle.

On the verge of screaming in frustration, Lark looked up at the sound of a vehicle coming toward her and almost cried in relief to see Troy's pickup. He parked in the middle of the street, hopped out with a rope in his hand, and was already swinging it before the heifers had time to scatter again.

It took him mere seconds to catch one of the runaway bovines and lead her into the vacant backyard. Lark manned the gate as he roped the heifers one at a time. They'd just trapped the last one when a police officer arrived to provide assistance. Lark told him what she knew, then returned the phone to Mrs. Jamieson.

She looked down the street to see Troy speaking with the police officer, then at her clothes. In the process of chasing the cows, she'd gotten sweaty, her dress was filthy, and both shoes were coated in manure. She certainly hadn't planned to greet Troy all stinky, dirty, and exhausted.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute before trouble finds you, can I, Songbird?" Troy teased when she walked over to his pickup as he returned his rope to the back seat.

"No, I guess you can't. I'm going to need a few minutes to change." She kissed his cheek, careful not to brush against him. "Thank you for helping. I was starting to think I'd never get them out of the street."

"Won't the people who own the house where we left them be upset to come home to a yard full of hungry heifers?" he asked.

"They moved out a few weeks ago. The house is a rental, but the owner isn't good about keeping up with things. I doubt he'll notice the heifers were ever there if someone cleans up the cowpies when they're gone." Lark glanced down at her ruined shoes. "I'll go clean up. The door will be unlocked. Come in after you park in the driveway. I'll hurry."

Troy caught her hand before she could scurry to her house and kissed the back of it. “No rush, Lark. I didn’t make reservations, so we have all the time you need.”

Before she could head to her house, a pickup pulling a trailer turned onto the street. “Have you seen three black heifers?” a man called out the open window.

“We have. They are in the yard there,” Lark said, pointing to the house where the police officer stood guard while talking into his radio.

“I’ll help him get them loaded while you clean up,” Troy said, giving her hand a squeeze before he strode to the house where they’d left the escaped cows.

Lark indulged in a moment of watching him walk away, his stride even and purposeful, his jeans fitting just tight enough to make her mouth water.

Before she started drooling in the middle of the street, she returned to her yard where she attempted to wipe the manure off her shoes. The heifers had left their smelly calling cards on sidewalks along both sides of the street as well as in her yard. She’d have to remember to shovel the manure into the flower beds later.

Lark removed both shoes and was making her way toward the door when a car parked across her driveway. Her sister barreled out, opened the back door, and pulled out Josh. Before Lark could drop her disgusting shoes, Robin had raced around the car and extracted Jeremiah from his car seat.

“I’m late for a date with Danny. The babysitter canceled at the last minute. We’ll be back by ten. The boys haven’t eaten and need baths.” Robin thrust Jeremiah and a bulging diaper bag into Lark’s arms.

“But Robin, I have ...”

Her sister cut her off with a scoff as she raced back around the car, not even bothering to kiss her boys goodbye. “You have nothing better to do. Don’t forget their baths!”

Lark stood there with Josh leaning against her leg, Jeremiah fisting his hand into her mussed hair, and the diaper

bag hanging from her hand, wondering if anyone in her family, other than Jay, ever stopped to consider she might, on occasion, have a life outside of her food truck.

Robin zoomed down the street, nearly colliding with the pickup and trailer as it pulled out of the driveway at the house on the corner. The police officer had already left, or Lark might have hoped he'd write her a ticket for reckless driving. As it was, her sister laid on the horn and swerved before she barely paused at the stop sign and turned onto the road.

Troy drove up and parked in the driveway behind Lark's SUV. When he got out of the pickup, he lifted an eyebrow and nodded toward the boys. "Looks like we have a change of plans."

"Looks that way. I think the world is conspiring to keep us from having an evening alone," Lark said, shifting Jeremiah as Troy reached out and took the diaper bag from her.

He hunkered down and smiled at Josh. "You must be Josh. Your Auntie Lark told me all about you. I'm Troy."

Overcome with shyness, Josh buried his face against Lark's dirty skirt.

"He's always shy with strangers. Give him a few minutes to warm up to you." Lark placed a hand on Josh's head and ruffled his hair. "Come on, Josh. Let's go inside the house."

"Want me to grab your shoes?" Troy asked as she opened the front door.

"No. Leave them. If one of the neighborhood dogs doesn't pack them off, I'll toss them in the trash later. They are beyond saving." Lark gave one last look at her favorite pair of wedge shoes, then nudged Josh inside the house.

Her nephew made a beeline for a box full of toys she kept in the corner. He got out a wooden truck with a horse trailer and started pushing it across the floor making "brmmmm, brmmmm" noises as he played with it.

Jeremiah wiggled, wanting down, so Lark set him on his feet and he scurried over to grab a soft rubber ball out of the

box. He dropped it and kicked the ball, then giggled when it bounced off the leg of the coffee table.

“I hate to ask, but could you keep an eye on them for a few minutes? I need to clean up.” Lark edged toward her bedroom door.

Troy dropped the diaper bag on the couch, set his hat with the brim side up on top of the entertainment center, then sank onto the floor a few feet away from Josh. “We’ll be fine.” Both of her nephews eyed him, but neither looked like they were about to cry.

“Thank you,” she said, then rushed into her bedroom and gathered a change of clothes before she went into the bathroom and showered for the second time that afternoon. Instead of the luxurious shower she’d taken earlier, she raced through this one. She dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, combed her hair, and hastily applied styling cream to smooth the tangles, then returned to the living room. Troy showed Josh how to build a tower out of blocks and kept Jeremiah giggling by using his foot to kick the ball for the little boy to chase.

The sight of the brawny man on the floor with her nephews made Lark’s heart melt at her feet. She’d never given much thought to marriage or children of her own, always so focused on her career, then on rebuilding her life. She’d assumed she’d be the fun aunt to whatever offspring Robin and Jay produced.

Yet, seeing Troy with Josh and Jeremiah filled her with a powerful longing to have her own family. A family she’d raise with Troy. She could almost see their children, with a mixture of her red hair and his blue eyes, giggling as Troy sat on the floor and played with them.

Not a single doubt existed in her mind that Troy would be an excellent father. He’d be kind and gentle but firm. She could also picture him making an incredible husband.

The question was if she wanted a husband. Could she set aside her dreams to live on a ranch and raise a family?

Until she figured out the answer, she knew it wasn't fair to her or to Troy to get more involved with each other, but she couldn't have stayed away from him then even if her life depended on it. There was just something about a cowboy playing with babies that was completely and thoroughly irresistible.

"What do you think of pizza delivered here and we watch a movie with the boys?" Troy asked, giving her a warm smile when he noticed her standing by the couch, watching them.

"I think that's a great idea. I'll order the pizza. What's your favorite? Wait!" Lark held up a hand to stop him before he could answer her question. "Meat and more meat, is that right?"

Troy winked at her as Josh knocked over the block tower and clapped his hands in delight. "You know it."

Lark ordered the pizza, filled two glasses with iced tea, and carried them back to the living room, then dug out the boys' cups from the diaper bag. Robin assigned anything blue to Josh and anything red to Jeremiah, so it was easy to tell their things apart.

After Lark sat on the floor by Troy, Jeremiah, who was almost twenty months old, toddled over to her and plopped in her lap, looking up at her with a smile that showed off his pearly baby teeth.

"Hi, baby." Lark feathered the hair away from his forehead and pressed a kiss there.

Jeremiah giggled. "Mo!"

"More kisses?" Lark asked, picking him up and playfully kissing his face, then blowing on his tummy. His belly laugh was infectious, and soon Josh and Troy were laughing along with them.

She and Troy remained on the floor playing with the boys until the pizza arrived.

Lark set Jeremiah in Troy's lap and hopped up to answer the doorbell. After she carried the pizza to the dining room, she returned to the kitchen to fix something for Jeremiah.

“Will the baby be able to eat pizza?” Troy asked, walking into the kitchen with Jeremiah held on one arm and Josh on the other.

“Technically, he could eat it, but I’ll warm up some veggies and pasta for him. Josh, though, loves pizza, so be warned. He might try to steal it all.” Lark made a silly face and poked a finger into Josh’s tummy, making him wiggle and giggle.

Troy looked around the kitchen. “What can I do to help?”

“Just keeping them busy while I warm up Jeremiah’s food is great. I have a little booster seat I use for Josh. It’s already on one of the chairs.” Lark took a bowl with leftover pasta from the refrigerator. She spooned what she thought Jeremiah might eat onto a small plate and set it in the microwave to warm, then sliced a third of a small avocado into tiny bite-size pieces. After retrieving their drinks from the living room and placing them on the table, she set out plates and napkins. Lark retrieved a big flour sack towel and a smaller dish towel from a kitchen drawer and took them to the dining room, where Troy stood by the door with the boys, listening to Josh jabber about mud and bugs.

Josh was going to grow up to be a farmer if his father and grandfather had anything to say about it. Her nephew loved to play in the dirt and had a toy tractor with several attachments to drag behind it. When he came to her house, Josh liked to walk around her herbs, poking fingers into the moist soil and looking for bugs.

The beep of the microwave drew her back to the kitchen where she retrieved Jeremiah’s pasta, added the avocado, and carried it to the dining room. She took Jeremiah from Troy and sat on a chair, then draped the flour sack towel over her lap, and fastened the dish towel around the baby’s neck before she scooted her chair close enough that he could reach his food.

“Prayers first,” she said, when Josh got up on his knees, trying to reach a piece of pizza from the box in the middle of the table. Her nephew looked at her and sat back in his chair, folded his hands, and squeezed his eyes shut. Lark tossed a

glance at Troy. He smiled at her, reached across the table to take her hand, and bowed his head. She squeezed his fingers, then bowed her head and offered a brief prayer.

“Amen!” Josh exclaimed, once again on his knees.

“Which piece do you want, pardner?” Troy asked as he reached for a slice.

Lark had ordered a large pizza with all meat and half with a few veggies tossed on top.

“That one!” Josh pointed to a piece with peppers and olives.

“Coming right up,” Troy said, lifting the piece and setting it on Josh’s plate. He scooted the boy’s cup closer, then looked at Lark. “This looks great, Lark. Thank you.”

“No, I should be thanking you because you could have taken one look at the chaos this evening has dissolved into and run. Instead, you stayed. So, thanks for that.”

Troy waited until she’d chosen a slice with veggies to take a big piece of meaty pizza and set it on his plate. “You know I enjoy spending time with you. I’m glad I finally get to meet the boys. Remind me again how old they are.”

“Josh is three,” Lark said, and Josh held three fingers up in the air before he bit into his gooey pizza. “And this big boy is almost twenty-months.” She glanced down at Jeremiah who had smushed avocado smeared all over his face and hands, along with a glob of pasta sauce. It would be pointless to clean him up until he finished eating, so she ignored the mess and took a bite of her pizza.

“Does Jeremiah talk yet?”

Lark shrugged. “When the mood strikes. He rarely talks, but when he does, it seems advanced for his age. Last week, he called me Aunt Lark as plain as anything, but five seconds later, he refused to say another word.”

“He’s an independent thinker,” Troy said, grinning at the baby, making him smile in return. “They’re good kids.”

“They are.” Lark kissed the top of Jeremiah’s head before she took another bite of pizza.

“You’re pretty good at this domestic stuff, you know.”

Lark glared at Troy across the table. “Don’t get any ideas. Just because I cook and like kids doesn’t mean anything.”

“Not a thing,” Troy said, then caught Josh’s cup before it fell off the edge of the table.

The two little boys kept dinner lively. While Lark washed Jeremiah’s hands and face, Troy took Josh out to the backyard to play. When it began to rain again, Troy carried Josh inside. Lark found a movie with a funny cast of zoo animals to keep him entertained.

Josh climbed right up in Troy’s lap to watch the movie. Lark was sure if her heart hadn’t already melted, seeing the two of them together would have finished the job.

When an upbeat song began to play as part of the movie, both boys got on the floor and did their version of dancing, which was more like hopping in place with an arm thrown out in random intervals.

Troy laughed as he watched them, then leaned across the couch toward Lark. “You gonna bust a move like that?”

She grinned. “Nope. I might rupture something.”

By the time the movie ended and Troy had helped her give the boys baths, Lark was exhausted. She settled the boys in the guest room bed and read them a story from a stack of books she kept on hand for when they visited.

“Love you to the moon and all the way back,” she said, kissing first Josh, then Jeremiah.

“Want Troy,” Josh said, his eyes already drifting shut although he held his arms out.

Lark glanced over her shoulder at Troy as he lingered at the bedroom door.

He pushed away from the wall with his shoulder and crossed the room, bending over so Josh could hug him.

“Love you,” Josh mumbled then his arms went limp as he fell asleep.

Troy brushed the hair away from Josh’s forehead and gave him a light kiss, then did the same for Jeremiah. “Sleep well, pardner.”

Lark turned off the light, leaving a nightlight plugged into the wall, then shut the door partway.

“You are incredibly good with kids, Troy. You’ve been holding out on us.”

“Nope. I don’t get a lot of opportunities to be around kids, but I like them just fine.” He followed her back to the living room. While she tucked the boys’ things back into the diaper bag, Troy gathered up the toys scattered across the floor and stored them in the toy box.

“Would you like some dessert?” Lark asked, taking a step toward the kitchen.

“Of course,” Troy said with a teasing grin. “When have I ever turned down anything you’ve made?”

“Never, but there’s a first time for everything.” She tossed him a flirty look as she took the cake from the refrigerator and cut a generous slice, then added a scoop of caramel-laced vanilla ice cream. “Do you want a Dr Pepper or more tea?”

“Milk?” Troy asked as he picked up the two plates and carried them into the dining room.

Lark poured two glasses of milk and then joined him.

Troy waited until she was seated to settle into the same chair he’d sat in across from her at dinner, then forked a bite of the cake. He studied it, sniffed it, then set it on his tongue.

Although he’d looked dubious when he tasted it, he smiled in approval and quickly forked another bite. “What is it?”

“Sweet potato cake with brown sugar cream cheese frosting and candied pecans. It’s a new recipe I was playing with earlier. Do you like it?”

“It’s really good. Makes me think of the holidays with all those spices. Is that nutmeg?”

Lark smiled. “It is, and I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“You could make it again sometime, and I wouldn’t complain.”

“Good to know.”

She asked him about his plans for the coming week, and he questioned her upcoming festival schedule. The conversation turned to asking each other questions just to get to know one another better.

“What’s your most embarrassing moment?” Troy asked, lifting the last bite of cake on his fork.

“You ask that as though there is only one,” Lark said, twirling her fork around in her fingers. “I have so many, Troy, it’s ridiculous. I like to think of myself as somewhat intelligent, but I seem to occasionally do the stupidest things.”

“Like what?” He leaned back in his chair and studied her. “I have a hard time believing you’ve ever done anything dumb, and you are far more intelligent than I can ever aspire to be.”

“Not true about the intelligence thing. You’ve got a smart head resting on those broad shoulders.” Lark hadn’t meant to mention the width of his shoulders, or how much she liked seeing them in a tight T-shirt. “As for my blunders, I have far too many to choose from.” A multitude of incidents from her past still left her with a deep sense of humiliation any time they came to mind.

“Just tell me a recent one,” Troy suggested as they moved from the dining room to the couch in the living room, giving her time to gather her courage to share a story.

“Other than being knocked down at the fair, which was plenty embarrassing, a few weeks before that, I agreed to do an event at a winery with several other food trucks. The winery manager sent out emails about how the road was going to be under construction, but it was fine to drive around the road closed signs and into the property. He assured me not to

worry about it. He made such a big deal about the whole thing that I was expecting huge neon signs or something. I drove past one little road closed ahead sign, but could see big signs further up the road with all this heavy equipment parked behind it. I just couldn't bring myself to drive right into what was clearly a work zone, so I stopped and called the winery manager. He told me to drive around the sign. So, I did. I'd gone maybe ten feet when the construction crew started yelling at me and waving their hands. One guy even blew an airhorn at me. I stopped and told them why I was there and what the winery manager had said."

Lark blew out a breath, feeling her cheeks heat as she recalled the humiliating moment.

"And? What happened?" Troy asked, appearing eager for her to continue.

"The guy who blew the airhorn looked at me like I was the dumbest human he'd ever encountered. He pointed out that the winery was about thirty yards back up the road. I was so focused on the construction zone, I'd driven right past the winery."

"Seriously?" Troy asked, looking like he was on the verge of laughing.

"Completely serious. I was mortified. And to make it even worse, I had to turn around in the food truck. The whole time, those construction guys were laughing at me and hollering less than helpful driving instructions. It was awful. If nothing like that ever happens again, I'd be okay with it."

"I'm sorry, Songbird. We all do stuff we'd rather no one else were around to witness." Troy slid his arm around her and pulled her to his side, giving her a comforting hug.

Lark nestled against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "What about you? What's your most embarrassing moment?"

"You could choose any of the silly things Cooper James has involved me in over the years." Troy shrugged. "I think the worst, though, was when I was roping with my old partner.

We were at a rodeo in Arizona, and without any warning, the back of my jeans split open about the time I leaned forward in my saddle and tossed the loop to heel the steer in the arena. There I was, in front of hundreds of people with the breeze blowing in the back of my britches. The guys tormented me about that for weeks. Comments about the color of my underwear dogged me for what seemed like months.”

“Poor guy,” Lark said, patting his leg. “Were they white?”

“Nope. Black with green clovers and the words *get lucky*. Grammy bought them as a joke. She told me they’d be my lucky underwear every time I roped.”

Lark couldn’t hide her smile. “You still wear them?”

“Heck, no. I burned those things after that rodeo. If you wear blue undies with blue jeans and the back splits open, it’s less noticeable, not that I’ve had to test out the theory.”

She laughed and relaxed against him. Troy cupped her chin and turned her face so he could kiss her. Their lips brushed softly at first, then he lifted her so she was held on his lap. Each kiss grew more intense than the last.

“Troy,” she whispered, uncertain what she wanted from him, what he needed in return. All she knew was how good and how right it felt to be pressed close to him, feeling his heart race in time with her own.

“Lark, my pretty Songbird, what are you doing to me?” Troy asked in a husky voice that made a delicious shiver slide along her spine.

Lark didn’t feel the need to answer. Instead, she pulled his head down to hers and kissed him again. She was sure she could hear bells ringing to go along with the lights that sparkled behind her closed eyes.

“Someone’s here,” Troy said, setting her down beside him and standing.

Lark hopped up and would have tripped over the diaper bag if Troy hadn’t caught her.

“Take a breath,” he said, maintaining his steady hold on her arms.

Lark inhaled, getting a whiff of the pleasant, woodsy aroma that was all Troy. His masculine fragrance invading her senses was not going to help matters. She expelled a breath, then hurried to answer the door as the bell rang again.

She opened it and was nearly bowled over by her sister. Danny followed behind her at a more sedate pace.

“Who’s parked outside? Why is someone here when you’re supposed to be babysitting my boys?” Robin asked in a snide, accusing tone.

“Oh, hey,” Danny said as he noticed Troy standing behind Lark. “Troy, right? You and your cousin rope?”

“Yep, that’s right.” Troy reached out a hand to shake Danny’s. “Did you have a nice evening?”

Danny settled a hand on Robin’s shoulder, and it seemed to calm her. “We had a great time, but I apologize. Robin didn’t mention you two had plans.”

“She didn’t mention any,” Robin said, smiling sweetly at her husband, then glaring at Lark, as though she dared her to challenge her explanation.

Lark bit her tongue and picked up the diaper bag, handing it to her sister before she headed toward the guest bedroom.

“Did they behave?” Danny asked, following a step behind her, leaving Robin in the living room scowling at Troy.

“They did,” Lark said, folding back the blanket covering the boys. “We had a great time with them, although Troy and I had planned a date. Out. Together. Alone.” She glanced over at her brother-in-law.

Danny appeared apologetic. “I’m really sorry, Lark. Robin assured me you didn’t mind watching them at the last minute. It won’t happen again.”

“I don’t mind watching the boys, Danny. I love spending time with them, but Robin always expects me to drop

everything and be at her beck and call all the time. As hard as it might be to believe, I do have a life of my own.”

“I know. Again, apologies. I’ll talk to Robin.” Danny scooped Josh from the bed and held the sleepy boy against his shoulder.

“I’ll wish you luck with that.” Lark picked up Jeremiah and cuddled him close, then had to swallow back a laugh as she thought of Troy’s lucky underwear. Maybe she should get Danny a pair to wear anytime he had to have a discussion with Robin.

Danny led the way out to his pickup. Lark helped him settle her nephews into their car seats while Robin stood in the driveway quizzing Troy about everything from his shoe size to his last tetanus shot.

Lark tossed Danny a desperate look, and he hurried around the pickup, took the diaper bag from Robin, and pressed his hand against his wife’s back, pushing her toward the open passenger door.

“Thanks again. Have a nice evening. Bye!” Danny said, almost tossing Robin in the vehicle and shutting her door in spite of her spluttered protests.

Danny waved once, and Lark waited until he pulled away from the curb to let a giggle burst free.

Troy wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin on top of her head. “That was educational. Is your sister always like that?”

“Pretty much. Jay’s theory is that she’s wound a half-click too tight to be normal by any standard. My theory is she’s self-absorbed and nuts.”

“Maybe a bit of both,” Troy said, pulling her closer to him. “Danny seems like a great guy. How’d he end up with your sister? No offense meant.”

“None taken.” Lark rested her hands over Troy’s as they clasped together at the front of her waist. “He fell for Robin the first time he met her, and, to his credit, he seems to only see the best in her. They act like newlyweds most of the time,

even though they've been married for nine years. Danny is a great guy, a wonderful husband, and a caring father. He's much, much better with the boys than Robin is. Honestly, she's not good at the whole mothering thing. I used to think it was awful she shipped the boys off to a babysitter all the time, but I'm starting to realize it's probably for the best."

"Probably," Troy said, then kissed her cheek. "I should get going. It's going to be a busy day tomorrow, and I left Truitt with all the work this evening."

"I'm so glad you came, but I apologize for our date getting so far off track."

Troy stepped in front of her and looked down at her with a warm light shining in his eyes. "Are you kidding? We had fantastic pizza, ate an incredible dessert, watched a cute movie, and got to hang out with your nephews, and that was after capturing three rogue heifers. You know how to keep an evening interesting, Lark Gibson, even if we didn't make it out to dinner."

She smiled, but before she could speak, Troy's lips had claimed hers in a tender exchange that made her feel cherished and loved.

"On that note, I'll say good night, Songbird. Sleep well."

"You too, Troy. Thanks for everything."

"Anytime." He kissed her nose, then strode over to his pickup. He waved once, then left.

Lark watched until his taillights disappeared before she went inside and leaned against the door considering all the ways falling in love was going to alter her future plans.

Chapter Eighteen



Wendy Lucas watched her two grandsons bundling into their heavy coveralls and boots before they headed outside to do the morning feeding. The frigid temperatures made her glad Troy had volunteered to gather the eggs while Truitt had offered to feed the horses, both chores she typically saw to each morning. The boys had been good about taking over those duties once the weather had turned cold.

She used to love being outside regardless of the temperature or season, but for the past few years, she'd found herself preferring to be indoors where she wasn't too hot or too cold.

Troy and Truitt both worried about her growing older and working too hard, but she thought hard work kept her not only busy, but also young. However, that didn't mean she would argue about staying in where it was warm when the thermometer hovered in the single digits, barely above zero.

Wendy dropped a load of bath towels into the washing machine, waved at her grandsons as they left, and returned to the kitchen, where she brewed a cup of tea from a box of holiday tea Lark had given to her last week.

The girl had invited Wendy to join her at the commercial kitchen she rented on Tuesday afternoons and helped her bake dozens of loaves of quick breads for the church's annual bake sale. Wendy generally made banana bread. Lark had helped her bake two dozen loaves of it, then talked her into trying a recipe for eggnog bread as well as one for pear bread with a streusel and almond glaze topping. They'd ended up with six dozen loaves of the three breads combined, three times as many as Wendy had ever baked on her own.

While the bread baked, Lark had served fragrant holiday tea and dainty sandwiches, along with mini chocolate and gingerbread cakes.

Wendy had been both charmed and impressed. She'd appreciated the opportunity to visit with Lark and get to know her better. The more time she spent around the hardworking girl, the more she liked her. If Wendy had anything to say about it, she hoped Lark would marry Troy and become her granddaughter.

The trouble seemed to be that Troy was dragging his feet about making a commitment while Lark had plans to move to Portland in the spring to pursue her career as a chef.

Not that Wendy could blame Lark. The young woman had the talent, drive, and skill to succeed. But wasn't love more important than a career? Besides, Lark seemed truly happy when she was in her food truck, making her wonderful tater tot creations inspired by her grandparents.

Wendy couldn't see what was wrong with Lark using her talents in the food truck. It seemed to her it would be more interesting and fun than going to a restaurant every day where Lark would have to worry about an abundance of expenses and responsibilities she didn't have to deal with now.

Even if Lark decided to stay in the area with her food truck, it wouldn't matter if Troy didn't quit acting like a lunkheaded dolt and figure out he was in love with the beautiful woman.

From what Wendy could surmise, Troy had fallen for Lark the moment he'd met her. According to Truitt, though,

Troy was fighting his attraction to Lark, even if he couldn't quite bring himself to stay away from her.

No one could blame him.

Lark was funny and sweet, smart and kind, caring and lovely. Energy fairly pulsed from her, and she was a delight to be around. If that weren't enough, she could cook Wendy right under the table without even trying.

One thing Wendy knew about both of her grandsons was that they enjoyed a good meal more than most. The old adage about the way to a man's heart being through his stomach was accurate when it came to Troy or Truitt.

Uncertain about what she could do to give love a nudge, Wendy considered her options as she sat at the kitchen counter, making a grocery list. Thanksgiving was two days away, and then next week Troy and Truitt would head to Las Vegas for the National Finals Rodeo. It seemed anyone who modeled for Lasso Eight in their winter campaign received an all-expenses paid trip so they could appear in the Lasso Eight booths and be part of a huge fashion show.

Wendy would have liked to accompany the boys, at least to the fashion show, but all three of them couldn't be gone at the same time. As it was, Troy was already fussing about leaving her alone for more than a week. He'd lined up two college kids they'd hired last summer to come help her as soon as they returned to their homes when the fall semester ended, but he worried about her doing the chores alone for a few days until the hired help arrived.

Aware that Lark would also be in Las Vegas as part of the Lasso Eight crew, Wendy contemplated what she could do to get Troy and Lark to see past what they thought they wanted to open their eyes to what they needed, which was each other.

Briefly, Wendy considered calling Lark's mother to see if she had any suggestions, but she knew from listening to Lark and Troy that Lark's parents were busy with their farm and not involved in their grown children's daily lives. Not the way Wendy was with Troy and Truitt. There were likely situations she meddled in when she shouldn't have or prodded them

when they preferred to be left alone, but she only wanted what was best for them.

After she'd lost both of her sons and then her husband, Troy and Truitt were all the family she had left in the world, and the thought of them being alone and lonely made her heart ache.

She wanted them to fall in love, marry, have children, and live full, rich lives that would bring them joy into their golden years. At the rate the two boys were going, though, Troy would end up a crusty old bachelor with only his horse and dogs to keep him company. Truitt would be the guy who was always the life of the party, but never let anyone close enough to love him.

Refusing to allow her grandsons to fall into such bleak fates, Wendy picked up her cell phone and scrolled through the contacts. She pushed a button and waited as the phone rang.

“Paige James. May I help you?”

Wendy grinned. “Paige, it’s Wendy Lucas, Troy and Truitt’s grandmother. I was hoping you and Ashley might be able to help me with something ...”

Chapter Nineteen



“Oh, wow,” Lark said, sinking lower in the seat of the cab to better stare out the windows at the buildings all aglow along the Strip in Las Vegas.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Jay asked as he glanced out the window on his side of the vehicle. “This is going to be awesome.”

Lark glanced over at her brother. “I hope it will be. Thank you for coming with me. You know I hate traveling alone.”

Jay grinned at her. “I do know that, but you could have gone with Troy and Truitt. In fact, I’m pretty sure they asked you one or two, or a dozen, times to ride with them.”

Lark sighed and turned to look out the window again. Troy had asked her at least three times if she wanted to ride with him and Truitt to Las Vegas. They planned to drive down because they were going to stop on the way home to look at a bull that was for sale in Nevada. Troy had also hinted he and Truitt would do all their Christmas shopping in Las Vegas and needed a way to haul their purchases home.

She had no idea what they intended to buy, but she thought the two cousins just liked the idea of a road trip and wanted to drive. Lark couldn't blame them. Being crammed into an airplane seat next to a stranger that smelled like he had bathed in garlic wasn't her idea of a fun way to travel.

When Troy and then Truitt, had invited her to ride with them, she'd considered it, but being in close quarters with them for an entire day made her hesitant to agree. She was getting far too attached to Troy and his family. When the day came for her to pack up and move to Portland, it was going to break her heart to tell him goodbye. She couldn't see any good coming from falling even deeper in love with him than she already was. A day spent in the pickup with him would definitely give her ample time to do just that.

After making polite excuses to Troy and Truitt about flying to Las Vegas, Lark had called Jay and begged him to come with her. He'd wrapped up his classes early, and driven to her house, ready for an adventure.

"Look at you getting into the spirit of things, wearing a cowboy hat. Did I know you owned one?" Lark joked, tugging on the brim of Jay's hat.

"Har. Har. I don't think I've ever not had a cowboy hat, even if I don't wear one that often. If my current career falls through, you know I still want to be a cowboy when I grow up," Jay said in a teasing tone, then adjusted the hat on his head and gave Lark a long look. "You sure I'm not going to be in your way?"

"Not at all," Lark bumped him with her elbow as the cab pulled up at their hotel. "You're my convenient excuse if anything comes up I don't want to do. Got it?"

Jay rolled his eyes and opened the car door. He got out, then gave her a hand, helping her to her feet as the cab driver popped the trunk and lifted out their luggage.

Lark paid the driver, then she and Jay headed inside the hotel. Check-in went smoothly, and they stepped into the elevator, heading to their rooms. She'd happily paid for Jay's travel expenses, including a room that was located directly

across the hall from hers. It gave her peace of mind to know he'd be with her if she needed a listening ear or just the comfort of his presence.

“Twenty minutes to unpack, then let's head out. Paige and Ashley said everyone will meet for dinner in an hour. I think we can walk from here.” Lark smiled at her brother as they stepped off the elevator and walked down the hallway to their rooms. “No napping.”

“Napping? Are you nuts? I might not sleep the whole time we're here.” Jay grinned and opened his door and stepped inside.

Lark held her plastic key card in front of the electronic lock and heard it beep, then turned the knob and pushed the door open into a plush suite that had a sitting area, a bedroom with a king-sized bed, and a spa bathroom where she planned to take advantage of soaking in the jetted tub as many times as possible during her stay. The small kitchen would be more than adequate since she planned to take a break from cooking while she was there.

After rolling her two suitcases into the bedroom, she unpacked, changed from jeans and a sweater into a long, flowing dress and comfortable cowboy boots, then transferred her essentials from her big tote bag into a small crossbody purse. After slipping the strap over her head, she grabbed a jacket and walked out the door. Jay was just stepping into the hall, and she caught a glimpse into his room which looked identical to hers.

“These rooms are amazing,” he said, leading the way to the elevator. “I really appreciate your inviting me along, Lark. I can use a break before we dive into Christmas with the family.”

Lark frowned. “Is everything okay with school and Rachel?”

“Rach has finals all week and is going to stay to work until right before Christmas. School is fine, just tough classes, and I took a full load of credits this semester. It's been a little

rough doing that and working and trying to balance a relationship.”

From what Jay didn't say, Lark got the idea things between him and Rachel were not on good footing. They'd have time to get into that later. When Jay felt like talking, he would. Perhaps inviting him to join her on this trip would be a blessing to them both.

“Come on, let's explore on our way to dinner.” Lark wrapped her arm around Jay's, and they stepped outside, where throngs of people combined with bright lights and glitz made it seem like they'd walked into a foreign land.

They stopped on a corner, waiting to cross the street, and watched a huge video monitor. The Lasso Eight logo flashed on the screen.

“Oh, look,” Lark said, pointing to the monitor. She and Jay watched as two cowboys walked toward the camera. At first, their images appeared blurred while the background of a snowy pasture and rolling hills were the focus. As the perspective shifted from the landscape to the men, Lark recognized Troy and Truitt. The background had been altered to show computer-generated snow, but there was no mistaking the two good-looking cowboys. A glance at Truitt made her smile, but when she looked at Troy's image, she felt her heart skip a beat.

A line of text flashed across the screen. *Double trouble never looked so good.*

Lark couldn't argue with that. She glanced around and saw women staring at the screen, then heard the buzz as people started discussing who the two look-alike cowboys could be, since they weren't among the rodeo contestants competing in the national finals.

“You better slap a brand on Troy or you're gonna be out of luck, Lark,” Jay commented as they crossed the street and headed into the resort where they'd join friends for dinner.

“I'm not slapping a brand on anyone, smarty. Besides, Troy is free to date whomever he pleases.”

Jay stopped so suddenly, she almost tripped over her own feet. She glared at him, but he met her gaze with an annoyed glower. “If you don’t screw your head on straight and realize Troy is the best thing that has ever happened to you, you are going to be sorry, sis. There’s more to life than plotting to take over the culinary world. You’ve been happier since you met that cowboy than I can ever remember seeing you. He makes you smile, and he’s a good guy. For the record, I wouldn’t mind having him as a brother-in-law. Besides, I think Robin’s afraid of him, which makes him even better.”

Lark grinned and grabbed Jay’s arm, tugging him toward the restaurant. “What makes you think Robin is afraid of him?”

“I heard you and Danny talking about him at Thanksgiving, and Robin just got this look on her face, like he intimidates her.”

“Huh. How about that? Maybe that’s why she’s been halfway decent the past several weeks. Troy and I were supposed to go on a date one evening a few months ago. She showed up unannounced and dumped the kids on me without even giving me a chance to say I had plans. Troy was there when Robin and Danny returned to get the boys. Danny and I carried them out to the car, so she and Troy were alone for a few minutes. Since then, she’s called to ask if I had time to babysit instead of just arriving and expecting me to take care of them on her whim. I wonder if Troy said something to her.”

“If he did, and it sank into her thick head, more power to him.” Jay pulled open the door to the restaurant, and Lark went inside, waving as she saw Paige and Cooper James already seated at a table.

More people arrived, and Lark found herself seated between Jay and Troy, with Truitt across from them. Tally and Gage Taggart were there along with Trevor and Mykah King and a few other couples Lark had met through Troy. They were all what her grandmother would have called good folks, down to earth and fun.

The big news of the evening was Trevor and Mykah's announcement that they were expecting the stork to pay a visit in June. Lark didn't miss the look Tally and Gage exchanged, but she wasn't sure what it meant. Everyone offered their congratulations to the couple, then joined in a toast to happy days ahead.

As the group dispersed, Jay joined Truitt and a few other cowboys planning to visit Fremont Street to see what adventures they could find. Lark gave her brother a warning look before she accepted the arm Troy held out to her.

"How was your flight?" he asked as they strolled through the resort, in no hurry to leave.

"Good. Are you tired from that long drive?" she stopped to stare at a display of Christmas decorations that featured a theme of enormous red silk roses, glittering gold balls, and black music notes suspended from the ceiling amid tartan plaid ribbon streamers.

"Tru and I took turns napping. We left at midnight and arrived a little before five." Troy grinned at her. "I'm pretty sure I'll sleep like a lump tonight."

Lark tossed him a coy glance. "I thought you slept like that all the time. According to Truitt, it's like having a hibernating bear living in the house year-round."

Troy's gaze narrowed, then he leaned close to her ear. "I'll show you a hibernating bear, Songbird. You better watch out."

Lark breathed in his scent, reveled in the warmth of his presence, and pondered what Jay had said earlier about Troy. Was she about to lose out on the best thing that had ever happened to her? Or was she being cautious in an effort to avoid repeating the mistakes of her past?

Uncertain, she knew tonight wasn't the time to sort out her tangled thoughts. Instead, she walked with Troy across a skywalk. They were nearly over it when he stopped and pointed to fountains that suddenly shot water into the air, choreographed to the song "Sleighride."

“Ever been to Vegas before?” he asked after she’d clapped along with the crowd at the end of the water show.

“No, but so far it’s been grand.”

“Good. If there is anything I can do to help make your experience more enjoyable, let me know. Truitt and I are happy to serve as your personal taxi if there’s anywhere you want to go.”

“Thanks, Troy. That’s kind of you to offer, but then you always are.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m always what?”

“Kind. It’s one of the things I admire most about you.” Lark smiled at him, then led him into a boutique shop selling clothes that were both ugly and outrageously expensive, but it was fun to laugh over them with Troy.

Two hours later, as they meandered along the sidewalk, both licking ice cream from rapidly melting cones, Lark couldn’t think of a time she’d been happier. The evening had been beautiful, not because they’d done anything spectacular, but because she’d spent it with Troy.

Seeing him in a big city, out of his element but relaxed around her, filled her with joy. She knew Jay had been right in saying she’d been happier since she’d met Troy than she’d ever been in her adult life. Troy made her happy, made her smile, and made her dream impossible dreams.

Tonight, though, she didn’t want to worry about anything. She just wanted to be thankful for this moment of time spent with a man she adored, enjoying an evening together. They strolled as they ate their ice cream, then exhaustion set in.

“I think I’m ready to turn in for the night. It’s been a busy day.” Lark saw dark circles beneath Troy’s eyes. “You look beat, cowboy. Let’s head back to the hotel.”

“I won’t argue with you.” Troy laced their fingers together, and they made their way back to the hotel where they both were staying. Lark was shocked to discover Troy and Truitt had a room on the same floor as hers. In fact, they were just five doors down the hall.

“Want to have breakfast together?” Troy asked as she keyed open her door and took a step inside the room.

“I’d like that. What time?” Lark hoped he wouldn’t say something crazy like six. She wanted to sleep in.

“How about nine? After we eat, we can head over to one of the vendor shows.” Troy leaned an arm against the doorframe and pushed his cowboy hat back with the tip of his index finger. “Unless you have other plans.”

Lark experienced an almost primal urge to grab him by the collar, tug him into her room, and forget anything existed except Troy. Instead, she inched back a step. “No other plans. That sounds perfect. Thank you. I hope you sleep well and have a great night.”

“You too, Songbird.” Troy leaned in for a kiss, but the elevator opened, and a boisterous group of people got off, walking straight toward them. Troy kissed her cheek, winked at her, then strode down the hall to his room.

Lark watched him go, anticipating the days ahead spent with her hunky cowboy.

The following evening, she sat between Jay and Troy, watching the finals rodeo. They had good seats, provided by Lasso Eight, with a great view of the arena and action. They’d arrived early and taken time to wander around, looking at everything, listening to music, and eating delicious barbecue sandwiches.

Before the tie-down roping started, Lark stood and squeezed past Jay as he sat in the aisle seat, intent on finding a restroom. “Anyone want anything?” she asked, looking around their group.

“We’re good, but thanks,” Truitt said when no one requested drinks or food.

Lark stepped out of the stands and headed to the nearest restroom. On her way back to the seats, she’d only taken a few steps outside the restroom when she felt engulfed by people. She didn’t know where they’d come from or how they’d surrounded her, but she could hardly move, pressed on all

sides by people moving at the pace of a snail. As she took one shuffling step then another and another, she tried to work her way toward the doorways that opened into the sections of the stands.

Overcome with a feeling of claustrophobia with bodies hemming her in on all sides, she tamped down the urge to use humans as climbing blocks and moved with the slow-paced flow until she saw the sign for the doorway to the section of seats where her friends awaited her. She had a sudden understanding of what it might be like to be in the center of a school of fish all swimming upstream.

Despite her attempts to work her way to the edge of the flow of people, she could see they were going to pass by her section before she could break free.

“Excuse me, please. Please, let me through!” She raised her voice to be heard above the noise. “Please, excuse me!” Desperate, Lark lifted a hand and tried to step between two cowboys who were too busy drinking and laughing to even notice her.

Suddenly, a hand clasped hers and yanked her from the swarm of people. She looked up at Troy’s face, weak with relief.

“What happened?” he asked, placing a hand on her back while the other cupped her elbow.

“I’m not sure. I stepped out of the restroom and got swept into that.” She motioned to where the sea of people continued onward, pulling in unsuspecting people who got too close to them.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Troy shook his head, then looked at her. “Are you okay? Want to leave?”

“No. I’ll be fine.” Lark just needed a moment to regain her equilibrium as she drew in a few deep breaths. “I didn’t realize I was claustrophobic until I got stuck in that.”

“It would make anyone with a brain in their head freak out. If it had been me, I’d have shoved my way out, and no

one would have wanted that to happen.” Troy grinned at her. “Ready to go back in?”

Lark nodded. “Lead the way.”

Troy took her hand in his and guided her back to their seats. He nudged Jay to scoot over and let Lark have the aisle seat. Her brother took one look at her pale face and moved over to the seat Troy had occupied. Troy sank beside Lark and continued holding her hand as they watched the remainder of the rodeo. Somehow, that simple touch made her feel safe and protected, like nothing or no one would ever be able to hurt her.

After the rodeo ended, Troy drove her to the hotel while Jay went with Truitt to attend an after-rodeo party.

When Troy walked her to her room, she wasn’t ready to let him go. Not just yet.

“Want to come in and watch a movie? We could order something from room service if you’re hungry.”

Troy grinned. “I’d like that. I heard Ashley mention they have a great chocolate peppermint cake.”

Lark flicked on the light in the kitchen and picked up the room service menu. “How about cake and popcorn?”

“Sounds perfect.”

Two hours later, Lark felt herself floating, drifting somewhere between asleep but not quite awake. Strong arms lifted her against a solid chest where a heart beat in a steady, comforting rhythm in her ear.

“Troy,” she whispered, longing for him to sweep her into his arms and carry her off into sunset dreams.

“I’m right here, Songbird,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple.

She breathed in his woody, warm scent. “You smell nice. You always smell nice,” she mumbled. “I think I love you.”

“I love you too, Songbird, but you should rest now. We’ll talk tomorrow.” Troy’s voice was a deep rumble that made her

want to keep him talking, but she was so tired. It required more energy than she possessed at that moment to find the words she wanted to say.

She felt the softness of a pillow replace the hard contours of Troy's chest as he gently laid her on the bed and settled the duvet over the top of her.

"Sweet dreams, Lark," he whispered, then she felt the brush of his lips on her forehead.

"Night, cowboy," Lark muttered before succumbing to exhaustion.

Morning arrived with sunlight streaming in through the crack in the curtain. Lark lazily stretched in bed, recalling the wonderful dreams she'd had last night. They'd seemed so real, she could still feel Troy's arms around her as he carried her to bed.

Lark's eyes popped open, and she jolted upright. The last thing she remembered had been eating popcorn with Troy as they watched a romantic comedy about a woman trying to save her grandmother's candy store in time for Christmas.

Had she fallen asleep?

Lark tossed back the duvet and discovered she was still wearing the jeans and blouse she'd had on last night at the rodeo.

She scurried into the living room to discover her boots were where she'd toed them off in the kitchen, and two empty plates that had once held slices of cake were in the sink. A few remnants of popcorn sat in a bowl on the counter.

A note on a piece of the hotel's stationery simply said, "call me," and had a smiley face next to it. She recognized the distinctive handwriting as Troy's.

Lark found her phone plugged into a charger in the kitchen. She called Troy and smiled when he answered on the second ring.

"Morning, sleepyhead. How are you feeling today?" Troy's rich voice questioned.

“I’m feeling good. Thank you. Did I dream it, or did you tuck me in last night?”

“I did. You fell asleep right before the end of the movie, which was cheesy, by the way.”

Lark laughed. “Oh, you loved it. Come on. Admit it was fun to watch.”

She could hear the smile in his voice when he spoke. “I’m not admitting anything, Songbird.”

“Fine. Be that way,” she sighed in mock exasperation. “Have you eaten breakfast?”

“Sure have. If you’re hungry, we can grab an early lunch. Truitt and Jay took off about an hour ago to go to the convention center vendor show. We can join them there if you want, then eat lunch, and then we’re supposed to work in the Lasso Eight booth this afternoon.”

“Okay. I’ll shower and change, then be ready to go.”

“Need any help with that?” Troy’s tone indicated he was teasing.

“No! But I’ll hurry. I’ll text you when I’m ready.”

She didn’t wait for his response but rushed through a shower. Instead of trying to style her hair, she worked styling cream into it and scrunched her curls, letting them go a little wild. Lark pulled on a Lasso Eight dress and denim jacket with boots, then grabbed her purse, and sent Troy a text she was ready.

When she opened the door, he was just lifting his hand to knock, looking like a cowgirl’s dream in a shirt the same color blue as his eyes and the Lasso Eight jeans that fit him to perfection.

“You ready for a day of non-stop fun?” he asked, holding out his arm to her.

She grinned and kissed his taut, tan cheek. “Bring it on.”

Chapter Twenty



“Well, look at that,” Truitt said, slapping Troy on the back so hard it nearly knocked him forward into traffic at the intersection where they stood waiting to cross the street.

Above them, a huge video monitor advertised everything from restaurants to the rodeo.

Troy glowered at his cousin, then glanced up as Truitt pointed to the video screen. It took him a moment to realize he was looking at a video of him with Lark taken at Chase and Jessie’s ranch when they stood near the food truck. Snow had been added to the scene and appeared to fall all around them. In the shot, Troy leaned back slightly, holding Lark in his arms, wearing the wool coat that he thought might give him a heat stroke. Lark was decked out in Rugged Stylz apparel. A promotional line about fashion meeting function faded out, then the screen dimmed, making the lights that were strung from the food truck appear to glow.

All Troy could focus on, though, was the look on Lark’s face. A look of adoration mingled with love. Deep love.

Caught off guard, he continued gaping at the screen even after the ad disappeared and one promoting a casino took its

place.

“Come on,” Truitt said, propelling him across the street.

Troy’s limbs felt numb as he followed his cousin. On the corner, Cooper James and Shaun Price greeted them with handshakes.

“What’s going on?” Cooper asked, giving Troy a studying glance, then looking at Truitt for an explanation.

“We just watched the Rugged Stylz ad with the food truck in the background. I think this blockhead finally figured out Lark is in love with him.” Truitt thumped his shoulder. “Either that, or he’s suffering from a case of acid reflux from those spicy tacos we had for lunch.”

Cooper grinned. “Was it the ad where Lark looks completely besotted with this big lunk?”

Troy turned to scowl at Truitt and then Cooper. “Enough with the name-calling. I’m standing right here, and last I checked, I hadn’t lost all sense of hearing.”

Shaun chuckled, and the four of them headed toward the hotel together. “No, but you do look like someone left you flummoxed,” he said. “We’ve been there ourselves, Troy. We get it.”

Troy gave Shaun and Cooper doubtful looks, then did his best to ignore their less-than-helpful hints for wooing Lark.

“Maybe you should resort to dial-a-date,” Cooper suggested.

Shaun made a growling noise that caused Truitt and Cooper to laugh. “Don’t mention that.”

“Was that when Shaun’s dad had several of us take Brylee on adventures to make him jealous?” Troy asked Cooper.

“Exactly. Jason Price had a whole bunch of you on speed dial in an attempt to get Shaun to realize how much Brylee meant to him.”

Truitt shrugged. “Must have worked out since you two have been happily married for a while, and you’ve started a

nice little family with your cute son.”

“It did work out well. And we are thrilled with Carter and the one on the way.” Shaun smirked. “Although I didn’t just tell you that. Brylee only found out a few weeks ago that we’re gonna be parents again. Keep it under your hat.” He looked pointedly at Cooper.

“I won’t say anything,” Cooper said, shrugging as though he’d never once blurted facts or details people wanted to be kept confidential. He held up two fingers and crossed his heart with his other hand. “Scout’s honor. I won’t even tell my wife.”

“Paige might already know, but I appreciate your keeping quiet, Coop,” Shaun said. “Brylee wants to wait another month or so before we make an announcement.”

“Got it. Mum’s the word.” Cooper made a clicking noise and pretended to turn a lock over his mouth.

“I got twenty bucks that says he’ll spill the beans to someone before the day is through,” Truitt said.

Troy smiled. “I want in on that too.”

Cooper slapped a hand to his chest in feigned indignation. “You two wound me deeply.”

“Make it three bets.” Shaun took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Truitt.

“With you guys as friends, who needs enemies?” Cooper questioned, doing his best to appear insulted.

They were all laughing as they entered the hotel lobby, even though Troy’s thoughts lingered on the expression on Lark’s face in the advertisement.

He was still mulling it over several days later when he was backstage at the fashion show, waiting for his turn to model. It seemed like all his friends were trying to find ways and opportunities for him to spend time with Lark. Jay and Truitt were just as bad as the others, inventing errands they could run together or nudging them to go see decorations at a resort or go for a drive to see the lights at night.

Troy certainly wasn't complaining about spending time with Lark. Far from it. The more time he spent with her, the deeper he fell in love with the beguiling woman. But Lark was still talking about moving to Portland in the spring. He didn't want her to leave, not ever, but he wasn't sure he was ready to offer the commitment of marriage. He still lived in the bedroom where he'd grown up, for gosh sakes. A wife wouldn't want to share a room next door to Truitt.

Many times, he'd thought about building a house on the ridge at the back of the ranch that overlooked one of the wheat fields. He loved the view, especially in early summer when the wheat was still green and the wind blew through it. It was like watching waves roll on the ocean. He'd even investigated the necessary permits to build there, but he hadn't broached the subject with his grandmother or Truitt. That might be a good first step before he got down on one knee and proposed to Lark.

Not that he was of a mind to do that. At least not yet.

Troy was still trying to figure out if he was ready to settle down. If he'd be a good husband and father. If he could survive if something happened to his wife, the way his father had to soldier on after his mother had passed.

Before Troy asked Lark to marry him, he wanted to be sure he was the person she needed in her life. She was way out of his league. Although she didn't take any money from her parents, she'd grown up with nice things—expensive things. He'd seen it all firsthand when she'd asked him to go with her to a Sunday dinner at her parents' home a few weeks ago. The whole time he'd been there, he'd been afraid he'd break something that was priceless.

The most valuable thing at Dusty Hills Ranch was probably the antique bedroom set in Grammy's room. Their family had never been poor, but some years had been lean when hail destroyed the wheat crop or cattle prices bottomed out. They'd not once gone hungry, but there were things they'd done without, like toys they wanted or the trendy sneakers all the other kids were wearing at school.

Troy wasn't convinced he could ever provide for Lark in the way she deserved. Then again, she'd never seemed like the type of girl who expected lavish gifts or luxury. The day she'd been trying to chase heifers out of her street and ruined her shoes came to his mind.

He'd never seen her look as beautiful as she had at that moment. When he'd pulled up at her house to find her in the yard with a baby in her arms, her face flushed from the exertion of catching the cattle, her hair in wild snarls, wearing a manure-flecked dress, she stole his breath with her beauty that went far beyond the outside all the way down to her heart.

A hand on his arm made Troy jump, drawing him back to the fashion show. "You're up next," Ashley said, giving him a push toward the stage. He was nearly there when he saw Lark approach him from the other side.

His mouth went dry at the sight of her. Her springy coils of hair had been subdued into chunky curls that curtained her back and framed her face. The skirt that swished around her looked like it had been hand-painted with a ranch scene, while a tight dark green jacket with two rows of bronze buttons marching up the front of it complemented the color of her hair. She wore boots the same color green as the jacket.

"You look amazing, Songbird," Troy whispered, offering her his arm as Paige motioned for them to step onto the stage.

Troy walked out, tipped his hat to Lark, then watched as she sashayed down the runway, executed a spin that sent her skirt swirling at the end of the walk, then made her way back to him. They stepped to one side and waited.

Truitt came out next with a young woman Troy didn't know but had seen performing as a trick rider at a few rodeos. Tally and Gage Taggert joined them on the stage with a few other couples before they all returned backstage to change for the next set.

When Troy walked out with Lark dressed in a Rugged Stylz shirt and pair of pants and her hair in two loose braids, he thought she couldn't look any cuter if she'd tried. The dark

blue shirt adorned with a tiny Aztec print in pink looked anything but utilitarian, just like the dark blue pants she wore.

A few guys whistled at her and Troy had to work to contain his urge to jump off the stage and knock their heads together.

Their final outfits of the day left Troy's mouth hanging open when he was again paired with Lark. She sashayed down the runway in a straight black suede dress with short sleeves. However, on her, the simple dress clung to curves, while the fringe around the hem that fell just above her knees swayed enticingly with each step she took in a pair of knee-high turquoise-hued boots.

Catcalls and whistles made Troy bristle as she turned and made her way back to him. Lark's cheeks were pink, betraying the fact the attention embarrassed her, but she smiled and posed until they could escape the stage.

When Troy finally found his tongue, Lark was almost to the women's dressing room. He grabbed her hand and pulled her against him, dropping his head until his lips almost caressed her ear so she could hear him above the noise around them.

"Want to wear that the rest of the day? I don't think I've ever seen a sexier woman than you."

The blush on her cheeks turned from pink to red when she glanced up at him. "Thanks, I think, and no, I'll be changing."

"Maybe I can get a private showing sometime?" he asked in a light tone, although he wasn't joking. Not when that fringe taunted him with every movement she made.

"Stop teasing," she said, pressing a hand to his chest and smiling up at him. "I'm starving. With all the modeling, I didn't get a chance to eat. Want to grab lunch before we go to the Lasso Eight booth?"

"Sure." Troy was hungry, but it had nothing to do with food and everything to do with the tempting woman in front of him. Before he could figure out what to say to her, to explain

how incredible he thought she looked, she dashed into the dressing room.

Troy went into the men's dressing room to change and gather his things. Truitt waved as he left with a group of friends, including Lark's brother. It appeared the conspiracy to keep Troy and Lark together was still afoot.

With a bag full of clothes in his hand, Troy waited outside the women's dressing room for Lark to appear. She carried a bag of clothes in one hand, and two boot boxes in the other.

"Paige said I could keep whatever I wanted, and I really want these boots." Lark smiled as Troy took the boxes from her, tucking them against his side as they walked out to the parking lot where he'd left his pickup.

He drove to a restaurant near the vendor event where they'd spend time in the Lasso Eight booth, then he and Lark enjoyed a peaceful lunch together. They were just leaving when Troy felt a hand on his arm and turned around to see his former roping partner grinning at him.

"Dude, it's been forever," Roger said, giving him a brotherly hug before stepping back. "How are you, man?"

"Good, Roger. And you?" Troy asked, trying not to let all the emotion rolling through him show on his face. If life had been different, Troy might be the one competing with Roger in the finals rodeo. Instead, he'd always be watching from the sidelines.

A slight pressure on his hand reminded him he wasn't alone, though. He glanced over at Lark and decided maybe the sidelines weren't so bad after all.

Roger pasted on his charm-the-girls smile. "Hi. I'm Roger Hamilton. Troy and I used to rope together before his granddad passed."

Troy felt a spurt of jealousy when Lark shook the hand Roger held out to her.

Possessively, Troy wrapped his hand around Lark's waist, pulling her closer to him. "This is Lark Gibson."

Troy saw a spark of interest flicker in Roger's eyes as he dropped a glimpse at her ring finger.

"She's mi ... my girlfriend," Troy said, his voice laced with warning. He'd almost said, "she's mine," wanting to make it clear Lark had already been claimed. He knew how Roger operated. Back when they were on the rodeo circuit together, he was sure Roger had a girl in every town they visited.

Yet, he didn't miss the slight tilt of Roger's head toward him, as though he understood Lark was off limits.

Troy decided perhaps he wasn't the only one who'd grown up and changed in the last few years. "You and Ted are having an amazing season, Roger. Congratulations." As he said the words, Troy realized he meant them. He was happy for his former partner and wanted him to do well.

"Thank you. It's been quite an adventure getting here this year." Roger's phone buzzed. He gave it a quick look, then pushed open the door. "I gotta run, but it was good to see you, man. You take good care of this pretty lady, and both of you have a Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Roger. I'll be cheering you on to win."

"Thanks, man." Roger tipped his hat to Lark. "It was nice to meet you, Ms. Gibson. Keep this big lug out of trouble."

"I try," Lark said, offering Roger a polite smile, then looking up at Troy with a tender glance. "Are you okay?"

"Actually, I am okay. Better than okay." Troy gave her a quick kiss, then took her hand and led the way out to his pickup.

On the way to the vendor event, Lark placed a hand on his leg, igniting little fires along his thigh with her fingers.

"Want to talk about seeing your old nemesis?" she asked.

Troy smirked at her. "I don't think I ever referred to Roger as a nemesis."

"You didn't have to. I could tell the few times you mentioned him that there were some hard feelings between

you two. Do you still feel that way?"

"What is this, a therapy session?" Troy turned off the street into the parking lot at the venue for the vendor event.

Lark shrugged.

Troy sighed. "Honestly, it didn't bother me like I thought it would to see him. I'm truly happy for Roger to be doing so well."

Silence fell between them until Lark said, "And?"

"And, seeing him made me realize there are things I enjoy more than roping, things that are far more important."

Her expression relayed her surprise at his statement. "Like what?"

Before he could hold back the words, he blurted, "You."

"Oh." Lark looked out the window as he found a parking spot and didn't speak as they made the hike into the venue. He might have been concerned about her reaction if she hadn't squeezed his hand and held onto it with a tight grasp.

When they reached the Lasso Eight booth, they didn't have more time to talk for the next three hours.

"So thirsty," Lark said just loud enough for Troy to hear. She'd spent the past thirty minutes posing nonstop with people who wanted to take photos with her in front of a large poster of an advertisement that showcased her leaning against a fence with snow and horses in the background.

Troy and Truitt had posed more times than they could count with Lark between them in front of a big sign that showed all three of them standing in snow-covered sagebrush. Troy decided he'd have to ask Paige or Ashley how they added the snow and wintry touches to the photos. It was amazing what they could manipulate on the computer.

"Just five more minutes and we can escape," Troy whispered to her before she smiled and posed with another visitor to the booth.

“Why don’t you go get all of us something to drink?” Truitt suggested as he headed toward a family with three children who seemed excited to meet the Lasso Eight models.

Troy strode toward the food vendor area and ordered sodas and water bottles, carrying the drinks in a box. He’d just stepped into the Lasso Eight booth when he saw a man kissing Lark. From his angle, he couldn’t tell if she was kissing him back or trying to push him away. Then he realized her hands were held out at her sides.

He set the box of beverages on the top of a round clothing rack and started toward the cowboy taking liberties with his girl. Before he reached them, Truitt intervened and pushed the guy back. He said something to the man, who appeared to be drunk. The idiot held up his hands in front of him palms out, as though he indicated he didn’t want any trouble, then he left the booth.

Troy grabbed a bottle of water and rushed over to Lark, who hadn’t moved since he’d returned to the booth.

“Here. Take a drink.” Troy unscrewed the cap and held the bottle out to her.

She took a tissue from her pocket and scrubbed it over her lips before she took a long drink of the water. When she’d downed half of it, she looked at Troy.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. What happened?” he asked, still fighting the urge to go after the drunk and level him for kissing Lark. Reason had left him the moment he’d seen someone touching her. All he wanted to do at that moment was pummel something or someone. The very notion of doing that was so out of character for Troy, it brought him up short. He wasn’t a person who ever thought violence fixed a problem, but he was ready to go on a rampage because some drunk had wandered into the booth and kissed Lark.

He couldn’t blame the guy. Not entirely. She looked every bit like a western model in her soft green dress with a wide leather belt cinching her waist, hair flowing down her

back, and a chunky silver and turquoise necklace accentuating her slender neck. Lark was a beautiful woman without a speck of makeup on her face. With her face still made up from the fashion show, she looked like a celebrity.

Troy took a step closer to her, hands clenched into fists, ready to send the next guy who got too close to her flying.

“Before you start dragging your knuckles on the ground and pounding your chest to mark your territory, take a breath,” Truitt said quietly as he stepped beside Troy.

Truitt held out a bottle of Dr Pepper to Troy from the box of drinks he now carried.

Troy took it and guzzled half of it before he came up for air. He blew out a long breath, nodded once at Truitt to let him know he was fine, then looked at Lark. She stared at him like he’d morphed into an alien creature.

“Since today is the last day of the rodeo and the vendor shows, I’m going to do some shopping. By myself.” Lark took a step away from Troy. “If you guys aren’t planning to hang around here, I can get a cab back to the hotel.”

“Just text me when you’re ready to leave,” Troy said, forcing a smile as Lark continued backing away from him.

She nodded once, grabbed her purse from behind the counter, and left.

Truitt took out his phone and sent a text to someone. At Troy’s questioning look, Truitt pointed to a red head walking their way. “I asked Jay to keep an eye on Lark. She seems kind of rattled after that yahoo slobbered all over her, and you aren’t in any shape to offer her comfort. What’s up with you today?”

Rather than respond, Troy started to walk off, but Truitt stopped him with a hand on his arm. “You can brood and pout after we finish our Christmas shopping. We still need to pick out gifts for Grammy, and I think we should get something nicer than a gift card for our friends this year.” Truitt gave him a push forward. “Come on, grumpy britches. Let’s go spend some money.”

Troy would have preferred to walk until he sorted out his riotous feelings, but he went along with his cousin. As they shopped, Truitt somehow managed to drag some details out of him, like Troy's annoyance at the men whistling at Lark at the fashion show, then his irritation when they ran into Roger, and finishing with the dolt who'd kissed Lark.

"I never took you for the jealous type, Troy. But if you want men to leave Lark alone, you'd better stake your claim. What are your plans where she's concerned?"

"What are you?" Troy asked, scowling at his cousin. "Her self-appointed guardian?"

Truitt smirked and stepped into a booth selling candles their grandmother would love. He picked up a jar that was labeled *Christmas Morning* and sniffed. Troy inhaled a whiff when Truitt held it out to him and nodded. The mixture of cinnamon and apples was something their grandmother would enjoy.

They each picked out a candle for her and paid for them, then continued wandering through the various booths. Truitt seemed to sense Troy balanced on the edge of losing his tenuous grasp on his patience and didn't provoke him further.

Together, they chose gifts for their friends. When Troy happened upon a booth selling something he knew was perfect for Lark, Truitt wandered upstairs to see what events were taking place. Troy paid extra to have the gift custom-made and shipped as soon as possible. He wished he'd noticed the booth last week. They could have had the sign ready for him to pick up and take home with him instead of having it shipped in the hope it would arrive in time for the holiday.

He wandered into several more booths, making a few purchases with Lark in mind before he found a booth that had gift baskets that would be perfect for several of their friends. He took a photo of one and texted it to Truitt, only to have his cousin step around a display on the other side of the booth. Together they chose baskets for several friends and decided to have them shipped instead of having to mail them when they got home.

They'd just finished when Troy's phone buzzed with a text from Lark.

Heading back to the hotel. Meet you in the lobby at six?

"What are you scowling at now?" Truitt asked, grabbing the phone from Troy. Before Troy could take it back, Truitt tapped out a message and hit send.

"Hey, that is not okay." Troy snatched his phone back, seeing Truitt had told Lark they'd meet at six.

"I should go check on her. Give her a ride," Troy said, taking two steps toward the exit.

"Just leave her be, bro. If she wanted you to give her a ride, she would have asked. She probably just needs a break from everything. If something were wrong, Jay would let us know."

Troy knew his cousin was right, but it didn't make him feel any better.

He and Truitt returned to the hotel and began packing up their things, preparing to leave for home in the morning. Troy had been to Vegas a handful of times in recent years, but he'd never enjoyed a trip as much as this one. That was because of Lark. Showing her the town and some of his favorite things made everything seem new and fresh and full of wonder.

The obvious efforts of her brother, Truitt, and Paige and Cooper James to make sure he had plenty of opportunity to spend time with Lark weren't wasted on him. If he didn't know better, he would have thought they were trying to play matchmaker. What none of them seemed to understand was that they didn't need to push him toward Lark. He was already at the point that he wanted to spend every moment he could with her.

The glaring problem, though, was what would happen if he stopped holding back a part of himself, a part of his heart, and let himself love her without reserve, without the fear she'd pack up and move right out of his life.

Troy didn't think he could leave the ranch and the land that was part of him. He couldn't imagine ever living

somewhere else. In fact, the idea of ever having to sell the land, even a small portion of it, made him almost sick to his stomach. The ranch wasn't just where he lived and worked. It was part of who he was. The dirt that blew through the rolling hills was in his veins.

Did he love Lark enough to leave it all behind and go wherever her job took her, even if it was to a big city? He had no idea what he'd do for work. All he'd ever known was rodeo and ranching. He was too shy and reserved to be an announcer or to step into a role that kept him in the spotlight. It was hard enough modeling for Lasso Eight, he sure wouldn't want to do anything that kept him in front of a camera.

Troy almost laughed aloud as he tried to envision himself as a social media influencer. That was never going to happen.

"I'm glad to see something made you smile," Truitt said, nudging him with his elbow. "Feeling better?"

"A little." He stared at his cousin who looked so much like him yet was so different. Troy could easily picture Truitt in the limelight and loving it. Nothing seemed to rattle him, although he had looked upset after the fashion show when Troy had seen him. "Everything okay with you?"

Truitt's head snapped up as he sorted through bags of purchases he'd made. "I'm good, man. Thanks for asking."

A glance at the clock confirmed they didn't have much time to meet Lark in the lobby. Troy changed his shirt and boots, while Truitt hurried to shave and yanked on a different shirt. They both settled hats on their heads, then rushed into the hall. Jay and Lark were standing at the elevator waiting for it, so they all rode down together.

"Dinner at the rodeo sound good?" Troy asked after the valet drove his pickup to the door and they all climbed in. Truitt drove, and Jay sat in the front, while Troy and Lark sat in the back seat.

When he stretched his hand across the seat toward her, she laced her fingers with his, giving them a gentle squeeze. Thankfully, whatever was wrong earlier no longer seemed to

be bothering her. Since tonight was their last night in Vegas, he wanted it to be one they'd remember.

In the darkness of the pickup cab, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed the backs of them before letting their joined hands come to rest on his thigh. He leaned over toward Lark and whispered "You are gorgeous" in her ear.

She turned toward him and mouthed "thank you."

Lark was sure to turn heads with that wild red hair hanging long and lush around her. She wore an emerald green satin shirt that made him think of Christmas and a snug pair of Lasso Eight jeans with a silver concho belt.

She looked incredible. It wasn't any wonder men had been flocking to her all day since her face was plastered across billboards and video screens, not to mention television ads.

"Want me to drop you off at the door?" Truitt asked as he turned off the street at the rodeo venue.

"We'll walk with you guys," Lark said, sitting forward to see over the seat between Jay and Truitt. "How can there be even more people here tonight? I don't understand how they can cram any more people into the seats."

"Some people buy tickets that don't give them a seat, but they can hang out in the public spaces," Truitt said, glancing back at her before he turned into a parking area and drove toward some open spaces at the back. It would mean a long walk both ways, but it would be easier to get out once the rodeo ended.

On their way across the parking lot, a few vehicles honked at them. They waved at friends and continued toward the entry doors.

Inside, they ate burgers with thick-cut fries for dinner, using a shelf attached to the wall that held free promotional materials as an impromptu table.

Troy dredged a fry through a pool of ketchup and grinned at Lark. "These can't compare to Bud's Spuds."

“You might be a little biased,” she said, giving him a sassy smile before she snatched the fry from him and took a bite. “Not bad for freezer-burned fat-fried potatoes.”

Once they finished eating, Jay and Truitt wandered off, leaving Troy and Lark alone.

“Want to go sit in our seats or walk around?” Troy asked, taking her hand in his after he’d tossed their trash.

“Wander a bit. I promised Dad I’d bring him a ball cap and forgot to buy one this afternoon.”

Troy guided her to a booth selling shirts, caps, and other memorabilia. Lark bought two caps, one for her dad and one for Danny, as well as shirts for both of her nephews.

“I thought you already bought souvenirs for Josh and Jeremiah.”

Lark nodded as she handed the sales clerk her credit card. “I did, but these little shirts are so cute. How can I resist?”

“You can’t, and they are cute.” He settled his arm around her shoulders and took the bag from her as they meandered along, looking at booths and greeting people they knew before he glanced at his watch. “We’ve got about ten minutes.”

“I’m going to make a pit stop, then I’ll meet you at our seats,” Lark said, backing toward the restrooms nearby.

“I’ll wait for you at the section entry.”

Troy visited the restroom and returned to see two guys had cornered Lark by a vending machine, effectively trapping her without a means of escape. Anger surged in him as he marched toward them, but before he could send them flying, Lark smiled and handed back a program she’d autographed for one of them. Troy could see a Lasso Eight ad with her as the featured model on the back cover.

The two guys, who had to be closer to Jay’s age than Lark’s, hustled off, seemingly excited to have her autograph.

Lark must have noticed his scowl because she hurried to offer reassurances. “It’s fine, Troy. They just wanted an

autograph. No harm done,” she said, looping her arm around his. “Let’s go sit down and get ready for a fun evening.”

He followed as she led the way to their seats. Jay was already there, texting someone. Troy greeted their friends, shaking hands with the men and smiling at the women. Somehow, he ended up holding Carter Price. Jessie Jarrett handed Jayla to Lark, then she and Brylee went to get something to eat.

Troy balanced Carter on his knee, while Lark held Jayla in her lap. The two toddlers eyed each other, babbling in a language only they could understand.

“You two are moving fast. Did we miss the wedding?” Truitt quipped as he climbed over the seat from the row behind them and settled next to Troy. He gently ruffled Carter’s red hair. “Is that Shaun’s kid? He looks more like he belongs with Lark. You should trade.”

Troy glowered at his cousin, then made a silly face when Carter looked like he was about to cry.

“It’s a glimpse into their future,” Jay joked, earning a dark scowl from Lark. He ignored it and held out a finger for Jayla to grasp. She pulled her hands against her chest, giving him a stink-eye look that made them all laugh.

Truitt motioned to Jayla. “You’re gonna have to lay on the charm with this one, Jay.”

“I’m figuring that out.”

Troy looked from Carter to Jayla, who was an exceptionally beautiful baby, and wondered what his children, if he could talk Lark into being the mother, might look like. Wouldn’t it be something if they had twins?

Taken aback by the direction of his thoughts, Jessie and Brylee returned just as the rodeo began. Shaun and Jason Price were working as pickup men and Chase was helping behind the chutes.

Troy thought the rodeo moved at an even faster pace than usual. He clapped and cheered when Roger and Ted achieved the high score for the evening, earning them second place in

team roping. Rather than feel jealous, Troy was happy for someone who had once been a good friend. It wasn't Roger's fault Troy had needed to drop out of the rodeo, even if it hadn't taken him long to find a replacement.

Today, none of it—none of his past—mattered. Not when he sat beside Lark, surrounded by friends who would do anything to help him if he needed it. Troy offered up a silent prayer of thanks for all he'd been blessed with, even if life hadn't turned out like he'd hoped it would.

“Shall we get out of here?” Jay asked, rising to his feet and stepping into the aisle so no one could go past him until their row emptied out.

Troy, Truitt, and Lark were stopped several times on their way to the door by people wanting to get photos with them or have them sign their programs. One buxom brunette tried to get Truitt to autograph her chest, which he refused with a charming smile.

More than ready to escape, Troy motioned to a side door, and the four of them headed outside.

“We want to go to the awards ceremony,” Truitt said, tipping his head to Jay to include him. “We'll take a cab. You two take the truck.”

Troy nodded as Jay and Truitt veered toward the taxi line, while he and Lark started the long walk across the parking lot. Once they finally reached the pickup, it didn't take too long to merge into traffic and drive to the hotel.

When Troy stopped by the front doors, a valet ran around to take his keys and give him a claim ticket.

“It's good to be back here,” Troy said, starting to walk inside with Lark. He stopped halfway through the door. “Oh, shoot. I forgot to grab the extra duffle bags. We're going to pack them with the gifts we bought in hopes everything will make it home in one piece. I'll be right back if you'll wait for me in the lobby.”

“I'll be here,” Lark said, patting his arm before he hurried out to the valet. Prior to meeting Lark, it annoyed him when

women patted or touched him like he was an overgrown dog. However, when Lark patted on him, it just made him eager for her touch. Thoughts of touches led to kisses, and kisses led to ... more. Lest his brain begin to fry from thinking about kisses and more, he motioned to the valet who had yet to move the pickup.

Troy took the keys and unlocked it, then dug behind the back seat for three empty duffle bags. When he found them, he handed the keys to the valet along with a tip.

“Have a nice evening, Mr. Lucas,” the valet said, opening the hotel door for him. The courteous service made him feel ancient, even though he figured he was only a few years older than the kid wearing the valet jacket.

Troy stepped into the lobby to see Lark wrapped in the arms of another man. From where he stood, they appeared to be embroiled in a passionate embrace.

The rational part of his brain said there was an explanation for Lark kissing the man. But after the crazy day he'd endured, and after seeing so many men flirt with Lark, something in Troy snapped. He dropped the duffle bags, spun around, grabbed his keys from the valet, and roared away from the hotel without a destination in mind.

The voice in his head that was still making a lick of sense urged him to turn around and go back.

Troy cranked up the radio to drown it out.

He listened to the Dixie Chicks singing *Tonight, the Heartache's on Me*. The lyrics sang about a fool who couldn't see. That pegged him to a tee, didn't it? He thought Lark truly cared about him, but maybe she'd been playing a sick game with him. Troy hated games. Hated being made to look the fool.

Had their time together meant anything at all to her, or had he been wasting his time?

Even in his agitated state, he knew the answer to that was no. Up until today, he had no doubt in his mind that Lark cared for him, and loved him. Every time she said, “hey, you” he

could hear it in her voice, even if she'd never said the words except for the night she'd been half asleep when he'd carried her to bed.

Troy turned off the radio, took a deep breath, and replayed what he'd seen in the hotel lobby. A guy who looked like a homeless degenerate tightly holding Lark, his lips crushing hers. The man was skinny with long, stringy black hair, a scruffy beard, and purple skinny jeans that looked like he'd scooted through a gutter wearing them. It was then Troy recalled Lark's arms had been trapped between them. She could have been struggling to free herself, not wiggling to get closer.

What had he done? Running off when she needed him. He'd never be able to live with himself if something happened to her.

At the next light, Troy pulled a U-turn and sped back to the hotel. For the third time in less than fifteen minutes, he tossed the keys to the valet and raced into the hotel. Lark wasn't in the lobby, so he pushed the elevator buttons.

The one to his left opened, and Lark rushed out, a cell phone held to her ear. She gave him a narrowed glare and raised her index finger in a gesture that let him know she would speak to him in a minute.

Troy stepped halfway into the elevator to keep the door from closing and looked down at the scrawny guy he'd seen with Lark. The man was doubled over on his knees, one hand pressed to his red eyes, the other clutching his groin.

"What's going on?" he asked glancing from the wincing stranger on the floor to Lark.

"Yes, that's right," Lark said, ignoring his question. "We'll be in the lobby. Yes, I'll stay on the line." Lark continued holding the phone to her ear and flapped the other hand at him. "Can you get him out of there? The police are on their way."

"What happened?" Troy asked, as his gaze raked over Lark from her disheveled hair to the torn sleeve of her blouse

to her puffy lips that looked bruised. “What did he do to you?” Troy carefully cupped her cheek.

She scowled at him, and he decided he deserved it for running off in a fit of jealousy instead of staying behind to make sure she was safe. After the drunk kissing her earlier and all the attention she’d garnered because of the Lasso Eight ads, he shouldn’t have let her out of his sight.

He dropped his hand and moved into the elevator, towering over the guy who’d started to whimper.

“Who is he?” Troy asked as he grabbed the man by the arm. He half-dragged him off the elevator and over to a chair, where he dropped the guy who moaned in pain, mumbling in a foreign accent.

Lark’s gaze fell to her boots, and she spoke too quietly for him to hear.

“What did you say, Lark?” Troy asked as he moved between her and the pathetic human rocking back and forth in the chair. “Who is this guy?”

“Mylan Dumas.”

Troy felt like his head was about to explode. His hands formed into fists, and his jaw clenched until he thought his molars might crack. “The Mylan who beat you up and stole your recipes? That Mylan?”

Chapter Twenty-One



All Lark wanted was to go back to her hotel room, take a long, hot shower, and sleep. Exhaustion didn't begin to cover how she felt. When Paige and Ashley had asked her to be one of the Lasso Eight models in Las Vegas, Lark had thought it would be all fun and no work.

While it had been fun, and she'd had many great experiences, she hadn't counted on being thrust into the spotlight with the Lasso Eight ad campaign.

The first few days they were in Vegas, the ads that ran didn't show her, and she was fine with that. Each day, the ads seemed to focus on a different group. One day it was all Tally and the Wyld Roads line. Another day it highlighted the children's fashion with the adorable Morgan and McGraw youngsters modeling them. There was a day all the ads centered on Mykah and Trevor King with the Retro Riggin' line.

The ads that had run with Truitt and Troy had been wildly popular, particularly with women. Truitt seemed to eat up the attention with a spoon, but Troy was more than happy to step

into the background and let his cousin revel in his sudden celebrity status.

Although the two Lucas men looked enough alike to be twins, Lark could easily tell them apart even from a distance. Truitt had an easy-going, affable manner, while Troy was the stoic, reserved one. Even the way they stood and walked reflected the variances in their personalities. They were both rugged and handsome and strong, but it was Troy who made her heart gallop and wish for things she wasn't sure could ever come true.

Yesterday, Lark had seen the first ad with her photo featured in it. The ads that had run today, combined with the fashion show, had pushed her into the limelight, and she rapidly concluded it wasn't a place she enjoyed. The drunk guy kissing her at the Lasso Eight booth was bad enough, but she'd listened to more pick-up lines in the past several hours than she'd heard in her entire life. She'd signed rodeo programs and event tickets, and even one man's twenty-dollar bill. Her cheeks ached from smiling, and if one more person touched her, she thought she might break their arm.

Well, with the exception of Troy. She wouldn't mind if he settled his arm across her shoulders again, or placed his hand on the curve of her waist, or his palm warmed the small of her back. Not one single protest would she utter if he did any of those things. In fact, she was too wound up to rest and planned to invite him in to watch a movie and eat something decadent for dessert from room service just as soon as they returned to the hotel.

The drive from the rodeo venue to the hotel was quiet, with both her and Troy lost in their thoughts. Troy turned up the radio when a Christmas song about being under the mistletoe started to play and winked at her.

"Think I should fasten some mistletoe to my hat?" he asked as he turned down a side street that would bring them into the hotel's parking lot.

"No, you should not. You'll end up with chapped lips from all your adoring fans kissing you." Lark shook her head

at him. “Truitt, on the other hand, should definitely add some to his hat.”

Troy chuckled as he pulled up by the hotel’s main doors and stopped. The valet opened Lark’s door and helped her out while Troy gave him his keys and took the claim ticket the young man held out to him.

“It’s good to be back here,” Troy said, placing his hand at the small of her back and holding the door open for her. He stopped halfway through the door and glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, shoot. I forgot to grab the extra duffle bags. We’re going to pack them with the gifts we bought in hopes everything will make it home in one piece. I’ll be right back if you’ll wait for me in the lobby.”

“I’ll be here,” Lark said, patting his arm before he hurried back out to the valet. She moved out of the doorway into the lobby and headed for the area where they kept lemon water, coffee, and hot cider for guests. Hot cider would taste wonderful and tide her over until they could order dessert. She reached for a foam cup when a man grabbed her hand and spun her around, crushing her against him as his lips pressed against hers.

All Lark could think of was how badly she wanted to get away from whoever was forcing his attention on her. Her hope was that Troy would hurry back inside and knock the guy’s lights out.

Lark winced as the man tightened his hold, trapping her hands between them, while he assaulted her mouth with hard, harsh kisses. She kept her lips pressed together and tried to wiggle away.

The second the guy came up for air, she jerked away and stared into a face she’d hoped to never again see.

Mylan Dumas, her former boyfriend, and the man who’d beaten her so badly, she’d ended up in the hospital, broken in both spirit and body, leered at her with an unsettling light in his obsidian eyes.

“Miss me, my love?” he asked in a French accent she’d once found endearing but now thought of as irritating.

“No. Why are you here?” Lark took another step away from him and glanced outside, hoping Troy would come to her rescue. Where had he gone, anyway? She saw the duffle bags on the floor just inside the door and had no idea what had happened to him. Had Mylan arranged for someone to keep him occupied, or hurt him? The thought of something happening to Troy made her feel ill, even more so than Mylan’s slobbers on her mouth.

“I have been working here in Vegas as a cook until a few weeks ago. They fired me. Me! Can you believe it? Then yesterday, I saw you on the big screens and the television. It was fate to cross our paths again. I visited the clothing booth at the convention center and saw you. It wasn’t hard to follow you back here. I knew if I waited long enough, you’d pass through the lobby, and it would be my chance to finish what we started a few years ago.”

“Finish what we started?” Lark asked, so shocked to see Mylan she could hardly process his presence. He’d fled the country after beating her up, and she assumed he wouldn’t be stupid enough to return. Clearly, he was not only an idiot but also appeared to be mentally unbalanced. He smelled like he’d crawled to the hotel through the sewer. His hair was greasy, his clothes filthy.

Gone was the suave chef-in-training she’d foolishly allowed to turn her head when she was in Paris. Mylan had known just how to charm her, inflating her ego and playing on her need to succeed. Then he’d talked his way into traveling to Seattle with her. She’d been so busy working, it wasn’t until he tried to crush her that she realized how evil he truly was. Now, he looked gaunt and unwell in addition to clinically crazy.

“Come, my little sparrow. We’ll go up to your room and catch up on life. We have so much time to make up for. I’ll kiss you just the way you like.” He brushed the hair from her neck and leaned toward her, but she hurried to the elevator and pushed the up button.

Mylan gave her a dark look as they stepped onto the elevator. Lark smiled sweetly, turning her back to the buttons and pushed the one on the top floor before Mylan tugged her to him again, attempting to kiss her.

Lark flashed back to the moment in the dark alley behind the restaurant when he'd worn a ski mask as he'd knocked her to the ground and beaten her with what felt like a baseball bat. He'd stolen the recipes she'd worked so hard to develop along with the expensive set of chef knives that had her initials carved into the handles. She'd been helpless and defenseless then, but no longer.

Lark refused to be a victim a second time. She sent up a silent prayer for strength and guidance, for deliverance from her worst nightmare returning to her in the flesh.

While Mylan was busy trying to kiss her, she slid her phone out of her bag and opened the audio recording app before slipping the phone into her pocket.

“Mylan, would you at least tell me why you beat me in the alley and stole my recipes?”

He braced her face with his grimy hands and nuzzled her neck. By sheer will, Lark managed not to shudder in revulsion.

“You were getting a big head, my sparrow. The chef thought you were fantastic and ignored me. That would never, ever do. I am the trained French chef. Not you. I thought I'd show you who was in charge. It felt good to hit you, to see you cry out in pain. Stealing your fancy knives and your recipes was a bonus. I still have your notebook, you know. I've used your recipes to get my last five jobs.”

“Really? And do you have my notebook with you?” Lark hoped it was in the dirty backpack Mylan carried over both shoulders.

“Of course. I take it with me everywhere. A reminder of the girl who got away. But you won't get away from me tonight, dear one. No. We shall have some fun, and then I'll leave you broken and crying once again.”

“Is that so?” Lark asked, giving Mylan a shove back as the elevator arrived at the top floor. She pushed the button to close the doors and then the button that would take them back to the lobby. The doors slid shut before Mylan could escape.

After he'd left her beaten and afraid of her own shadow, she'd taken several self-defense classes. She'd hoped to never need to use them, but she was glad she'd made herself endure the training as she rammed her elbow into Mylan's stomach, catching him off guard.

He grunted and grabbed a handful of her hair, trying to yank her off balance. She heard her shirt sleeve rip as he attempted to subdue her. Before he could, Lark sprayed his face with the little can of pepper spray she always kept handy.

Mylan yelped and rubbed at his eyes. She kned him in the groin twice, then once again swung her elbow into his stomach, using all the force she could gather in the confines of the elevator.

The elevator stopped. A couple started to get on, but Lark shook her head, shooing them away.

“Call 9-1-1 please,” she asked before the doors shut and the elevator continued toward the lobby.

“I will kill you this time, little sparrow. Slowly. With pleasure.” Mylan threatened as he leaned against the elevator wall for support.

Lark kicked him in the groin a third time and dialed the police as he sank onto his knees. She'd recorded enough to put him away for a while, even if he refused to confess.

When she connected with the 9-1-1 operator, Lark explained she was in an elevator with a man who had beaten her so badly she'd ended up in the hospital, then fled the country.

“Are you in immediate danger?” the operator asked.

Lark stared at Mylan as his eyes watered and he uttered a slew of curse words in French. “No, ma'am.”

“Officers will be there momentarily.”

Relieved, Lark sighed. “Thank you. I’ll meet them in the lobby.”

When the elevator opened and Lark stepped off, she was shocked to see Troy standing there. She held up a finger to let him know she was on the phone and listened as the operator told her to stay on the line.

After asking Troy to get Mylan out of the elevator, she ignored the questions her cowboy asked, wondering where he’d gone and why he’d left her alone. Of all the times she’d needed him and he’d been there, how could he fail her tonight when she’d had to face one of the worst demons from her past?

For the first time since she’d met him, Troy had failed to live up to the persona she’d created in her mind of him as her conquering hero. Maybe she didn’t need a conquering hero after all. Maybe Mylan’s appearance was a way of showing her she could rely on herself instead of waiting for someone else to protect her. Maybe the whole terrible episode was a nudge to remind her to trust her own abilities and in God’s perfect timing.

She’d been holding back from loving Troy because she was afraid she was incapable of accurately judging someone’s character. In the dark corners of her mind, she’d feared Troy might one day do the same thing to her that Mylan had done.

Now, seeing them together, she couldn’t believe she’d been so ignorant. Troy was nothing like Mylan. Nothing. He was good and kind, caring and tender, compassionate and generous. Mylan had always been a self-absorbed tyrant who thought only of himself. Lark felt shame that she’d ever been attracted to Mylan and that she’d even, for a minute, compared Troy to him.

Lark knew in that moment she loved Troy so deeply and completely, nothing would ever change that. However, she was beyond weary, traumatized, angry, and irrational. All she could think of as she waited for the police to arrive was that he left her to her own defenses. He left her.

When she frowned at him as he hovered between her and Mylan, he just nodded at her, as though he thought he deserved her wrath, and that made her even more annoyed with him.

By the time the police raced inside a few minutes later, Lark decided all men were morons and wanted nothing to do with them, at least for the night, and maybe not ever. Jay and Truitt arrived as the police handcuffed Mylan. One of the officers asked her to come down to the police station to give an official statement and file charges.

“We’re flying out in the morning,” she said to the officer trying to stuff Mylan into the back seat of a police cruiser.

“We’ll still need you to come down to the station before you go. You can come now or in the morning.”

“Now,” Lark said, glancing at Jay and continuing to ignore Troy.

“I’ll come with you,” Jay said, placing a comforting hand on her back.

“We all will,” Troy said, stepping forward.

Lark shook her head, moving away from him. “No. Just Jay.”

Troy looked so wounded, she almost gave in to her need to be with him, to feel his comforting touch instead of her brother’s on her shoulder. Regardless of what she wanted or needed, she refused to let Troy near her until she’d taken a shower and washed away every remnant of her encounter with Mylan. Before Troy touched her, she needed to feel clean.

Hours later, after answering what seemed like a million questions and sharing a copy of the recording she’d made of Mylan confessing to beating her and threatening to do more of the same, she returned to her hotel room, feeling like she’d done battle with a fire-breathing dragon and survived but with wounds that would take time to heal.

“Want me to sleep in your room on the couch?” Jay asked as she keyed open her door.

“I’ll be fine. I just want a shower and sleep. Will you wake me up an hour before we need to leave for the airport?” She flicked on the light by the door and then glanced back at her brother.

“Of course. Are you sure you don’t want to talk to Troy? Truitt said he’s pretty upset and blaming himself for what happened.”

Lark shook her head. “It isn’t his fault, and he should know that without my telling him. I just need to be alone right now, Jay, but I appreciate your going with me.”

Her brother stepped close enough to give her a hug. “You know I’d do anything I could to help you, Lark. You’ve always been there for me. I just can’t believe that dude assaulted you and stole your recipes. How could you keep that from all of us?”

“Have you met Mom and Robin?” Lark asked, her face buried against the front of Jay’s shirt.

“In fact, I have. I get why you kept it a secret, but still, Lark, he beat you so badly that you ended up in the hospital. I’m so proud of you for standing up to him, for having the wits to get him to confess to what he did, and then giving him a little taste of his own medicine. I bet it felt great kicking him in the ...”

Lark pulled back. The goofy expression on her brother’s face drew out her laugh in spite of her tempestuous emotions. “Thank you for going with me. I love you, little bro.”

“Love you, too, Larkster. Now, get some sleep. Unless the police decide to ask a zillion more questions, we should be free to fly home in the morning as planned.” Jay hugged her again, then stepped into the hallway. “If you need me or have bad dreams or something, just call.”

“I will, Jay. Thanks so much.” She patted her heart, then shut her door, making sure it was locked before she went to the bathroom and stayed in the spray of hot water until her fingers began to wrinkle. She shampooed her hair twice and conditioned it, then lathered on soap three times before she

considered herself clean. After drying off, she rubbed scented lotion into her skin, fluffed her hair to air dry it, then pulled on a pair of soft pajamas and fell into bed.

Although she thought she'd be plagued by nightmares, she slept a sound, dreamless sleep.

The sound of the alarm chirping awakened her just a moment before her cell phone rang.

"This is your friendly wake-up call," Jay said in a high-pitched, falsetto voice, making her smile.

"I'm awake. Barely. Have you eaten yet?" Lark hustled out of bed and over to her suitcase, tugging out the clothes she planned to wear.

"Just heading to breakfast now. Want us to wait for you?"

Lark had no doubt "us" meant Troy and Truitt. The four of them had eaten breakfast together almost every morning that they'd been in Las Vegas. "No. You go ahead. I'll get my stuff packed and be ready to leave on time."

"Want me to bring something back for you?"

"No thanks. I'm not hungry." And she wasn't. Being immersed in past drama and contemplating her future had effectively stripped away her appetite.

"Okay. If you change your mind, just text or call me."

Lark yanked on her jeans with the phone held to her ear. "I will, Jay. Enjoy your breakfast and tell the others I'll catch up with them another day."

"But, Lark, don't you think you and Troy—"

She disconnected before her brother made her feel guilty for giving herself a little time and space to sort out her jumbled feelings and get her thoughts in order. Right now, her emotions felt like they were on the world's wildest roller coaster and the only way off was to ride it through to the end.

Lark dressed and got ready for the day, then hurried to pack her suitcases. Troy had offered to haul home anything that wouldn't fit, and she'd already given him her boot boxes

and a large shopping tote full of gifts. She crammed a few more items into her suitcases, then had to sit on them to get the zippers shut.

Right on time, Jay sent her a text that he was ready to go. Lark wheeled her suitcases into the hall, a large tote bag dangling from her shoulder. Jay stepped out of his room, holding a single red rose.

“Troy asked me to give this to you since you ...” Jay cleared his throat. “Anyway, he wanted you to know he’s thinking of you, and when you feel like talking to him, to call.”

Lark took the perfect bloom and sniffed it. The fragrance was heady, and she drew in a second whiff as they headed downstairs and outside to catch a cab to the airport.

Jay didn’t bring up Troy again until they landed in Pasco and stood at the baggage carousel, waiting for their luggage.

“Are you mad at Troy about something?” Jay asked as they watched a few bags come out on the conveyor.

“No, I’m not mad at him. Why would you ask that?” Lark had tucked the rose Troy had given her through Jay in the corner of her tote bag where she could see it every time she glanced down. She planned to preserve it once she got home.

“Because you won’t see him or talk to him. It’s not his fault that creep you used to date came to the hotel.”

Lark frowned and yanked her suitcase off the conveyor before Jay had a chance to grab it. “I know that,” she snapped, then softened her sharp tone. “It’s all just a little... unsettling. I need some time to work through everything, and that includes my feelings for Troy. I’m not upset or angry with him.”

“Maybe you should tell him that,” Jay said, lifting her other suitcase and striding out the door. “He’s under the impression you hate him for not being there when you needed him.”

Lark walked a pace behind her brother. “I didn’t need him or anyone. As you observed, I handled it myself.”

The look Jay tossed over his shoulder said they both knew that she needed Troy, even if it wasn't to fight her foes.

After being in Las Vegas where the temperature was mild, warm, and sunny, Lark wasn't prepared for the blast of cold air that slapped her cheeks and chilled her from her nose to her toes. She joined Jay in running through the snow-slicked parking lot to her SUV. While her brother tossed the luggage in the back, she started the vehicle and turned the heater on high.

Lark pulled her heavy coat and a pair of gloves from the back seat, tugged them on, then grabbed an ice scraper and went to work on the windshield.

Jay got a brush out and tackled the snow that encased the top and sides of the SUV.

By the time they climbed inside the vehicle, it was warm and toasty against the frigid December air. Lark swung by one of their favorite restaurants to get take-out for lunch, then drove home.

Jay carried in the luggage while she turned up the heat and set the table.

"Are you ready to talk about what happened and why you're pushing Troy away?" Jay asked as they ate lunch.

Lark glowered at him, making Jay grin.

"Just checking," he said with a shrug. "You seem to be the only one unaware of the fact that Troy is crazy about you, and you're wild about him. If you mess around too long with this needing your space stuff and keep ignoring him, you're going to lose him, Lark. I don't want to see that happen. You deserve to be happy, and so does he. If you honestly can't picture a future with Troy, then tell him that and let him go. If you can see yourself with him in ten or twenty years down the road, then stop wasting time and let him know you can't live without him."

Lark wanted to shout at Jay to mind his own business even if what he said made complete sense. Nevertheless, she wasn't quite ready to tell him that.

“What’s up with you and Rachel? You’ve acted weird every time I mention her name.” Lark stopped with her sandwich halfway to her mouth. “You didn’t break up with her, did you?”

“No, nothing like that. I’ve been thinking about proposing to her for Christmas. Her mom and sister have convinced her that’s exactly what will happen, and she’s hinted at it more than once.” Jay sighed. “I just don’t think we’re ready for that kind of commitment. We’re still in college, and neither one of us are certain where we’ll end up after we graduate. It just seems like it would be better to wait a while until we’re on solid footing to start planning our future. Her mom is already pushing for grandkids. What if we wed soon and Rach gets pregnant right away? Do I look like I’m ready to be a dad?”

Lark stared at her brother, wondering when he’d grown up into a responsible adult. She still remembered him stuffing crayons up his nose and trying to ride his bike backward and ending up in the emergency room with a broken arm. The person sitting at her table was not a gangly kid but a man.

“You’re pretty smart for a dumb college kid, you know.” She tossed him a teasing smile.

“And you’re not too bad for an obnoxious sister.” Jay gave her arm a playful shove. He glanced around her house and noticed the lack of holiday decorations. “This place looks gloomy. I vote for getting a tree and decorating this afternoon before I head to the farm. What do you say?”

Lark stood and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, then noisily smacked his cheek. “I’d say you’re my favorite brother.”

Jay chuckled. “Your only brother.”

“You’d still be my favorite. Let’s go to the tree lot by the mall, then swing by the home goods store across the street for decorations. I never had time to set out any decorations when I lived in Seattle, and I didn’t feel like being festive last year, so let’s deck the halls.”

Grateful for the distraction Jay offered from her thoughts and troubles, she spent the afternoon with him decorating a Douglas fir tree and putting up decorations around her small home. When she hung an evergreen wreath on the door with a big red and green plaid bow, she released a contented sigh.

“Now this looks like Christmas,” Jay said, as he hopped off the step ladder he’d used to string white lights around the front of her house.

With snow on the ground and more in the forecast, it looked like the holiday season had arrived.

Lark wrapped a fleece throw around her shoulders and shuffled in her fuzzy slippers across the icy sidewalk to study the lights. “They look beautiful, Jay. Thank you for doing that.”

“My pleasure.” He folded the step ladder and carried it around the side of the house to the small shed, where she stored the lawn mower and her gardening tools, before he stamped his feet at the back door and came inside. “I’d better get home before it’s dark.”

“Take some cookies,” Lark said, handing him a box full of Christmas butter cookies she’d baked while they’d decorated the tree.

“Gladly.” Jay took the cookies from her, then gave her a hug with his free arm. “Thanks for the trip, Lark. I needed to get away, and it was perfect. I’m so, so sorry about what happened last night, but think about what I said. Troy deserves to know why you aren’t talking to him. He’s convinced you’re angry that he wasn’t there when Mylan accosted you.”

“I’m not angry with him. I’m just ...” Lark sighed. “I’m not sure what I am, but I need to figure it out.”

“Good luck,” Jay said, then rushed outside to his pickup and left.

Lark made a cup of holiday tea, curled up on her couch, and nibbled on butter cookies as she stared at the tree lights.

A sign she’d seen in a booth in Las Vegas floated into her thoughts. It had said, “Never trust a guy who doesn’t like to

fish, can't shoot a gun, avoids dogs, and won't shake your daddy's hand."

Mylan certainly fit the bill on every one of those points, even though she'd never introduced him to her father. She could easily picture him acting like he was far better than her family though. When they'd been dating, he'd often poked fun at her potato farmer parents.

Troy, though, loved to fish and had offered to take her next summer if she wanted to go. He'd spent a weekend with Truitt and Chase Jarrett deer hunting even though none of them filled their tags. He loved dogs and treated Lotus and Lew like they were members of the family.

Perhaps the most telling trait was the day he'd gone with her to her parents' home for Sunday dinner. He'd met her father with a strong handshake and solid eye contact and politely thanked her dad for allowing him to join in the meal. Troy and her dad had talked farming and ranching all through dinner and for an hour after they'd eaten. Her dad had even taken Troy out to see the equipment in the warehouse where they sorted potatoes.

Both of her parents thought Troy was great, as did Jay. Danny liked him, and Lark's two little nephews thought Troy was their own personal playmate.

So why did she latch onto the unfortunate encounter with Mylan to slam the brakes on her relationship with Troy? Truthfully, she had no idea. She loved him. Of that, she had no doubt. But something made her hesitate, and until she could pinpoint the reason, she refused to move forward.

Lark waffled between calling Troy and giving herself more time to get past what Mylan had done. She was beyond livid that Mylan thought he could hurt her a second time and she'd just take it. She wouldn't have taken the beating the first time if he hadn't caught her so unaware in that dark alley and knocked her down before she had time to react.

In some ways, she was almost grateful Mylan had shown up at the hotel because seeing him again was forcing her to

deal with things she'd thought she could shove to the back of her mind and pretend never happened.

It was only after coming out on the other side of her encounter with him at the hotel unscathed that she realized how much his first assault still weighed on her, coloring her thoughts and impacting her choices.

A week later, Lark was still undecided about what to do where Troy and her future were concerned. She'd spent a good part of the time baking and cooking in preparation for Christmas, even if she couldn't quite muster any joy in the holiday.

Lark looked down at the chocolate coconut cheesecake she'd just finished creating and realized she'd made it with Troy in mind, knowing how much he'd enjoy it. For a moment, she held the decadent dessert poised above her garbage can before she shoved it into her refrigerator with an exasperated huff.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop thinking of Troy. At the rate she was going, she was sure there would be permanent ruts grooved into her brain.

"I think I need a sign," she said to herself. "Some clear direction. Do I move away to resurrect my big city dreams in Portland, or do I stay here with Troy and my food truck?"

No answer was forthcoming, so Lark went into the dining room where she'd created a gift-wrapping station and perched on a chair to finish wrapping gifts for Josh and Jeremiah. She'd purchased a child-sized rope for Josh and the cutest stuffed longhorn for Jeremiah. Lark had just cut paper to wrap the rope when she heard a thump from her porch.

She jumped and almost gouged the table with the scissors before she shifted them in her hand like a weapon and crept toward the door. Lark carefully eased along the wall in case someone tried to peer in the window at her. When she reached the door, she waited, listening to the sound of a door shutting and a vehicle driving away.

The breath she'd been holding whooshed out of her in relief.

"You nitwit. It was probably the mail," she muttered to herself. Lark opened the door and stared down at a pile of boxes, two tote bags, and a large wrapped box.

She recognized the boot boxes as those she'd kept after the fashion show and given to Troy to transport home. One of the tote bags held gifts she'd purchased and forgotten about in all the upheaval of the past week. The other tote bag held a tin of peanut brittle and another of fudge, made by Wendy Lucas. There was a Christmas card from the older woman, telling her how much she'd enjoyed spending time with her and inviting her to come out to the ranch anytime. There were also wrapped gifts with tags from Wendy and Truitt.

After moving everything inside, Lark lifted the large wrapped box and carried it to the couch. An envelope taped to the outside of it bore her name, written by Troy's hand.

For a moment, she sat holding the envelope, staring at the writing, missing Troy so badly, she almost picked up her phone to call him. Almost.

Instead, she turned the envelope over, lifted the flap, and removed a sheet of paper. She unfolded it and caught the slightest whiff of Troy's woodsy aroma. After drawing a deep breath, she read his note.

Dear Lark,

I don't even know where to begin apologizing for not being there when you needed me in Las Vegas. I'm such an idiot, and I'm truly, deeply sorry. Of all the times I should have been there for you, I wasn't.

There's no excuse for it.

After seeing all those guys hit on you that day, it made me jealous and angry. When I walked into the hotel and saw you in the arms of another, I turned around and left. I hadn't even made it a few blocks away when I realized you could be in danger. I whipped around and came back, but by then, you'd already handled things on your own.

I'm proud of you. You didn't let what that scum did to you the first time keep you from protecting yourself. You're such a strong, incredible person, Lark Gibson. I hope you never lose sight of that.

Jay has kept us posted on how you're doing and assured me you aren't upset with me, but I can't help but think you are. I'm so, so sorry, Lark.

I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but I am. And if the day ever comes when you feel like talking to me again, I'll be here, waiting.

Whether that day comes or not, I wanted you to have this as a reminder that you can do anything you set your mind to.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas, Songbird.

With all my love,

Troy

Tears spilled from Lark's eyes and flowed down her cheeks. She hadn't cried the day Mylan had cornered her at the hotel with plans to beat her again. She hadn't cried at the police station as she filed charges and gave her statement. She hadn't cried once she returned home and let all the emotions she'd been experiencing wash over her.

But she cried now. Cried for all that she'd survived and endured. For the dreams she'd surrendered when she returned home and bought the food truck. For the future which lacked any clarity because, no matter how much she wanted to plan a move to Portland, she couldn't find any joy or peace in the decision. Not when her heart was at Dusty Hills Ranch with Troy.

Lark cried for her uncertain future with the one man who'd completely captured her heart. Troy was everything she'd ever need. And he loved her with the type of love that was meant to last a lifetime.

She missed his hugs and kisses. She missed looking up into his amazing blue eyes and seeing into his heart. She missed his teasing smile and the sound of his voice when he called her Songbird.

When Lark felt as though she had no tears left to shed, she dried her eyes and blew her nose, then said a prayer, realizing she should have done that from the start.

As she stared at the gift Troy had left and recalled all the sweet, kind, thoughtful things he'd done, she knew he was someone she could depend on and trust. She didn't blame him for what happened with Mylan. She wasn't even upset with him for rushing off in a fit of jealous anger, because she would have done the same thing if the circumstances were reversed. Thankfully, because of Truitt and his ability to draw attention, Troy hadn't been in a position to need to fight off many unwelcome advances from women.

Lark knew she'd speak to Troy again. Soon. Her heart wouldn't rest until they had at least one more conversation. Would one be enough when she wanted thousands more? Could she really walk away from him and the promise of a future full of love just because she wanted to be a famous chef? Was her career more important than the hope of a forever love?

Lark settled against the couch cushions and watched the snow begin to fall outside, adding a fresh coat to the blanket of white already covering every surface. She had no idea how long she sat there, staring out the window, knowing in the depths of her heart what she wanted to do.

Finally, she sat up and unwrapped the gift from Troy. When she opened the lid on the large box, a smile burst from her. She lifted out a sign made from the top of a wine barrel. The Bud's Spuds logo had been burned into the wood. A holly berry wreath surrounded the sign, making it a festive decoration she couldn't wait to hang. After the holidays, she could remove the wreath and use the sign on her truck or anywhere. She carried the sign across the room, took down a landscape painting, and hung Troy's gift on the hook.

"There's my sign," she said with a laugh, then turned and raced into her bedroom to change.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Troy lifted the foot of the horse he was shoeing, then glared at the radio playing a steady stream of holiday tunes. He didn't need Elvis to remind him what a blue Christmas it was going to be since Lark had stopped speaking to him.

He couldn't blame her. It was all his own doing. He should never have believed, for even a second, that she'd kiss someone else when they were involved with each other. Lark wasn't that type of girl, and he knew it.

Troy felt deep shame that he'd let his jealousy drive him into making unreasonable, irrational assumptions. It wasn't like him to be that way, and it certainly wasn't like him to just drive off and leave the woman he loved at the mercy of a scummy criminal intent on harming her.

If he hadn't been so wound up and angry, he might have noticed from the start that Lark was pushing against Mylan instead of enjoying the brutal kiss.

Troy had called himself so many names, he'd used all he knew and invented a few new ones. Grammy, Truitt, and even Jay had done their best to reassure him he wasn't to blame for

anything that had happened, but he couldn't stop the waves of guilt that washed over him.

He was grateful Lark had been able to handle Mylan on her own. Still, it rankled Troy that he'd left her when she needed him most. It wasn't that he felt a desperate need to keep her safe, although he did feel that need. Troy had failed her as a friend. Failed to be there when she needed his support and encouragement.

He'd been so proud of her for defending herself, and at the same time terrified that she'd been thrust into such a scary situation in the first place. If he'd just walked over to Mylan instead of leaving, Lark wouldn't have been in the position of being forced to defend herself against him.

Then again, if Troy had been there, Lark might never have been able to record Mylan's confession of beating her in Seattle, or his intent to do the same again. At least her recipes had been recovered. Jay had seen to that. The notebook stunk like ... well, Troy didn't know how to describe the terrible odor other than excessive filth. But Lark would be happily surprised Christmas morning when Jay gave her a flash drive that contained all the recipes typed into neat, organized files.

Earlier, Troy had driven into town and left the things he'd hauled home for Lark, along with the gifts they'd planned to give her for Christmas. Originally, Lark's mother had called Grammy and invited them to join the Gibson family for Christmas at their farm.

Now, though, with Lark refusing to speak to him and their future together uncertain, Grammy planned to make their usual feast for three at home.

Troy couldn't bear to see Lark's things in the corner of his room any longer or her gifts beneath the tree. He'd left them by her door without even trying to see her. He didn't want to make things any more awkward between them.

He held onto one gift he couldn't quite part with, tucking it in his pocket as he drove home to shoe a horse.

One of the neighbors was planning to propose to his girlfriend on Christmas Eve by giving her a new horse. He'd asked Troy if he could leave his gift at their barn. He'd also requested a new set of shoes for the horse. A paper-thin metal plate had been custom-made to sit beneath one shoe. "Will you marry me?" was inscribed across it.

Troy thought it was a unique and romantic way to propose, but what did he know? The woman he'd finally decided he couldn't live without wasn't even returning his text messages, let alone talking to him, and Christmas was only a few days away.

When Troy wasn't busy lambasting himself for being the biggest idiot on earth when it came to women in general and Lark in particular, he let every memory he had of Lark roll through his head like a movie playing on a loop.

He smiled as he thought of seeing her that first day at the fair, her red hair flowing across the green grass. Even in the middle of summer, she'd looked like a beautifully wrapped Christmas gift. Savoring Christmas was something he'd so been looking forward to experiencing with Lark, but after that last disastrous night in Las Vegas, he fully realized how alone he was going to be for the holiday.

Troy finished with the third shoe and moved over to do the last shoe of the horse, the one with the proposal.

As he worked, he listened to a singer ask if it was too late to confess his love and meet his girl beneath the magic of the mistletoe.

"Maybe that's what I need. Mistletoe," Troy mused and glanced at the horse. "What do you think? Mistletoe? Maybe some roses? Although she seems to like ingredients to cook with better. Should I track down some truffles? Aren't they expensive?"

"Expensive and not worth it," a familiar voice said, startling him. Troy missed the nail he was tapping into the hoof and hit his leg with the hammer as he glanced up to see Lark standing a few feet away, smiling at him. Her hair was hanging around her in the profusion of wild curls he adored,

and she looked both beautiful and festive in a dark green coat with a cream scarf looped around her neck.

Humor twinkled in her eyes, and a smile danced around her kissable mouth.

“Hey, you,” she said, taking a step closer. Troy realized then that when she said, “hey, you,” she meant “I love you.”

His heart somersaulted in his chest as he breathed in her soft fragrance and tried to convince himself she was real and he hadn’t gone loco from missing her.

“Hi, Songbird. Fancy meeting you here,” he said, tapping in the nail that was partway into the shoe. No matter how much he wanted to stop what he was doing, he couldn’t quit halfway into attaching the shoe.

Lark moved so close, he could feel the heat radiating from her. He fought the urge to wrap her in his arms and absorb her warmth all the way to his soul.

She saw the words on the horseshoe and gasped, pressing a hand to her throat.

“Is that ... Are you ...?” She gaped at him, like she couldn’t find the words to finish her thoughts.

Troy glanced from the horseshoe to her and shook his head as he tapped in the last nail. “No, I wasn’t, I mean I would ... I want to ... It’s not ...” He stopped and took a breath. “This horse and the proposal belong to a neighbor. He’s popping the question on Christmas Eve and the horse is a gift, or a bribe, depending on how you look at it.”

“Oh,” Lark said, dropping her gaze to her feet.

That one word held a world of disappointment and gave Troy the encouragement he needed to finally speak from his heart. He quickly finished tapping in the last nail, released the horse’s hoof, and yanked off his gloves, taking Lark’s hand in his.

“Songbird, I don’t know if you can ever forgive me for not being there for you, for being a first-class dolt, but I am truly sorry.”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Don’t apologize, Troy. Nothing that happened was your fault. Mylan would have done the same thing regardless of who was there. He’s a horrid, terrible person, and I’m glad that I don’t have to keep looking over my shoulder, waiting for the day he’ll attack me again. He’ll be locked up for a while. I have a feeling I’m not the only woman he’s attacked, and once they start digging into his past, I’m sure more will come forward to press charges. Besides, without you there to rescue me, I learned some important things about myself.”

“But I should have been there, Lark. I should have kept you safe. I’m so sorry. I should have—”

Her fingers on his lips cut him off before he could say anything further.

“Troy, stop blaming yourself. It happened. It’s over. And I’ve finally gotten myself back on track. I came out here for three reasons.” Lark’s hand slid down his shoulder until her fingers meshed with his.

“Three? What’s the first one?” he asked, curious about what had brought her to the ranch.

She smiled at him. “To say thanks for making the delivery to my house. The treats from your grandmother were much appreciated and delicious. It was so kind of you to drop off everything. There were a few gifts in the tote bag I’d forgotten I’d purchased. The second reason I came was to thank you for your note and the gift.”

Troy’s left eyebrow shifted upward. “Did you like it?”

“The note or the gift?” she asked, teasing him.

Troy knew if she was teasing, then everything was going to be fine. He relaxed his stiff posture and inched closer to her. “Both.”

“The note made me cry, and the sign was exactly *the* sign I’ve been waiting for. You see, before you came, I was still trying to decide what to do about my future, and until I gained clarity, I couldn’t let myself get in touch with you. It wasn’t because of anything you did or didn’t do, Troy. It was because

I've been so stubborn and dense, clinging to an old dream instead of grabbing onto a newer and better one with both hands." She squeezed his hands. "The Bud's Spuds sign is perfect, not just as something that will make me smile each time I look at it, but as a reminder that God's plans are far better than any I might make and I need to be willing to follow them."

He grinned at her and pulled her closer. "I sometimes need a kick in the pants or a knock upside the head to remind me of the same thing."

Lark nodded. "Which brings me to my third reason for being here."

Troy stared into her beautiful, beloved face, wanting so badly to kiss her, to love her and never let her go, but he had a feeling he'd have a lifetime ahead to hold and cherish her. "And what's that third reason, Songbird?"

"I need to be with you, Troy. I'm miserable without you. You make me laugh and smile and think and dream. If you don't mind me sounding like a terrible cliché, you complete me. I want your love, Troy, not just for a week, or a month, or a year. I want it forever. I want to spend my nights wrapped up in your arms and wake up to your teasing grin. I want to have babies with you and don't care which one of us they look like. When I close my eyes, all I can see is us, together, here, building a future. What do you think? Could you stand to have me around all the time, even if I want to keep my food truck?"

Troy pulled a small box from inside his coat pocket. He'd been carrying it around with him since he got home from Las Vegas, where he purchased it. He'd started to leave it on Lark's porch earlier, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Right now, he was glad he'd brought it home with him.

He dropped down on one knee right there in the barn aisle, opened the box, and looked at Lark, feeling like his heart was so full it might explode. "I could stand to have you around all the time, Lark Gibson, and I hope you'll not only keep your food truck, but continue to pursue whatever makes you happy. All I ask is that you let me tag along beside you as your

partner, your friend, and your lover. Would you give me the privilege of becoming your husband? Will you marry me, Songbird?"

"Yes!" Lark shouted, wrapping her arms around his neck as he stood and swung her off her feet. When his lips connected with hers, the kiss was electric, hungry, but it settled into something so sweet and tender, it made him work to swallow back emotion when he lifted his head and looked at the love shining in her eyes.

"I love you so much, Lark, and I always will." He took the ring from the box and slid it onto her finger. It fit perfectly, just like Lark fit into his life and heart with a unique perfection that would never be duplicated.

"I love you, Troy, so much more than I can ever express. You are an amazing, wonderful man and it will be my great honor to be your bride."

Lark pulled his lips to hers and kissed him with passion and promises. Promises for all their tomorrows.

"This is gonna be the best Christmas ever, Songbird." Troy twirled her around one more time. "Let me finish with this horse, then we'll go show Grammy your ring."

"Go show off that ring," Truitt said as he stepped into view from the tack room. "I can finish the horse. Maybe this marry-me horseshoe is good luck for lovesick cowboys."

"Maybe it is," Troy said, giving his cousin a nod. Once Lark had stepped into the barn he'd forgotten all about Truitt working in the tack room.

"Congratulations to both of you." Truitt slapped Troy on the back, then gave Lark a big, brotherly hug. "Jay owes me twenty bucks."

"For what?" Lark asked, leaning against Troy. He slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. He'd already concluded he would never tire of having her tucked against his side.

"We made a bet about whether you two would get married or break up. I told him Lark would end up with a ring

on her finger. Jay thought Lark would end up in Portland.” Truitt smirked. “I’m sure glad I won. Welcome to the family, Lark. I’ve always wanted a sister just like you.”

Lark kissed Truitt’s cheek before she moved back into the circle of Troy’s arms. “I’m excited to be part of the Lucas family. Troy and I just have about a thousand details to work out first. Like when we want to have a wedding and where.”

“You tell me the date and time, and I’ll be there,” Troy said, kissing her temple.

“The second Saturday in January. We could have a snowy, wintery outdoor wedding and the reception in an empty barn my family only uses for promotional events.” Lark glanced up at Troy. “What do you say, cowboy? Can you handle the thought of being married in a few weeks?”

Troy picked her up off her feet again. “I’d marry you today if you wanted to fly back to Vegas.”

“Well, that’s an option too.” Lark laughed as he swung her around, then carried her toward the house to share the news with his grandmother.

It looked like Christmas was going to be a merry one after all.

Two and a half weeks later, Troy and Lark exchanged their vows beneath an arbor made of fragrant evergreen boughs decorated with burgundy and peach roses. The white chairs set in a semi-circle around the arbor each held a white fleece blanket to keep the guests warm. They’d invited only immediate family and their closest friends to the ceremony.

Troy nodded to his grandmother as she smiled at him from her seat beside Lark’s mother. Truitt stood beside him as best man, while Lark had asked her sister to stand up with her. He knew the two women didn’t always get along, but he thought it was a big gesture on Lark’s behalf to ask her sister to stand with her.

A harpist began to play a traditional wedding song, and Lark appeared on her father’s arm in a beautiful lace and satin dress that looked like it was created with her in mind. A crown

of white roses nestled among the curls piled on top of her head. Troy looked forward to taking out all the pins one by one later that night.

Emotion welled in him at the sight of his gorgeous bride and the fact that he was about to marry the woman who would always hold his heart in her hands. Last summer when he'd met her, he would never have guessed they'd be getting married and starting their future together just a handful of months later, but he couldn't imagine anything better than joining his life to Lark's. She'd become so dear to him, so precious, and he intended to let her know how much he treasured her as well as her friendship and love each and every day they had together.

When Lark's father placed her hand on Troy's arm with a warning glare, Troy knew what he was communicating. He was making a silent agreement with the man to protect and cherish her always.

Troy looked down into Lark's green eyes and knew there was no place he'd rather be, no one he could ever love so deeply and completely as he did this magnificent woman. They exchanged vows and rings, and then it was time to kiss the bride.

In no rush, Troy gave her a kiss that was sweet and tender, with just enough heat to make her sigh.

Truitt thumped him on the back, and those gathered around them offered their congratulations before Celia Kressley, their wedding photographer, had them pose for a variety of photos before the guests arrived for the reception being held in the event barn at her parents' farm.

Troy hadn't seen inside the barn since the decorations had been completed. He walked through the wide double doors holding Lark's hand, and both of them sucked in a breath at the glow of hundreds of white twinkle lights draped across the rafters and three chandeliers hanging down the center of the barn. Tables were covered in white linens with burgundy and peach roses surrounding tall candles in hurricane vases.

Outside, a few firepits were set up for those who wanted to brave the cold.

And surrounding the barn were half a dozen food trucks. Instead of having the reception catered by one person, Lark had called some of her friends, and they'd all been happy to bring their trucks out to celebrate their special day.

Lark had insisted on baking her own cake and decorating the three-layer confection as well as dozens of cupcakes that were topped with burgundy and peach frosting roses.

Much later, after they'd sampled food from each food truck, cut the cake, and danced several dances, Troy watched as Truitt spun Lark across the dance floor. His cousin said something that made her laugh, and it warmed Troy all the way from his heart outward. He loved seeing the way they got along like siblings.

"You did good, honey," Grammy said, stepping up beside him and wrapping her hands around his arm.

Troy lifted his arm and settled it around his grandmother, kissing her temple. "You look exceptionally pretty, Grammy. That peach color is good on you."

"Thank you, Troy. Lark helped me pick out the dress. I just love that girl." She gave him an approving glance. "She's good for you, honey, and you're good for her. I hope you have a long, happy life, rich in joy and blessings."

"Thanks, Grammy. And thank you for your wedding gift. We're excited about building our house in the spring." Troy could hardly believe it when his grandmother had presented him and Lark with a deed for a hundred acres that included the ridge where he'd always wanted to build a house.

He and Lark had only browsed through a dozen house plans before they'd happened upon the one they both wanted and agreed on all the details. Lark planned to use the money she'd saved to open a restaurant in Portland on the house. With the money Troy had saved, they would only need to take out a small loan. The permits had already been submitted for them to break ground as soon as the spring thaw arrived. In the

meantime, they planned to stay at Lark's little rental house in town. It was a cozy, private place for newlyweds to cuddle up for the winter. Troy would still go out to the ranch to work most days, and Lark planned to join him, even if all she did was stay in the house with Grammy, trying out new recipes.

Life was full of love and happiness, and so many unexpected blessings. Troy could hardly fathom the unanticipated but much-appreciated turns his life had taken.

"I think you ought to go dance one more dance with your beautiful bride, then sneak out the side door. No one will notice," his grandmother said, pointing to a door not far from the dance floor.

"What about the garter thing and bouquet toss?" Troy asked. He had been dreading tossing Lark's garter just because it would be one of those embarrassing moments he preferred to avoid.

"Skip it. If Lark wants to toss the bouquet, have her throw it in the air on the way out the door." His grandmother gave him a tight hug. "I love you so much, baby. You're one of the kindest, most thoughtful men I've ever met. I wish you and Lark happiness always."

"Thanks, Grammy. I love you, and I'm grateful for all you've done for me. No one could have had a better mom than you." Troy kissed her cheek, then brushed away the few tears she hadn't been able to contain. "I'll call you when we land tomorrow."

"Just send a text. I'm sure the two of you are going to be preoccupied." She grinned and gave him a nudge forward. "Enjoy your honeymoon."

"We will, Grammy." The wedding gift their friends had gone together to give them was a week's vacation in sunny Cabo at a swanky all-inclusive resort. They'd leave in the morning, and Troy could hardly wait to see Lark on a white-sand beach with all that hair spilling around her.

He strode across the dance floor as the song ended and took Lark's hand in his. She turned from saying something to

her brother to look at him with a smile that seemed to start at her soul and end in her eyes.

“You ready to run away from our party?” she asked as he danced her toward the door.

“How did you know?” he asked with a grin.

“I can read your mind, cowboy.”

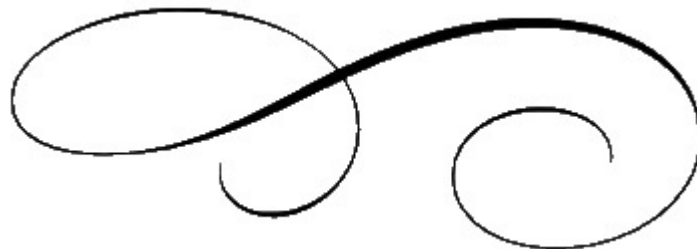
He shook his head. “If that’s true, I’m gonna be in big trouble for the next fifty or sixty years.”

She laughed. “Absolutely in trouble all the time, and you’re going to love every minute of it.”

Just before they reached the door, Lark snagged her bouquet off the cake table, where she’d left it, and heaved it into the air behind her. She giggled as Troy led her outside. He swept her into his arms and started toward his pickup that had white paper bells hanging from the side mirrors and a *Just Married* sign taped to the tailgate.

They both looked up at the soft snowflakes falling around them, then Troy kissed Lark with tenderness. “Being married to you is already amazing, Lark. I can’t wait to see what the future holds.”

She tilted her forehead against his. “Each other,” she said, kissing him again before they ripped the sign off the pickup. Paper bells drifted down with the snowflakes as they left the ranch, excited to embark on the beginning of their happily ever after.



*Keep reading for a preview of a fun and funny romance
with a matchmaking camel!*

Spuddy Bites

When I first considered what recipe to share in this book, I wanted to include one that involved ice cream, Idaho Spud Bars, and other delicious treats, but it seemed far too complicated. Then I happened across a recipe for “potato candy” that isn’t made with potatoes, but crafted to look like them! These are so, so yummy! I dare you to eat only one! It’s no wonder Troy can’t leave them alone.

Spuddy Bites

4 ounces cream cheese

¼ cup butter

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

¼ teaspoon salt

4 cups powdered sugar

3 cups sweetened flaked coconut

3 tablespoons cocoa powder

Bring cream cheese and butter to room temperature. In a large mixing bowl, beat cream cheese, butter, salt, and vanilla together until smooth. Scrape down the sides of the bowl.

Add the powdered sugar to the mixture and, on low speed, beat until incorporated. Increase the speed and beat about two minutes, until fluffy. Scrape down the sides of the bowl and add coconut, stirring until combined throughout.

Line a baking sheet with parchment and scoop a tablespoonful of the mixture at a time onto the parchment. Chill for 30 minutes.

Once chilled, shape the candy between your hands into an oblong potato shape. Roll in cocoa powder until coated. Store in a covered container in the refrigerator.

Author's Note

Thank you for coming along on Troy and Lark's journey to a happily ever after. It was a fun ride, wasn't it?

Troy's character was first mentioned in [Roping Christmas](#), when he helps Ashley shoe a horse as part of her efforts to win Jon Sinclair's business. As soon as I wrote about the humble, handsome farrier, I knew I would have to give him his own story. And here it is!

Troy is a complex character, although people might think he's simple at first glance. There is a lot going on beneath the surface.

For one thing, he loves (absolutely loves) to team rope. I spent a while watching YouTube videos just to study the precise movements of champion team ropers. There is a great video taken from [Trevor Brazile's](#) head cam that is so fascinating to watch.

It was also neat to research farriers. My first stop for research was my niece who can shoe a horse like nobody's business. On a frigid April day when a freak snowstorm hit, she gamely went through each step of the process while Captain Cavedweller made a video of it and I shivered in the background. Thanks, Amanda! You are amazing and so appreciated!

I also did some online research. One thing that was fun to watch was a [Wrangler Network video](#) talking about the slick grass in Pendleton, and the use of things like ice nails to help give the horses traction.

If you caught Troy's musing as he drove to Richland to see Lark, you might have noticed his mention of the [Hanford project](#).

The town of Richland was incorporated in 1910. For decades, it was a tiny agricultural village. In 1943, it had a population of just 247 residents, when the War Department acquired 586 square miles in this desert area to use for plutonium production.

People from all over the country came to Hanford, forming a large workforce although many of them didn't know they were creating the plutonium used in the bomb that brought an end to World War II.

By 1944, the population of Richland had swelled to 11,000, and most of the residents worked at the Hanford project. After the war ended, there was a brief lull in production before it ramped up again in 1947 to meet the challenges of the Cold War and continued in operation until 1987 when the last reactor ceased operation.

Production of the weapons left behind both solid and liquid wastes that posed an environmental risk, so several agencies worked together to clean up the Hanford Site. Today, anyone can take a tour of the site thanks to [virtual tours](#).

What did you think of Lark and her food truck? I wish we had a food truck like that in our area. I think it would be a big hit!

The idea for a heroine with a food truck began when we were at a rodeo and had enjoyed some marvelous brisket. From there, Lark's food truck evolved into Bud's Spuds. If you read [Remembering Christmas](#), Lark's food truck is mentioned in one of the fair scenes, although when I wrote that, I hadn't yet given the food truck a name.

Why a tater tot truck, you ask? Well, last year when I was trying to figure out what kind of food truck I wanted Lark to have, I asked for suggestions in my Hopeless Romantics group on Facebook. One of the ideas was for a tater tot truck, and I loved it. Big, big thanks to Stephanie R. for suggesting it.

For me, writing about tater tots took me down a little memory lane stroll. You see, [Ore-Ida](#) is a name synonymous with French fries and tater tots, and their headquarters is in the valley where I grew up.

And if you want to make your own tater tots, similar to Lark's, they are so easy! Just boil potatoes, drain and cool (I like to rinse mine a few times to wash off as much starch as possible), then shred them. Mix with salt and whatever seasonings you like (we used Lawry's), shape them into little

tater-tot shapes, and cook in an air fryer at 375 for twenty minutes. You'll want to stop at 10 minutes and turn over the tots so they get nice and crispy on all sides. See – told you they were easy!

One more little tidbit about the food truck. When I started writing the story, I had not yet seen the cover, which was created by the talented and amazing Josephine Blake of [Covers & Cupcakes](#). I was about halfway through with the book when she sent me a first look at the cover. There may have been happy dancing in my office chair. I was beyond thrilled with it, and I absolutely loved the food truck. Isn't it perfect for Lark and the story?

When I was thinking about a big potato farm in the Tri-Cities area, I just happened across a link to [Easterday Farms](#). Their history inspired Gibson Farms in the story!

In the opening scene with the steer running wild, I named that wild beast after a pet steer I once had named Bucky. We had neighbors who raised Jersey dairy cattle. Dad got Bucky with the intent of fattening him up for beef. I got attached to him, and whenever anyone would mention how good Bucky tasted at the dinner table, I tended to suddenly lose my appetite.

The heifers running loose through Lark's neighborhood was something that happened to my dad a few days before the county fair this past summer. He told me he looked out and saw something in the yard, but couldn't tell what it was. It came back, and he thought it was a big dog, then he realized he had heifers on the run through his quiet neighborhood. I think they moseyed on without nearly as much trouble as Lark had catching the three escapees on her street.

Lark getting trapped in a "swarm" of people at a rodeo happened to me. When I stepped out of the restroom, there had to have been at least a hundred people all moving together. I didn't know if it was a joke, or what was going on. Before I could step back and wait for them to pass by, I just sort of got sucked into the group, and the more steps we took, the deeper I ended up entrenched in the mass of moving bodies. It was not a pleasant experience and one I hope to never repeat. I'm

not fond of tight spaces, and I could literally feel people pressing against me from all sides. Before I hyperventilated, I made a lunge toward the outside edge and worked my way free.

The song Lark's two little nephews were dancing to is "[I Like to Move It](#)" from the movie *Madagascar*. Years ago, when one of my nieces was little, she came to visit us one summer. She loved this song so much, she wanted to listen to it the entire three-hour drive home. It took a long, long time before I wanted to listen to it again, but a few months ago, it popped into my head and I sent the movie to my niece for her two little guys. They adore the song and love to jump up and dance to it, which is hilarious to watch!

The bench swings I mentioned around the firepit at Dusty Hills Ranch were inspired by swings one of our neighbors have down the road. They have a huge firepit with porch swings hanging from heavy timbers, and it just makes me smile every time I drive past it.

Thank you, dear reader, for going along on another Rodeo Romance adventure. I hope you loved the story. Who would you like to see in a future sweet western romance? I'm thinking Truitt might need to find his own happily ever after.

A huge, heartfelt thank you to Katrina, Allison, Alice, Linda, and my Hopeless Romantics who helped make this book the best it can be.

Happy holidays to you!

Shanna

Thank You!

Thank you for reading Tate and Kenzie's story. Now that you've finished [The Christmas Cowboy](#), won't you please consider writing a review? I would truly appreciate it.

Reviews are the best way readers discover great new books.



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Scent of Cedar Preview



Shafts of soft morning sunlight bathed Cedar Haynes in golden warmth as she lazily stretched in bed.

“Now this is more like it,” she said, slowly opening her eyes and looking around the room. Although it was her

bedroom, it was as unfamiliar to her as everything else in the house she now owned. Thick ivory drapes were pulled back, allowing light to seep into the room through the lace-covered windows. Buttery yellow walls provided a lovely background to the cream-toned sleigh bedroom set that looked like something from a French movie set.

The cream comforter on the bed, a crystal vase of yellow roses on the dresser, and a landscape painting of yellow and white tulips in a field added to the soothing, elegant atmosphere.

Cedar sat up and gave the room another glance then extended her arms above her head before she rolled out of bed and dressed in yoga pants and a heavy sweatshirt. She knotted her long blonde hair on top of her head in a messy bun, pulled on a pair of fuzzy socks, and then wandered downstairs.

“I should send Juniper something for doing such a great job with the house,” Cedar muttered to herself as she made her way to the kitchen and plugged in the coffee maker. She opened a cupboard by the deep farmhouse sink and took out a ceramic mug, gratified she’d known exactly where to find it. It had been dark and late when she arrived last night, but her sister assured her she’d be able to find everything without any problem.

Six weeks ago, Cedar shocked everyone by deciding to move to the small Oregon town of Faraday near Mount Hood. Eager to leave behind her hectic, crazy life in Portland, her sister offered to help her locate the perfect house. Juniper ran a successful real-estate business, so Cedar was more than happy to give her free rein in finding a place and filling it with furniture.

The warm, inviting house and furnishings were as different as day from night to the stark, aloof world where Cedar had spent the last eight years. Her downtown condo, full of chrome and glass, always looked upscale and trendy, but it had never felt like home. Never gave her a place to relax and unwind, not that she spent much time there anyway. She’d always been too immersed in her work.

This vintage house, with its wide doorways, multi-paned windows, and beautiful oak floors spoke to her heart and made her glad she'd walked away from a career and life many people might envy. What good were the wealth, position, and power as chief financial officer for one of the top companies in the country if she was dead before she turned thirty?

After an episode two months ago, Cedar knew she had to make changes in her life. Big changes. In spite of her family's determination to paint her problems with a rosy brush, Cedar readily acknowledged she'd had a nervous breakdown. Working seventy-hour weeks without a vacation in five years would tend to do that to most people. Mix in a demanding, unreasonable board of directors, an office romance that ended horribly, as well as an incompetent assistant who just happened to be the company president's step-daughter, and it was a guaranteed recipe for disaster.

The therapist she'd been seeing recommended Cedar change jobs, change location, change whatever she thought would help her to relax and relieve her overwhelming stress load.

The month-long leave of absence she planned to take from her job turned into a decision to make it permanent. After enjoying a few weeks of peace and quiet, she knew she was incapable of returning to the toxic, soul-sucking atmosphere of the office.

The day after she gave her notice, she felt such freedom, as though a heavy weight had floated off her shoulders. The decision to shake up her entire world, like a child with a snow globe, came easily. She sold her condo, all furnishings included, to a co-worker, and her Mercedes to a neighbor.

She purchased a new SUV, told her sister to find her an old-fashioned house that could be a cozy home, and began preparing a business plan to start her own financial consulting business. So far, she had three clients with signed contracts and more interested in hiring her.

Cedar was through living a high-powered, stress-ridden lifestyle, one she'd once excitedly embraced then merely

endured. Her new business would allow her to work from home and she could choose how many hours she worked each day. Besides, Faraday was only a little more than an hour from Portland if she needed to meet a client in person.

For now, though, she planned to spend the next few weeks settling into her home and community. With the holiday season right around the corner, it seemed like the perfect time to relax, indulge in pampering herself, and keep her workload light as she grew accustomed to her new life.

The house Juniper found was located on an acre at the outskirts of Faraday. The town, population twelve hundred, promised to provide the peaceful existence she craved. Although Cedar hadn't set foot in Faraday before arriving last night, she'd trusted her sister to do what was best. It had taken all her time and energy to wrap up loose ends, both in her personal life and at work. That's why Juniper had been the one to take care of getting the house move-in ready for Cedar. Basically, all Cedar had to do was pack her clothes and what few items from the condo she wanted to keep, drive to Faraday, and step into a world she'd often dreamed about but never thought to experience.

Daylight lightened the early November sky as Cedar looked out the kitchen window at her neighbor's pasture. Frost clung to the wooden fence and tipped the blades of dry grass, painting the world with a magical white wand. In the distance, a berry-red barn provided a bright, cheerful contrast to the landscape filled with shades of gray and brown.

In spite of the nippy temperatures, she pushed the window open and breathed deeply. Wood smoke, loamy earth, pine, and a smell she couldn't quite identify drifted on the slight breeze. The fresh air invigorated her, leaving her eager to explore her new home and town.

Cedar poured a cup of decaf coffee and carried it into the adjoining family room. Steam from the fragrant hazelnut-flavored brew wafted around her. She took a sip as she pulled back the curtain on the door that opened onto the wrap-around porch. Her gaze swept over the backyard and her neighbor's place.

“Mmm,” she said, taking another sip of coffee before setting the mug on the coffee table. A patch of sunshine streaming in the sparkling glass of the sliding door beckoned to her. She sank onto the floor and let the light caress her face.

Cross-legged, she lifted her spine, rested her hands on her knees, and touched her thumbs to her middle fingers, focusing on quiet meditation. She let her mind drift to serene scenes and breathed from deep in her abdomen.

A sudden thumping sound threatened to disturb her, but she ignored it. It was probably the wind blowing a shutter.

Breathe deep. Focus.

Another thump followed by a horrid, ghastly, unearthly sound caused her eyes to pop open in alarm. She looked up into a long, hairy face that appeared more alien than real as it pressed against the glass door.

Cedar screamed and scrambled backward, looking around for something, anything, that might serve as a weapon. She glanced at the door to see the monster was no longer there. Where had it gone?

This was bad, so bad. Her hand splayed across the base of her throat as her breath came in ragged gasps. Was she having another breakdown? Had the move been more upsetting than she wanted to admit?

In truth, she'd been happier and more content since she made her decision to leave Portland than she'd been in years. But if she'd just hallucinated, perhaps she better make an emergency appointment with her therapist.

Surely she hadn't imagined the beast at her door, had she?

Pressing her nose against the polished glass of the door, she looked to the left and right, but didn't see anything amiss. If she hadn't been so distressed, she might have taken time to notice the pleasing layout of the yard and the big oak tree off in the far-right corner that would provide a perfect place to sit in the shade in the summer.

Instead, she gaped with wide blue eyes, afraid of what she might see, fearful of what she wouldn't. Moving back

from the glass, she closed her eyes and inhaled several calming breaths, aware of an odd odor.

“I’m not losing my mind, I’m not losing it,” she chanted. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes and found herself staring once again into a hairy, hideous face.

She screamed louder this time as she raced to find the cell phone she’d tossed on the kitchen counter last night. Her fingers trembled as she punched in 9-1-1 and waited for an operator. Surely they had some sort of emergency response program in this tiny town, didn’t they?

Cedar slammed the kitchen window closed then frantically paced the floor, one hand flapping back and forth as though that might make someone answer faster. Finally, a voice came on the line.

“Operator 2377. What is your emergency?”

“Oh, thank goodness. My name is Cedar Haynes. I just moved to town, and there’s some kind of wild animal trying to get inside my house!”

“Wild animal, ma’am?” an unruffled voice questioned.

“Yes! A wild animal!” Cedar cautiously peered out the kitchen window. She caught sight of a furry backend stepping off the porch and disappearing around the corner. “It’s kind of brownish-tan, furry, big, and it smells weird.”

“What’s your address, ma’am?”

Cedar rattled off her street address, surprised she could remember it in her distraught state.

What sounded like a chuckle made her pull the phone away from her head and glare at it a moment before she scowled and returned it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Sorry, ma’am, but if you look out your kitchen window, can you see a big pasture and a red barn?”

Stunned by the fact the operator described the exact view she had from her kitchen, Cedar almost demanded to know how in the world the operator knew her home so well. Then again, she had moved to a small town where secrets were rare

and everyone knew everyone else's business. "Yes, I see the pasture and barn."

The operator laughed. "That's the old Bolton place. Will Bolton is known around here as an eccentric in everything from his house to his pets. You've just met Lolly, a unique welcoming party of one. She's harmless, if not a bit frightening first thing in the morning."

Cedar frowned. "Lolly? What's a lolly?"

"A camel."

Convinced she'd misheard the operator, Cedar leaned against the counter and tapped two fingers against her forehead, trying to dislodge whatever crazy notions made her think the operator said the monster roaming around outside was a camel.

A camel? She really was losing it. Her therapist would have a field day with this. "Would you please repeat that?"

Another annoying chuckle carried over the connection. "Lolly is a camel, Miss Haynes. She's a friendly beast, won't do you any harm, but she does have trouble staying on her own side of the fence. If you like, I can send an officer over to herd her into the pen. Her owner is most likely already on his way to work."

"No, I'm sure that isn't necessary. Thank you." Cedar sank down on a stool at her counter and wondered what she'd gotten herself into by moving to a quirky little town where camels ran loose, terrorizing unsuspecting women.

"Welcome to Faraday, Miss Haynes. We're happy to have you here. My brother helped work on the house when your sister had the remodeling crew there."

"Oh, well, thank you," Cedar said, feeling her anonymity of being an unknown newcomer slipping away. "I'm sure he did a great job. I haven't had a chance to check out the whole house."

"I know. It was late when you got in. My cousin lives across the road and saw your lights come on last night."

The woman's soothing voice did nothing to dispel Cedar's concerns. Just how closely were these people watching her? Born and raised in a bustling city, she had no experience with anyone keeping close tabs on her every move. In Portland, people did not spy on their neighbors unless they wanted to be labeled as a stalker or some sort of psychopath. Juniper had warned her that life in a small town would be completely different from anything she'd known. Perhaps, she should have listened to her sister a little more closely on that particular point.

"Thank you, Miss..."

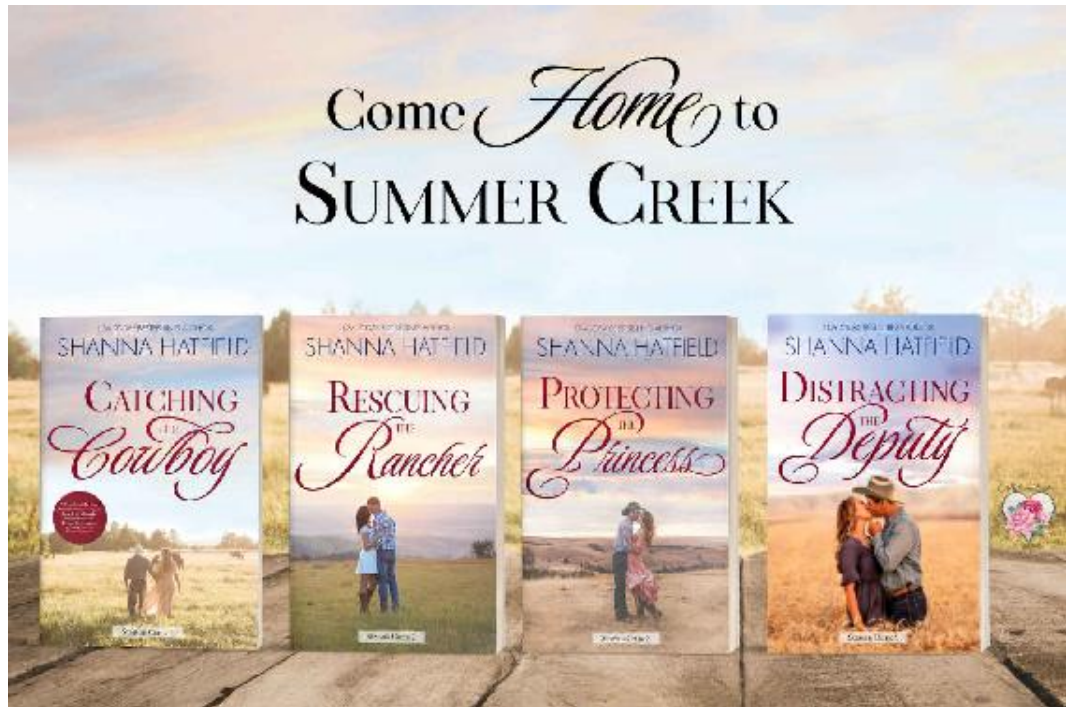
"Kirkpatrick. Sarah Kirkpatrick, but just call me Sarah. I'm sure we'll meet soon at the grocery store or church, or one of the community events. There's a Veteran's Day parade in the works. You should plan to go," Sarah said, with a burst of enthusiasm that was impossible for Cedar to miss. "Anyway, if you need anything, just let me know. As for Lolly, she was probably giving you her own special brand of welcome. If she didn't like you, that fact would be abundantly clear by now."

"I see. Thank you, again," Cedar said, disconnecting the call. The moment she heard a dial tone, she called her sister, prepared to give her an earful.

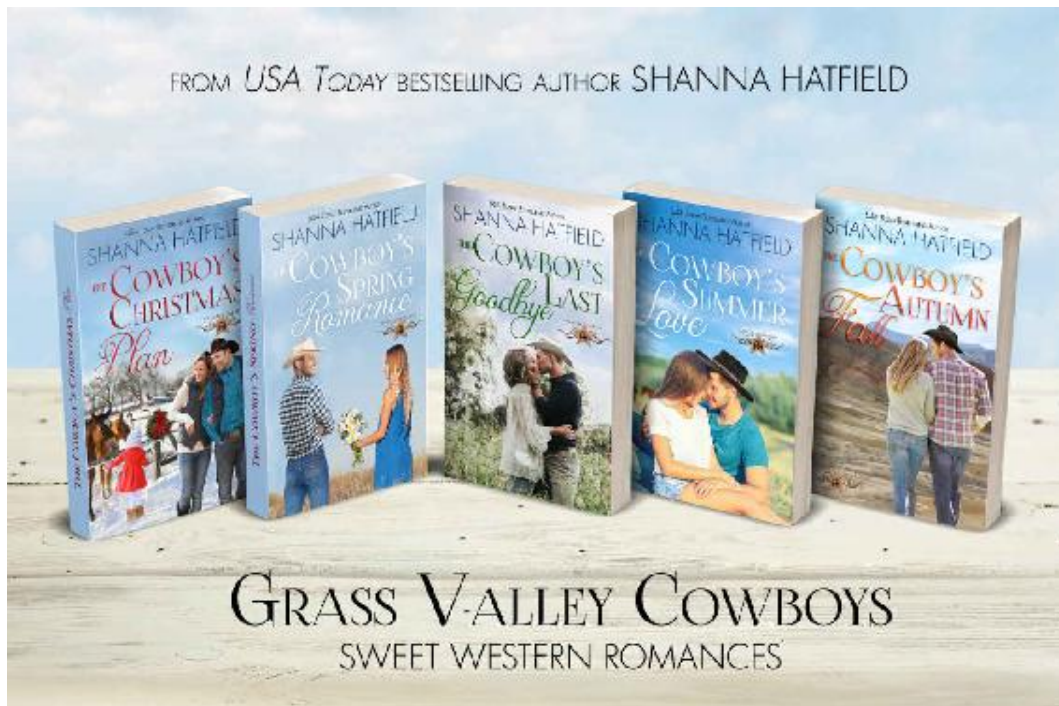
In all the conversations she'd had with Juniper about Faraday and her new home during the past month, how had her sister failed to mention an eccentric neighbor and a wandering camel?

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About the Author



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USA Today bestselling author Shanna Hatfield is a farm girl who loves to write. Her sweet historical and contemporary romances are filled with sarcasm, humor, hope, and hunky heroes.

When Shanna isn't dreaming up unforgettable characters, twisting plots, or covertly seeking dark, decadent chocolate, she hangs out with her beloved husband, Captain Cavedweller, at their home in the Pacific Northwest.

Shanna loves to hear from readers.

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