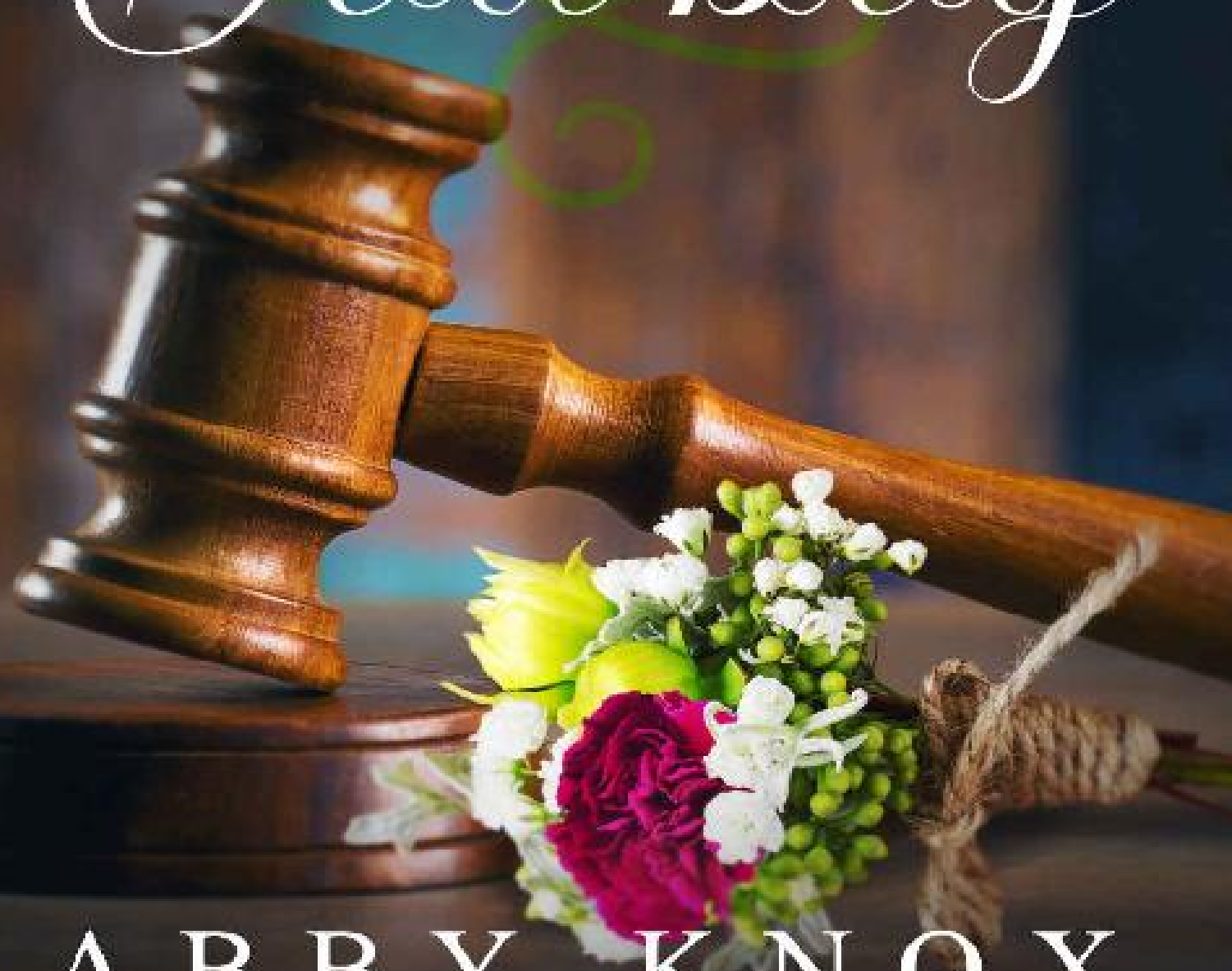


The Cowboy Auction of Darling Creek

WINNING THE *Cowboy*



ABBY KNOX

Winning The Cowboy

THE COWBOY AUCTION OF DARLING CREEK

BOOK TWO

ABBY KNOX



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Winning The Cowboy

Whitney

I've always loved my simple, quiet life in this small mountain town, but that also means the dating pool isn't huge. A recent break up has awakened me to that stark reality. And now that my last unmarried friend is tying the knot, I'm going to be dateless at her wedding.

When I attend the town's annual charity dating auction, however, I snag myself the perfect date to ward off intrusive questions about my love life. Local cowboy Huck Tillman is so attentive and accommodating, he almost has me fooled that this is more than a date of convenience.

Huck

One look at Whitney Snow, and it's love at first sight for me. I don't know her, and I don't know why she bid on me. Heck, I barely understand how I got lassoed into this charity auction in the first place. But something like destiny must be at play because I'm ready to find a preacher the second I lay eyes on her. Be her date to her friend's wedding? That's child's play. I'm never leaving her side again, as long as I can help it.

The only thing standing in my way is having to convince Whitney that I'm all in, and serious about making her mine, forever.

P.S. The Cowboy Auction series is a trio of contemporary cowboy romance stand alone set in the same lovable small town as the Mail-Order Brides of Darling Creek. As always, these adorable pairings bring you all the charm, high heat,

and happily ever afters you expect. No cliffhangers, no cheating, but lots of insta-love goodness!

Chapter One

Huck

“I need you to move out.”

The ranch owner’s wife, Maisy, looks pained, wringing her hands as she tells me this. Seeing the boss lady in the dusty barn when I’m shoveling shit is always jarring. She’s always dressed to the nines, especially now that her wedding venue business has taken off. At least she got smart enough to start wearing flat-heeled boots instead of her usual spiky designer heels whenever she needs a wedding-related favor from us cowhands while interrupting our chores.

I’m not sure what’s happening here today, but I might be getting fired from Hall Ranch.

I pause what I’m doing and lean on my shovel. “I thought I’d been doing a good job,” I say flatly, disguising the panic roiling in my stomach.

Maisy looks confusedly at me, then a wide smile breaks across her face. “Oh! No, I’m not firing you. God, no. Lincoln would spit nails...no, you’re not going anywhere, but I need your cabin.”

I stare at her. I’m not fired, but she’s kicking me out?

I’ve lived in one of the ranch cabins for about the past eight years. I’ve watched the ranch grow from a sprawling cattle operation into a so-called “event center” with the help of

Maisy. I've been given raise after raise for going the extra mile to help with these weddings.

"I...don't know what to say...I like living here. If I've done something wrong...."

"Just for the next couple of days!" Maisy explains, her eyes wide. "The bride would like to use one of the cabins as her bridal suite, and yours is the tidiest. She wants somewhere private to put on her dress, makeup...."

Maisy looks put together as always, in her professional pink suit, but also tired. She can't hide that this particular bride has her running on empty.

I hate to push back, but having someone else in my cabin, touching my stuff, rankles me.

"Isn't there a dress-putting-on room up at the main event building?"

Maisy exhales and nods exhaustedly. "Yes. But she's got ten bridesmaids and wants to be separate from that chaos. The bride's got it in her head that she wants an authentic 'rustic' experience that she's paying for. Her words, not mine."

Sounds like a handful. Especially with the way that Maisy uses air quotes around the word "rustic."

The cabins are indeed that. Between the rough-hewn walls, a homemade log bed, a small, ugly sofa, and an ancient iron wood stove for heat, I can't help but smirk. It's not much, but it's perfectly me. "Fine. But she's gonna get splinters in her wedding gown."

Maisy blows out a breath. "Let's hope I can pretty up the cabin enough that she doesn't notice. Thanks so much; you have no idea how helpful that is to me."

This still doesn't answer where I'm supposed to stay while this bride takes over my cabin with makeup and things. "You want me to double up with Frank? I think his cabin still has a bunkbed leftover from back in the day."

Maisy looks horrified on my behalf. "Oh no. No, we're giving you the weekend off. You've earned it."

I've earned extra days off? That can't be right. "You don't need me to work the wedding? Help tie bows and direct traffic and stuff?"

"Absolutely not. When was the last time you took a vacation?" Maisy asks.

"Never."

The boss lady crosses her arms over that big binder of hers and looks at me like a mother scolding her child. "And when were you planning on taking your vacation days, young man?"

"Never," I repeat.

"Exactly. So, for your troubles, we're giving you a hotel voucher. Anywhere you want to go."

She opens her binder, fishes a card from the pocket, and hands it to me. I take it but don't look at it. I lift one shoulder and tell her that I don't particularly want to go anywhere.

"Don't you want to go and see Yellowstone? Las Vegas? Anywhere? Take a few days and relax."

I don't much want to talk about how I have no one to visit places with, so I thank her while silently deciding to stay at the motel in Darling Creek until the wedding business is over. Maybe watching Netflix alone and eating takeout from the Corner Café won't be all that bad.

Maisy is overflowing with thanks, then hurriedly leaves me to my task of shoveling shit and replenishing the straw in the barn.

For all the disruptions these weddings can cause, we ranch hands have also seen plenty of bonuses to make up for the extra work, so it's all the same to me. Stringing lights and setting up tents is a nice break from fixing fencing and roping stubborn heifers.

I've got plenty of money saved for a real vacation someday. If I save enough, I can use it for a honeymoon. At 29, I'm hoping this happens sooner rather than later. I've been ready to settle down since I moved here with my younger brothers after everything that went down in Colorado. The

sooner I get married and start a family, the more stable I'll feel.

Maybe I went about things the wrong way. I should have taken my brothers to the big city, found a lovely wife there, and then settled down in a small town. As it is, I don't have much of a dating pool in Darling Creek. Not that I've tried.

I should take a page out of Lincoln's book and find myself a mail-order bride.

Nah, I think wryly. That only works if you've got something to offer a wife. I'm a simple ranch hand with a beat-up truck and calloused hands. Nothing all that special about me.

But a night or two in town might be a welcome change of scenery. And one never knows who one might meet.

Chapter Two

Whitney

I stare out the window of my office that faces Main Street and smile at the woman with the impractical shoes headed this way.

I don't often get visitors at Clark Electric and Gas. Usually, just phone calls. Calls from people upset over the timing of their heating oil delivery. Calls from lost technicians or delivery drivers. Calls from people who can't pay their bills on time. And sometimes, calls from people who just need someone to talk to.

Violetta Reed has just stepped out of the new bakery with arms loaded with paperwork and boxes, the wind blasting her flouncy skirt. She is undeterred in her five-inch heels, nodding and smiling at locals coming and going from Trudy's Grocery and the Corner Café. The woman exudes enough enthusiasm for three people in her five-foot-two frame.

Violetta grins at me through the plate glass window, and I head to the door, holding it open for her.

The door chimes, and in scurries the breathless Main Street director.

“Good morning, Violetta.”

She answers my greeting with a chipper, “And hello to you, Whitney Snow.”

The woman plunks down a small pink box on the counter.

“Ooh, what’s this?” I ask, the aroma of warm sugary goodness filling the room.

Violetta smiles brightly. “Donuts and coffee.”

“For me?” I smile and clap my hands together, never one to turn down the offer of treats. But more importantly, it’s always nice to see a friend.

By choice, I’ve been avoiding people over the last few days because I don’t want to talk about Brock. But it’s time to face facts: he is the police chief and my very recent ex, and everyone knows him. So, I may as well begin socializing again.

I smile wryly, wondering why I haven’t been to check out the new bakery yet. Isn’t that what heartbroken women do? Eat all the sugar and ice cream while they wallow in self-pity with chick flicks and trash TV?

But I haven’t been doing that.

I’ve just been...living my life like a shadow.

“For you,” Violetta says, “Yes. And this is a blatant attempt to see if Mr. Clark could squeeze in a meeting with me.”

I chew on my bottom lip while Violetta presents her sales pitch about needing sponsors to help pay for refreshments, decorations, and boutonnieres for the annual Darling Creek Cowboy Charity Auction, which raises fund for emergency heating for local residents who are down on their luck.

“...and I wouldn’t ask, but Jeanie, the florist, is swamped right now with the Warner wedding. Otherwise she simply donates all the flowers. I even asked Serena Wilkins, but the Warner wedding also cleaned out almost all of her wildflowers, if you can believe it.” Violetta pauses to take a breath, looking hopeful.

Oh, I can believe it, I think to myself ruefully. I know all about the Warner wedding.

I frown sympathetically. Lord have mercy on all florists, caterers, and cake makers this weekend.

“If it were up to me, I would give you the shirt off my back, Violetta.” I really would. I field panicked phone calls from people who can’t afford to heat their homes daily, so I have the emergency aid agency phone number laminated and taped to my desk. If I had the money, I would make sure nobody—absolutely nobody—would have to worry about such a thing, especially not in these frigid Montana winters. Then again, if I ran the world, nobody would have to pay for utilities, period. But as Mr. Clark says, nobody wants to hear my “radical” ideas.

“I know you would,” she says, and I can already tell this woman is bracing for the bad news.

“But unfortunately,” I continue, “Mr. Clark is out of town until Saturday.”

How convenient, too, that my boss always schedules his vacation to Aspen to coincide with a charity event that, in his words, “is aimed at making Clark Electric and Gas out to be the villain who keeps everyone poor.”

I sometimes gently—very gently—explain to him that charity is simply the neighborly thing to do. And he has more money than Scrooge McDuck, so why not give something?

Violetta’s face falls. “Oh, dear. Well, I suppose we could skip the boutonniere tradition this year. The nearest available florist is two towns away and it is fairly inconvenient. And, it doesn’t really mean anything....”

This has me reeling.

I may have zero interest in bidding on a cowboy for a date, but I love the boutonniere ceremony. I go to this auction every year just to watch it, and it’s my favorite part.

So, I’ll be damned if one of its tiniest, silliest traditions goes by the wayside over something as stupid as a little bit of money.

Every year, the winner pins a pretty flower on the shirt of her prize cowboy, and he wears that flower until the two of

them go on their date. It's ridiculous, and I love it.

One year, I tried to convince Brock to dress up as a cowboy and enter himself in the auction, so I could bid on him. "It'll give everyone a laugh," I'd said. "Seeing the local police chief dressed as a cowboy? Come on, do it. You already wear a cowboy hat as part of your uniform for no reason!"

Brock had just bristled and made a disgusted face. He was never the playful type. And he hated it when I'd tease him about his hat. How could I not? I was raised on a ranch, and Brock had never so much as learned to ride a horse. After that exchange, I didn't have the guts to suggest that dressing up as a cowboy might lead to some sexy role-play later. Sigh.

What's wrong with the men in my life, anyway? Apart from my cattleman granddad, at least. Between my ex and my boss, you'd think this town was full of boorish bores.

Suddenly, an emotion I haven't felt in a long time comes over me. I'm going to do something to help Violetta help our town. I'm tired of selfishness and greed, and I'm going to do something about it.

I've been feeling...not so much sad about Brock, but dead inside since he left. The only sadness I feel is regretting how he wasted my time. And that I'm going to a wedding in three days with no date.

Well, screw boring Brock and screw the stingy Mr. Clark. Without thinking further about the crime I'm about to commit, I slap my palm to my forehead and exclaim, "You know what? I completely forgot. I'm such a ninny!"

Violetta's eyes widen. "What is it, honey?"

I laugh and try not to sound too maniacal. "Mr. Clark left discretionary funds for charity donations."

"He did?" Violetta clutches her chest in shock.

I nod excitedly. Oh boy, I am all too eager for this. "Right before he went on vacation. He left about...how much did you say the boutonnieres cost?"

Violetta blinks at me in disbelief. “With what the florist charges two town over, about seventy-five dollars.”

I’m already taking out the company checkbook. Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. And Mr. Clark did not specifically say anything the auction this year either way. If the subject comes up later—if the old tightwad even notices missing money—I can tell the truth. The town needed money, and I gave it, and he can thank me when tax season rolls around because it can all be declared charitable giving on his taxes. A win-win for everyone.

“This is wonderful news!” Violetta looks as if she might leap out of her fancy shoes.

I relish the sound of tearing out the check from the perforation in this dusty old book. Why have checks if you’re not going to use them, right?

She takes the check, then scoots around the counter to hug my neck. I am thrilled to make this woman, who works so hard for our little town, happy.

There was a lot of grumbling at the senior center after the town council voted to hire a Main Street director. I volunteer there on weekends by calling bingo on Saturdays, and the ancient Ida Simpson spent hours talking my ears off about how she thought money could be better spent on constructing more parking lots. I did not dare remind Ida that she hadn’t driven a car in four years, but I pointed out that a downtown advocate could make the town more walkable for people like Ida.

And that’s turned out to be true. Since Violetta arrived, she’s not only upheld long-standing traditions of Darling Creek—like the auction, the winter carnival, and the Easter Bunny parade—but also obtained outside funding to redo the sidewalks and to install pretty planters, benches, and vintage-looking light posts. She singlehandedly saved the library’s crumbling limestone facade with federal grant money. Violetta is pushy but ultimately good. Beyond good. And, yes, I’m willing to risk getting fired for mishandling money for our Main Street director’s efforts.

Before she leaves, she hands me an envelope. “What’s this?” I ask.

She winks. “A VIP ticket to the auction for Mr. Clark. But if he’s still out of town tomorrow, I’m sure he’d want someone to use it.”

After she leaves, I examine the ticket because I’ve never been given a VIP pass for anything in my life. Even in little Darling Creek, I feel like I’ve made it, having been handed something like this. “Good for unlimited barbecue and beverages,” it reads.

Good lord. Do they want all the big donors to get sloshed? Oh, right. I’m so naïve I have to laugh at myself. Of course, they do. Fewer inhibitions means higher bidding, probably. Clever.

This has turned into a good day, which may result in a great weekend after all.

Chapter Three

Huck

“Who are you, and what are you doing tomorrow night?”

What is it with loud women in suits carrying stacks of papers saying unsettling things to me? Is today a full moon?

As soon as I stepped out of my truck at Willie’s Bar & Grill, I nearly bumped right into this short, stressed-out woman in high heels in the parking lot. And now she needs to ask me out? Is that what dating is like?

“Um. I...”

She sighs. “Are you a cowboy? Yes or no.”

This is unexpected. I raise my hands in the air between us. “Ma’am, you seem real nice and all, and real...energetic like...but I’m sorry to say I am not interested in a date with you.”

The woman throws back her head and cackles. “No, no, no. I’m sorry. You don’t know me at all, do you? I’ve been running around like a chicken with my head cut off, trying to finalize all the details for the auction. I’m Violetta, and I would shake your hand except....” She gestures with her stack of folders and papers and whatnot.

“D-do you need help carrying that, or...?”

She shakes her head. “No, no. What I need is a cowboy.”

“I see.”

“Not a date. Well. Sort of. Would you be interested in signing up for the auction? I just had a last-minute cancellation...some man holding a grudge against another one of our cowboys that goes back to some big football game he lost in high school. I don’t get it, but boys will be boys. Anyway, what do you say?”

What do I say? I say take this woman’s caffeine away.

“I’m not sure what it is you need help with,” I say, rubbing the scruff on my chin and squinting at the setting sun.

She nods thoughtfully. “So, you’re not familiar with the annual cowboy dating auction?” Why does this Violetta’s face look avid, like she’s about to reel in a big one?

“Dating...auction?”

“Yes,” she says, doing an excellent job of hiding her impatience with a kind smile and slowing down her words. “Every year, Darling Creek puts on a cowboy auction. It raises funds for those in need. People come from all over and bid on a willing cowboy. I just had one of our boys drop out, and I’m desperate.”

Desperate? That doesn’t feel great.

She realizes what that seems like instantly. “I mean, I need another handsome cowboy, and what a coincidence, here you are! What do you say?”

I know that sometimes Montana can still seem like the Wild West, but gosh almighty. I had no idea we still had old-timey madams around. And I’m actually talking to one. Not that I would ever treat myself to a...but...this is quite an interesting conversation.

“Is this a sex worker type of thing? Because I gotta say, I didn’t think that was legal here.”

Violetta whoops and throws her head back again. I had no idea I was so funny. “Why do so many people think it’s a sex thing? You know, next year, I’m just going to put that on the fliers around town. ‘This is not an exchange of money for sex.’” She snorts and laughs like this is hilarious, but on the

contrary, I think that explanation should come first. Maybe it's just me.

Now that things have been explained, a niggling thought occurs to me. This could be a good opportunity to meet someone nice. And it is for charity. If the date doesn't go well, at least I tried to put myself out there. Sure, it's more terrifying than swiping left or right on a dating app or whatever you do on those things. I wouldn't know because I haven't tried them.

So what am I waiting for? For the perfect woman to drop out of the sky? This seems as good an idea as any. And I have the weekend off to do the auction and go on a date, and nothing else to do with my time, so...

"Why not?" I tell her.

The woman's eyes bug out, and she gasps, nearly dropping all her papers as she doubles over at the waist. "Really? Oh my god. Oh my god, you are amazing!"

She's so excited you'd think I just proposed marriage to her. Ha. Don't get so big for your britches, Huck Tillman. Take it easy.

Violetta gives me the details, pleased as punch now that I've taken that stress off her to-do list.

As she walks away, I feel good to know I'm being helpful to the town after less than sixty seconds of my weekend off.

I hadn't known what I would do with myself this weekend, but this sounds like as good a plan as any.

Chapter Four

Whitney

I'm still smiling as I'm preparing to lock up the office for my lunch break when the door chimes again, and in walks Sandra Rhodes, the glowing bride-to-be.

Well, half glowing, half frazzled.

My friend since preschool is getting married in three days, and I still haven't told her that I'll be attending without a date. Oops.

"Ohh, donuts! I'm starving!" Sandra exclaims.

I give her a look of consternation as she opens the box and sniffs. "Raspberry, my favorite," she coos, picking up a sugary confection and taking a bite.

I slowly move the box behind the counter. Then, I feel like a jerk because, of course, I don't mind sharing food with my friend. Even though I was saving that one for my after-lunch dessert. Sandra has probably been busy this morning; I can always tell when she's skipped meals.

"Everything ready for Saturday?" I ask, taking a bite into a Boston cream. Not that I want that for lunch, but I'm marking my territory.

Through a mouthful of donut, Sandra replies, "Almost. That coordinator is being a pill about using the real barn for the ceremony. The event center is booked for the reception and

dance, but it's not as rustic and old as the barn. That would be much more romantic for the actual ceremony, you know?"

I blink at her, trying to see if I understand her. "You mean, the actual barn-barn? Where they keep horses and cows and stuff?"

Hall Ranch and Event Center boasts the prettiest wedding venue in the area, with a new reception hall built entirely of reclaimed barn wood. You want country chic? You book with Maisy Milliken-Hall.

Sandra looks at me like she's waiting for me to catch on. "Well, duh. The animals and saddles and things are what makes it authentic."

I smile as I take a sip of the velvety coffee. "And poop."

"What?"

"Animals poop. Barns smell like their feces. It's not bad once you get used to it, but it is what it is. Besides that, barns are dusty and dirty, and I'm sure plenty of guests would be allergic to all that hay, straw...."

Sandra stares at me like I'm speaking another language.

I wonder why Sandra would care about getting married in an actual, functioning barn when she's never spent a day getting her hands dirty. Her father owns the town's private pediatric practice.

I don't want to be too critical of my friend, but she's never done anything but turn her nose up at going to barn dances, country bonfires, or country bars with me. If she had, it occurs to me, I might have met some friendly cowboys in one of the neighboring small towns, instead of settling for dating Brock for the last five years. There are few single people our age to choose from in Darling Creek. Case in point: Sandra met her fiancé at law school.

And now she wants to entertain all her law school friends in a barn. Inside, I tell myself I'm being ungenerous. Let her do what she wants for her wedding and stop judging. Besides, I went to all that effort of making her a homemade wedding band quilt as a wedding gift. And I was excited to do it,

especially when she told me that her fiancé Arthur had just bought a little farmhouse outside Missoula.

Still, it wasn't until Sandra got engaged and began buying bridal magazines by the truckload that she caught the bug for a country wedding. Or country anything.

"I'm sure Daddy can pay one of those emergency clean-up crews to get rid of the smell," Sandra says dismissively.

I bite my lip. Be kind...be kind. She's just overstimulated with all this last-minute wedding stuff. She tends to lash out thoughtlessly when she's stressed. Or tired. Or hungry. It's been like this ever since we met in elementary school. I put up with it because our school in Darling Creek was so small, and everyone was friends with everyone. In middle school, Sandra and my friendship solidified when we saw each other through various childhood struggles. But as we changed and grew, our differences were amplified. I was plain; she liked fancier clothes. I preferred the outdoors; she loved going to the mall in Bozeman. I couldn't fault her tastes, but she often referred to me as her quaint hayseed friend. And yet when I had no interest in going to college, I helped her study to improve her grades so she could get into college. We were always welcomed into each other's homes, and she loved my granddad's attention when her doctor father worked too much.

So, being well acquainted with my granddad and me, Sandra should understand how a functioning ranch works.

"The Halls have to think of the animals. They wouldn't want the horses spooked or wedding guests getting hurt."

Sandra snorts and brushes sugar off her cashmere sweater. "You sound just like Maisy. Such a party pooper!"

Pooper. Ha.

I bite back the urge to make a joke and try to take a positive approach. "Oh, I don't know. Maisy seems reasonable whenever she comes in to pay her utility bill. I think you're in good hands. Why not let it go and trust her?"

Sandra rolls her eyes, and then she's on to the next subject. She begins furiously texting someone while she heaves a

heavy sigh. “And my sister-in-law is refusing to wear the right shade of periwinkle. I thought I was the nice bride by letting everyone in the bridal party choose to wear whatever they wanted, as long as it was periwinkle. And here it is, three days before my wedding, and she’s texting me a picture of her in periwinkle-purple instead of periwinkle-blue.”

Stupidly, I ask, “Did you say blue and not purple?”

Sandra lowers her chin and gives me the death stare that used to scare me when we were in middle school. “Everyone knows what I meant. Everyone has the spreadsheets,” she seethes.

Spreadsheets? Yikes.

I take a big sip of coffee, and it’s so good I remind myself to pay a visit to the new bakery soon.

“Well, I’m so glad you came by to chat, Sandra,” I say, giving her a hopeful look as the phone rings. I’d love to hear more wedding talk, but I have calls coming in on multiple lines.

“Oh! That’s not why I’m here.”

“It’s not?”

“No, silly. My number one reason is to tell you how much I wish I could have asked you to be a bridesmaid. But you know how it is.”

I do know how it is. I think. I mean, I assume the reason I wasn’t asked to be a bridesmaid was that Arthur, her fiancé, has three sisters. That combined with Sandra’s two sisters plus her law school housemates, there probably wasn’t room for eleven bridesmaids. Ten is a nice even number. A totally crazy number, but still. When she says “you know how it is,” though, I can’t help but feel like there may be a deeper layer that I’m not quite grasping.

“No hard feelings about that at all,” I tell her.

Sandra nods vigorously. “You’re the sweetest. Which is why I want you to come to my bachelorette party.”

My stomach rolls around at the very thought. I've known Sandra my entire life, and although her aesthetic tastes may change with the trends, one thing I have learned since she dragged me to Las Vegas for her 21st birthday bash remains true: she loves a male strip show.

"Oh, are you sure? You know I'm not comfortable with... all of that."

Again, she rolls her eyes. "My goody two shoes Whitney. We're not having that kind of party. Daddy won't pay for it. No, it's on theme."

My mind scrambles, but I come up with nothing as she looks at me expectantly.

"Theme? Is it a barn dance?"

She snorts. "No! Why would I have a barn dance for my bachelorette party when I'm having a wedding dance at a farm already?"

Beats me. "Okay, then, what's the party?"

"Daddy rented out this bar in Bozeman for the night, and we're having a real, authentic honky-tonk. It used to be a dirty cowboy bar, but now it's mostly aimed at college students and has better beer. Isn't that a hoot?"

I bristle at the dirty cowboy remark.

"You know my granddad was a rancher," I say quietly of the man who retired and now lives in Florida.

"Huh?"

"Cowboys aren't dirty," I clarify. "Once the day is done, you'll never see anyone cleaner than a cowboy."

Sandra squints at me like I'm speaking about aliens. Meanwhile, it was true of my granddad. Even the Pioneer Woman would back me up on the cleanliness thing, and I know Sandra watches her cooking show.

Whatever. I'm relieved that I will not be subjected to male strippers. "But if you're renting it out for the girls, who will we dance with? Are you renting dance partners too?"

She tosses her head back and laughs. “No! The boys will be there!”

“The...boys?”

“It’s a joint bachelor and bachelorette party. Isn’t that fun?”

Somehow, that seems worse. I guess I’m old-fashioned. A night out with only girls sounds like much less pressure.

I nod warily to her and move to pick up the phone. “Okay, I’ll think about it. I gotta answer the phone, hon.”

Sandra nearly leaps over the counter and clutches my hand. “Whitney, you have to come! Everyone’s bringing their significant others; you’re my last unmarried friend. I need a break from listening to husband stories and PTA drama. Please?”

I’m not sure she knows how her words cut me, but I need to answer the phone now. “When is it?” I ask, my hand on the phone.

“Eight p.m. tomorrow!”

And why am I just hearing about this now? Is she suddenly feeling bad that I wasn’t invited?

I must be making a face because she quickly follows up with, “Jamie totally forgot to include you on the invites for the party. Some matron of honor. I should have put my foot down and picked you.”

I wince to hear her talking about her wedding party like that. If I were the maid of honor, would she tell people I’m incompetent for planning a simpler party? These thoughts make me feel better about saying, “I’m so sorry, honey, but I’ve already got a ticket to the auction tomorrow night.”

“What auction?” Sandra blinks at me, letting go of my hand and snatching the other raspberry donut. Dammit.

She lands back on her feet and straightens her sweater, shoving the second donut in her face.

Why does her rudeness make me want to rage-eat way more than Brock breaking up with me?

“Come on. How long have you lived here? The annual cowboy charity auction,” I say.

“Are you going to bid on a cowboy? You?” Sandra grins teasingly, and her tone doesn’t feel good.

“No,” I say, then add, “Maybe. I don’t know. It’s just a tradition.”

Sandra cocks her head and dismisses me with a wave of her hand. “You are such a joiner. It’s adorable.”

Now seems like a good time to tell her what’s happened since there’s no way she could possibly hurt my feelings more.

“Changing subjects before I kick you out...I have news. Brock moved out. We’ve broken up.”

She circles her hand to indicate I should keep going.

“And...that’s it.”

She pouts sympathetically. “Oh, babe. I know. The whole town knows you two broke up,” she says. Finally noticing the sullen look on my face, her shoulders sag. “Are you okay? We can have a whole ice cream fest when I return from my honeymoon in the Maldives and talk about it.”

That is the Sandra I know and love. However, something tells me I’ll be over Brock when she returns from her honeymoon. If I’m not over him already.

“I would love that,” I tell her.

She brightens. “Well, this makes it easier to ask this other favor I need. Since Brock isn’t coming with you, do you think you could give up your plus one so Arthur’s cousin can bring her son?”

Wait, what? “I thought it was a no-kids wedding.”

Sandra rolls her eyes again and sighs heavily. “It is, but Daddy wants to play nice. She and her husband are big-time lawyers in Missoula, and they’re into this whole attachment

parenting thing and don't believe in babysitters... It's weird, but whatever. Can you?"

I have to ask because I'm curious. As soon as Sandra got engaged, she'd specifically told anyone who would listen that there wouldn't be any crying toddlers at this wedding. She was so vehement about it; it was off-putting. "How old is the kid?"

"Sixteen," she says matter-of-factly.

"Oh. Wait. Sixteen? Sixteen months?"

"No, sixteen years," she says.

Sandra watches me expectantly, and have I just grown a spine? I have.

"No."

She chuckles. "I'm sorry, did you say no?"

Here goes nothing. I suck in a breath to steel myself. "No. I mean, yes, I said no. I'm...bringing a date."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

The last thing I want to do is tell her I'm hoping to bid on a cowboy, but that's precisely what I plan to do now that I know she only cares about me giving up my plus one. Am I being petty? Yes.

"It's...a secret for now. We're taking it slow."

"Whitney. You're hardly one for jumping from one man's arms to another. Spill it."

"It's not like that. We're just friends who are seeing where things go."

I need her to leave before I become an even bigger liar by the second.

"It's a small town, Whitney. We know all the same people; why can't you just tell me who it is?"

Just then, her phone rings. Sandra frowns at the screen. “We’re paying this wedding coordinator to coordinate, so why am I still getting phone calls from the caterer days before my wedding. Hello?”

Phew. Saved by another nuptial annoyance. Gee, must be nice. Am I salty? Maybe a little.

She waves and blows me a kiss as she heads out the door. “Think about the bachelorette party and keep me posted on giving up your plus one!”

I’m more likely to skip the wedding altogether after everything she said to me today. Sandra’s always been slightly self-centered, but I remind myself that she has a good heart. It’s just the Bridezilla phenomenon. She’ll be back to her usual self in no time. Maybe.

Still, she really stung me. Would she even notice if I skipped the wedding altogether? Probably not, with all her married law school friends in attendance, surely lavishing the happy couple with gifts that blow my present out of the water.

But do I even want to gift her a wedding quilt now? Of course, I do. I spent weeks, months, working on it. Spread all the way out, the quilt takes up most of my small apartment living room. I even asked Ida Simpson and some other friends from the senior center to come over to offer advice when I struggled with it. What am I going to do with a giant wedding band quilt? I’m not that petty. But I am petty enough to not give up my plus one.

And come on. Sixteen and never had a sitter because of attachment parenting? All things being equal and no special needs involved, I’m sorry. No. Sandra’s doctor father can just spring for an extra plate at the reception.

Then again, who am I to judge parenting styles? Okay, yes, I’m judging.

And speaking of feeling judgmental, I’ve decided that when and if I get married, I’m doing the opposite of everything I see Sandra doing. I’d rather spend my energy

preparing for marriage than a lavish wedding, especially if it makes me snappish with my friends.

So maybe, just maybe, I'm not all that hurt about not being a bridesmaid after all.

Chapter Five

Huck

Putting myself up for auction was a terrible idea.

At least, that's what my last-minute jitters tell me. I have to go out there, in front of everyone? Somehow that's more terrifying than going on a date with a stranger.

After the local hairdresser has finished trimming my hair, shaving my scruff, and moisturizing my face—none of which I asked for—I am tackled by another volunteer about what I'm wearing.

I've had enough. "What's wrong with this?" I ask, gesturing down at my flannel shirt and jeans.

"Uh," she says, blinking up at me. "It's a dress-up kind of thing. We want you to look like a cowboy."

And now I'm just surly. "Have you ever met one? This is it. Now let's get this over with."

The volunteer frowns as I walk away to line up for this fiasco. In front of me and behind me, there's a queue of cowboys dressed up like it's date night. Oh. My stubborn ass is suddenly regretting blowing off Violetta's assistant.

And the auction goes about as well for me as I deserve. I already have several strikes against me, as nobody in this town knows me because I live more or less like a hermit.

I stand on the stage and face a crowd of unfamiliar people, and I haven't even bothered to take off my flannel shirt and put on something dressier.

Everything sounds like it's in slow motion and underwater as the auctioneer starts the bidding, and no one says a word. I focus on breathing and just getting through this. I can't help the fact that my face is beet red. But after this, I can return to being Huck, the hermit cowboy.

Except I have two more nights before returning to my cabin at Hall Ranch. This means I'll have to either suck it up and show my face at the Corner Café in the morning or take my hotel voucher and go somewhere else. I hear Bozeman's nice. Or maybe I'll take a road trip and go to Yellowstone after all. Let a moose trample me. Better yet, I could pray for the giant underground volcano to erupt and take us all out. That would save me from ever having to show my face in Darling Creek again.

“A hundred and twenty!”

The sound of chittering in the audience, followed by the auctioneer calling for a hundred and thirty, snaps me back to the present moment.

Did...someone actually bid on me?

I gaze around the room, but most everyone is hidden in shadows as I stand on the makeshift bandstand in the yellowish spotlight.

But then I see one sweet, gorgeous face in the front row, wearing a VIP badge and holding an auction paddle. And she's smiling shyly at me. The pink in her cheeks grows darker when I smile back at her and dip my chin politely.

She looks about my age and wears a flirty, short dress with tiny flowers. The wrap-around top of it hugs a pair of perfect breasts. Her hair is long, almost down to her elbows, and hangs in loose curls that make my hands itch to feel the strands slip through my fingers.

The longer I stare at her, the more muted her smile becomes, showing me a heated look with pouty, full lips the

color of the pink-orange sunset. Her teeth bite down on her bottom lip self-consciously, and it's now that I'm ready to give up on this whole auction silliness and just go and grab her. Take her out of here and go on an actual date. And definitely take her dancing. She's got muscular calves, clad in cute cowgirl boots: studded, well-worn leather with a floral design stitched in, built for two-stepping.

I already know her, and I don't even know her name.

Once again, I barely hear anything anyone is saying, but for a totally different reason. I'm solely focused on my future wife.

And now, this angel in cowgirl boots is walking toward the edge of the stage, looking up at me expectantly.

With the spotlight still on me, I hop off the stage and take her hand.

"Let's go," I say. I need to get her away from this crowd so we can talk.

"W-wait," she says, chuckling, pulling me back. "You forgot the best part."

The best part? What in the world could possibly be worse than standing around under a spotlight for a second longer?

The woman who roped me into this deal emerges from somewhere, holding out a tiny flower with a pin, the kind groomsman wear. What is happening? Am I getting married? Okay then. Sure. Fine. Let's do it.

I watch in confusion, but amusement as the woman of my dreams takes the small flower from Violetta and then turns back to me.

I laugh. "Are we doing this already? Okay, where's the preacher? I say yes."

This, for some reason, gets a huge laugh from the crowd. The pink in this lovely girl's cheeks grows even deeper, and she glances down. I've embarrassed her. I'm messing this up.

Boldly, I take her hand that's not holding the flower and lean in close so she can hear me over the cackling crowd. "I

don't actually know what's happening right now. Can you help me out?"

This is the right thing to say because her beautiful eyes meet mine again, and she nods. She rises up on her tiptoes, and I bend closer so she can speak in my ear. Her murmur is delicious, her breath on the shell of my ear intoxicating as she explains, "I won you, now I have to pin the flower on you, and you wear it until we go on our date. It's a stupid tradition. I understand if you don't want to do it."

She backs away an inch and I hold her gaze.

"Do it."

She beams, and my heart expands.

The woman who has already won my heart holds the flower up, her eyes searching for the perfect place to pin it.

"Aw, it's just an old beat-up shirt; just put it anywhere. It's already got holes in it."

She smiles shyly and pins it right over my heart, then watches me as I crane my neck to sniff it. "Perfect. Now everyone will know I'm spoken for. Not as good as a ring, but let's not get ahead of ourselves."

She laughs, as do a few nearby people who can hear us. "I'm Whitney."

Whitney. Whitney...my future wife's name is Whitney.

Once again, she looks like she's waiting for me to do or say something. God, I'm a dope.

"Huck. Huck Tillman," I say, flattening my hand against my breastbone.

"Snow," she says.

"In summer?" I ask.

"What? No. I meant I forgot to tell you my last name. Snow."

"Well, Whitney Snow," I say, taking her hand in mine and tugging her out of the spotlight. "Where do we go on our

date?”

The auctioneer and the audience have moved on to the next poor sap on the auction block. Finally, I can talk to her alone without everyone staring.

“Well, we don’t necessarily have to go now...I mean, unless you want to get the date over with,” she says.

I look at her confused. “Why would I want to get it over with?”

Our conversation is interrupted, though, by another man.

“Whitney? What’s going on? How’d you get a VIP ticket?”

His tone sounds snide, and I do not like it.

I keep Whitney’s fingers threaded through mine as she turns to someone nearby wearing a brown uniform and a badge. “Mr. Clark is out of town. What are you doing here, Brock? You hate this auction.”

“I do, but I got called in to work security.”

She squints up at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be out of uniform for private security gigs?”

He stares down at her like she’s stupid. “Crowd control is easier if people know the law is here.” For some reason, he eyes me when he says this, though I have no idea why. “Especially when we’ve got newcomers who don’t understand how things work around here.”

I’m about to step up to him when Whitney gives my hand a slight squeeze and tugs me closer to her. Okay. I like that.

She replies to this Brock guy with, “What a surprise, you’ve bored me near to tears. We have to go. I have a date. See his hat? That’s also a uniform. For his job. As a real cowboy. Bye now.”

I know that look on Brock’s face. That man is jealous. Too damn bad. I wonder what their history is. Pretty sure I won’t like that story.

After Whitney drags me away from getting more of a read on Brock, she breathes a sigh of relief. “That’s my ex. He broke up with me a few days ago over text. Everything is weird now.”

I blink, wondering what I’m supposed to do with that information. “Do I punch him for you?” I don’t want to assault an officer, but I would if she asked me to. I went to jail for worse in my younger days. It’s what almost got my younger brothers taken away from me before I skipped out of Colorado.

Whitney stares up at me, the color draining from her face. “What? No! Why would you think that?”

Shrugging, I reply, “Dunno. He looks punchable.”

The woman snorts so adorably and loudly that she covers her mouth. “He is pretty punchable. But no.”

I remember something I read about in one of the romance novels that Maisy keeps stashed up at the ranch house. She’d brought me all kinds of reading material that time I had the flu, and not going to lie; I enjoyed some of them. Some of them a little too much.

“Do you want me to help you make him jealous?”

A soft, dreamy look comes over Whitney’s face, and the hand covering her mouth drops down to her chest. “Uh, what? You don’t have to do that. It’s just a charity auction date. It’s just fun. You’re not obligated to do anything.”

On the contrary, I’m obligated to make this woman feel comfortable in all situations. “But do you want me to? I’m happy to help. It’ll make me feel better about not getting to punch him in the face for talking down to you.”

Her hands are still strangely clutching the front of her dress, and her full lips part slightly. “Uh. Sure. That would be fun. I love to role-play. I mean...oh god. You know what I mean.”

I do, but I sorta wish she meant the sexy kind of role-play.

That's my cue to laugh loud, pretending that Whitney has just said something hilarious. Which is not hard to do because I can laugh at my dumb luck at meeting her. She quickly catches on to what I'm doing and plays along, laughing along with me.

With an extra flourish, I snatch her against my chest, wrapping her up in my arms because she's so funny I have to hug her.

This may be too forward, as she feels stiff against me. But then her arms circle around my ribs and squeeze, her head nestling against my chest. I might explode with how good this feels. I've never felt this comfortable around someone I just met.

It may look insane to someone who knows that we just met. But then again, how does anyone in attendance know that we haven't met before?

"I think he's buying it." Her words vibrate against my chest, making my cock harden. Releasing her from my grip, I turn and look. Sure enough, that Brock guy is looking surly at us.

"Too bad, so sad," I say.

This gets a genuine laugh out of her, and she leans her forehead against my shoulder and snorts.

And now I'm genuinely laughing over her snorting, and to everyone around us, we look like we're having the best time ever.

"So...when do you want to go on our date?" Whitney asks hesitantly.

"Let's go right now," I answer.

The look on her face is hesitant. "Actually, I was hoping you could accompany me to my friend's wedding tomorrow? Everyone there will be married, and it's going to be a bummer for me, so...."

"Absolutely."

“You will?” Whitney looks more surprised than she should.

“Of course.” I nod. “You’re the one who paid a hundred and twenty bucks for me. I follow your lead.”

“That’s a huge weight off my mind; you have no idea.”

She smiles at me, and it warms me down to my toes. “I suppose I should get your number, and we can talk wedding details later.”

“Perfect,” I say. Everything about this is perfect.

Whitney shoots me her contact information while blushing deeply. “I have to go to the bachelorette party in Bozeman right now. Otherwise, I’d love to stay and chat some more. I mean, stay and make Brock jealous, of course.”

“Bozeman?” I ask. “That’s an hour away, and it’s 10 p.m.”

Whitney nods. “Yes, and?”

“How about I drive you? I don’t like the idea of you alone on the road so late at night.”

There’s a wary look in her eyes as she says, “That’s sweet, but I hardly know you, so how is that safer?”

She’s absolutely correct, and I’m kicking myself for being creepy. “You’re right; I’m sorry. I’m just enthusiastic about getting to know you.”

“You are?” Why is she surprised? She’s utterly fascinating to me.

“Of course.”

“Don’t you have to be back at the ranch—or wherever you work—at like five a.m.? I’m assuming you are a real cowboy; otherwise, I just lied to the police chief,” she laughs.

I nod. “I work at Hall Ranch, but they gave me the weekend off because of some weird request by the bride.”

Her eyes widen. “The Warner wedding?”

“Yeah.”

She points at me. “That’s the wedding! Sandra Rhodes-soon-to-be-Warner! That’s my friend.”

“Small world,” I say.

Whitney rolls her eyes. “Or just a small town. Nobody would dare have their wedding the same weekend as Sandra. Every flower within three counties is spoken for.”

Something in her eye tells me that this Sandra might be less of a friend and more of a thorn in her side. All the more reason to accompany her to the bachelorette party.

“Tell you what,” I say. “I’ll follow you to Bozeman in my truck. Just to make sure you arrive there and home safely.”

There’s a long pause, and she finally answers, “A guy with ill intent wouldn’t offer to do that, so if you’re serious? I’ll ride with you. Besides, if you work for Lincoln and Maisy, you must be a good egg. And...to tell you the truth, it’s a co-ed party. Like, all the groomsmen will be there too, and probably everyone will bring their spouses. It’s supposed to be an old-fashioned honky-tonk, so it might be fun.”“Count me in.”

Maybe she’s too trusting. But I’m also a selfish, lovestruck puppy who will follow Whitney to the ends of the earth.

She beams at me as if I’m doing her a huge favor. If only she knew that there’s no way this woman would have to pay for a date with me.

Chapter Six

Whitney

I probably ate too little of the free barbecue and imbibed too many free margaritas with that VIP ticket because the next thing I knew, I was bidding on a cowboy.

He's tall, big, and dressed like he wandered in off the street. I kind of like that he's not overdressed.

That's my cowboy, I'd said to myself.

And now, I'm in his truck.

I have to pinch myself and remember that this is for charity. It's not an actual date. And that I totally lied to Sandra. None of this is real. But damn, he smells good.

The drive to Bozeman is fun, despite my being tired and coming down from three margaritas. Sitting tucked in next to Huck energizes me, and the two of us spend the hour discussing music, movies, politics, and siblings.

Huck is so goodnatured and easy going about this huge imposition, I find myself pretending this is real, that he's my guy and this is an adventure.

In fact, Huck is so accommodating that I can't decide if he's for real or wants to get this date over with. Will he ditch me tomorrow? Or is he genuinely excited to get to know me? Sure, he joked around about getting married right when we

met, but he was playing to the crowd, right? No one has ever been this into me upon first meeting me.

And then there was his offer to make Brock jealous. That was fun, but was that about me, or male egos? I don't know.

I just don't know what feelings to trust.

But for now, I'll just soak up the attention. And I'm genuinely enjoying our conversations.

"So, have you ever done this before?"

"Put myself on the auction block for a date? No. But I'm glad I did," he replies, shooting me a grin that lights me up in all the right places. Gosh, he's good with the ladies.

Great, and now I'm up in my head, wondering just how experienced he is with women.

He's here with me, now. Just enjoy sitting next to a hot guy, I tell myself.

I study Huck's profile as we drive. His jawbone could slice a steak. And now I'm thinking of steak, and I'm hungry. Ugh, the munchies I get after drinking.

When we arrive at the brewery in Bozeman, it's nothing like what Sandra described. People are dancing to music, but it's not high country. Not even close.

My heart falls to the floor, and I look up at Huck, waiting for him to say something negative.

He smiles at me and says, "I didn't know there was such a thing as honky-tonk EDM."

I want to cringe; I feel so bad for dragging him to this, but he's taking it in stride.

Sandra comes running up to me wearing a white sash that says "bride-to-be" and a silver tiara that's quite off-kilter. I look into her soupy eyes, and oh boy, she's drunk. Really drunk.

"You made it!" she shouts over the music.

"We did!" I shout back.

The worst part about this is the music is so loud we can't hear each other talk. So who cares if I'm here if all we're going to do is scream at each other.

A part of me wants to turn tail and leave right now, but then I tell myself I'm being negative.

She turns and looks Huck up and down. "Are you her new boyfriend that she won't tell me about?"

Oh god.

"Huck," he says, thrusting his hand forward. Sandra takes it and giggles.

"Sandra. I'm getting married!"

A gaggle of women nearby hear this, and everyone in the vicinity raises their glasses and whoops.

Great. Awesome. We made an appearance; she'll never remember that I was here, and now I can go.

If Huck senses my discomfort, he doesn't show it. Instead, he walks over to the deejay booth. Meanwhile, Sandra begins to give me the third degree about Huck.

"So tell me, where did you meet him? Is this the mysterious friend you mentioned?"

Too many questions, and it's too loud and warm in here. On top of that, Sandra's wine breath is making me nauseous.

But then, the entire mood of the place changes. The dance music fades out and in its place is a line dance that soon sees everyone excitedly, drunkenly, but more or less adequately, crowding the dance floor in formation.

Everyone, that is, except Sandra. But she doesn't want to look like a total spoilsport for long and reluctantly joins the rest of us on the dance floor. With at least one eye roll, of course.

It's one of the silly cowboy songs from the 90s we used to dance to together, and soon enough, Sandra is having fun.

I turn my gaze from Sandra to the left of me to see Huck moving expertly through all the steps, having a blast, and

occasionally shooting me that heart-stopping little-boy grin.

As impromptu date disasters go, he sure knows how to make the best of things.

And he's making me like him so much, I'm well on my way to getting hurt.

Chapter Seven

H uck

Not everyone is the best version of themselves when they drink. I get that.

I just doubt that the sober Sandra knows how to treat Whitney any better than the drunk Sandra.

“I’m so glad you guys came. Actually, you can give us a ride home!”

The bride-to-be looks from Whitney to me and back to Whitney with an expression that says we should be super excited by this idea.

I watch Whitney try to parse out the problem for a minute before I have to step in.

“Didn’t you have a driver?” Whitney asks.

We’re standing outside the bar, with about fifteen members of the bridal party and their significant others in the parking lot in downtown Bozeman at one a.m. The rest of them have called ride-shares and have outright ditched the bride herself.

“We did, but the party bus driver quit on us,” Sandra explains, without seeming to acknowledge the outrageousness of this situation.

Whitney takes a step back and bumps right into me. I take this opportunity to touch her shoulders, gently massaging them as she talks to her friend.

“I don’t understand. Why would the driver—I assume who was already paid—ditch you?”

Sandra shrugs innocently. One of the other bridesmaids snorts and points at Sandra. “Because this bitch threw a hissy fit that they stocked the party bus with the wrong vodka!”

Several bridesmaids double over and cackle at this, but Sandra shrugs. “I like what I like, and don’t come at me with anything but Grey Goose.”

“Unbelievable,” Whitney breathes.

Sandra throws up her hands. “I know, right!? Who leaves a bride stranded the night before her wedding?”

I’m annoyed on behalf of Whitney, on behalf of the party bus driver, and on behalf of anyone who ever has the misfortune to provide a service for this Sandra person.

“Do you think we can all fit in your truck, Hulk?” Sandra flutters her eyelashes at me, but in her drunken state, it’s not as seductive as she thinks.

“Huck. His name is Huck,” Whitney says. “And can’t you call an Uber?”

Sandra shakes her head. “I’ve been banned from Uber.”

What the hell?

Never mind. Doesn’t matter. As much as I’m not a fan of Sandra, these people need to get home safely.

“I can fit everyone in my truck if you don’t mind sitting on laps,” I agree.

Sandra squeals excitedly and runs to tell her other friends the news.

Whitney turns to me. “They all can’t fit in your truck. You don’t even have an extended cab.”

I nod. “That’s correct. They’ll have to ride in the truck bed.”

“Fifteen drunk people in a truck bed for an hour?” Whitney asks. “That won’t end well.”

I shrug. “What’s a first date without an adventure?”

I can tell she feels terrible about the imposition. But the truth is, I’ll do anything for this woman, including giving her drunk, kind-of rude friends a ride home in my truck—even risk getting ticketed.

Moments later, we’re headed away from the city on the dark state highways to Darling Creek, avoiding the interstates so I can go slow.

Slow is fine. Slow will give me more time to talk to Whitney.

I have to know how someone as sweet and simple as Whitney ended up with a friend like Sandra. So Whitney fills me in on their background with stories from their first meeting at preschool, slumber parties, days as co-captains of the cheerleading squad, gymnastics competitions, and how they saw each other through innumerable heartbreaks in high school with gallons of ice cream and *Vampire Diaries* marathons.

While she talks, I slowly reach my hand over until it covers hers, where it rests on the console between us. The nervousness in my stomach settles when she doesn’t pull away. It feels good to listen to her talk, and it felt good dancing next to her. And her hand in mine feels right.

The ride back to Darling Creek is endless under normal circumstances. With a truckload of unruly drunk people, who occasionally decide to jump ship for laughs when we idle at a stoplight, and in the lane at a fast food drive through, it could be truly obnoxious.

But Whitney — my Whitney — makes everything feel effortless and fun. She makes me laugh, she makes me smile, but most of all, she makes me feel like I finally fit in somewhere outside of my hermit cowboy existence. With her, it’s a fun adventure.

“I’m so sorry about this,” Whitney says as we clip back into our seatbelts after corralling the best man back into the truck for the fifth time.

“Hey,” I laugh, touching my index finger to the tip of her nose, “Still easier than roping cattle. Next time I’ll get out the lasso.”

She digs into her late-night fries and burger with a smile on her face. I like this. I fed her, danced with her, listened to her talk until her voice grew hoarse. I call it a successful date.

Eventually, we safely drop off everyone at Dr. Rhodes’ house, then return to Willie’s Bar, where Whitney’s car is parked.

And now comes the awkward parking lot moment.

“I feel awful,” she half-whispers.

“Why?” Did I say something wrong?

She looks incredulous. “For roping you into a total disaster, all in the name of charity,” she says with a wince.

I have to handle this delicately, as she looks like she’s ready to bolt. I take a small step closer. “I had a great time. I liked hanging out with you.”

Whitney looks away, studying her feet, shaking her head. “And you’re really kind. The plan all along was to have a wedding date so I wouldn’t feel alone and awkward tomorrow —”

“And the wedding date still stands.”

She looks up at me, surprised. “But...”

“I agreed to the wedding date. Tonight was just a prequel.”

Whitney shifts from one foot to the other. “Tonight was a favor. Sandra manipulated you into being the designated driver. I know this was not how you planned to spend your evening.”

“No, it wasn’t the plan,” I say, shrugging. “But I’m not sorry about it.”

She scoffs. “Again, you’re very kind.”

I think there’s only one way to end this argument once and for all.

Chapter Eight

Whitney

I'm suddenly aware of how close Huck is. How long has he been inching forward? Was it when I was busy apologizing and trying to convince him what a terrible time he had tonight?

Huck touches my chin and tilts my face up. I let out a small gasp. And then, this big cowboy's full lips descend on mine.

The kiss is tender and sweet, sending shock waves from my chest down to my fingertips. My heart races, the hairs on my arms stand up, and I'm suddenly very aware of everything around us. How the security light is buzzing overhead. The crickets chirping. The night breeze brushing against my bare knees—knees that are getting weaker and weaker the more he kisses me. The way Huck smells, like some kind of spicy, piney soap. How soft his flannel shirt is, and how tightly it clings to that big arm that draws me close. And oh my gosh, his lips. Soft and strong and perfectly fitted against my mouth. I somehow notice all of these things in too short of a kiss.

The kiss ends too quickly for me to get my head together. I want to reach up and fist his shirt and heat things up. But then Huck pulls away and presses a chaste kiss to my forehead.

“What time do I pick you up tomorrow?”

I shrug. “You don't have to. The contract is fulfilled....”

“Whitney. What time do I pick you up tomorrow?”

“The ceremony’s at six.”

He nods, grins that devastating grin, and then the most unexpected thing happens. Still having a hold on my waist, he now draws me in for a giant hug.

No words; only hugging. This man is a wall of comfort, and he pulls me against his big chest and wraps me up in his strong arms.

And it feels so good. I’m surrounded in flannel and nice, piney, masculine smells. I could lose myself in his hugs.

When Huck had reached for my hand in the truck earlier, my body had lit up like a Christmas tree. And it made me realize how touch-starved I am. Having just ended a five-year relationship, I can’t remember when I’d last been touched or made to feel wanted.

And now I can’t remember when someone hugged me at all. There was Violetta yesterday. My friends at the senior center...especially the members of the wine-and-painting club (after they’ve had a few glasses of their “sugar-free grape juice,” because technically, there’s no wine allowed at the senior center.)

Brock never held me like this, especially not in the second half of our relationship. Over the years, his hugs turned to side hugs, pats on the back, and then nothing. But even in the beginning, his embraces felt like they had an ulterior motive. He hugged me intending to end up in bed.

Huck feels different. He’s holding me because he senses that I need it. This is new for me.

Like the kiss, the embrace ends too quickly. Huck pulls away, then squeezes my shoulder.

“Text me when you’re home safe,” he says.

I could point out that I live about a minute away from here, while he has a good thirty-minute drive up to the ranch in the mountains. But I don’t say any of that.

I simply enjoy the idea that someone knows I’m alone and worries that I’m safe.

Knowing that fact is almost as lovely as the kiss.

I text Huck the second I'm tucked away home in my apartment, biting my lip out of habit as I smile down at my phone.

I don't wait for him to text back. Instead, I take a long shower and treat myself to an extended bedtime skin routine. This has two goals: it helps me relax before bed and buys time, so I don't stare at my phone and wait for Huck to text me back.

With perfect timing, my phone pings just as I slip under the blankets.

Huck: Thanks for letting me know.

Me: Of course.

Me: Thanks for being so kind tonight. You went above and beyond.

Huck: Your friends needed help. No matter for what stupid reason. I can't abandon people if I'm able to help.

Me: You're a good man.

Huck: I had fun. I know you don't believe me, but I enjoyed my time with you. It was not an imposition.

Me: I liked hanging out with you too.

Huck: Are you going to wear those boots again tomorrow?

Me: No. Not to a wedding.

Huck: Damn. They look real good on you.

Is he flirting?

Me: I am wearing some cute new heels. Besides, boots would waste the pedicure I'm treating myself to tomorrow.

Huck: Looking forward to seeing you and your toes tomorrow at six.

I text him goodnight before this gets even flirtier. I wouldn't mind if it did, but my eyes are starting to droop.

Setting my phone down on my night table, I roll over and hunker down under the blankets. I fall asleep with my fingers touching my lips, remembering that kiss, with a goofy smile lingering on my face.

Chapter Nine

Huck

I would ask Maisy for help with dressing for a wedding date. But today being Saturday, she's so busy, I wouldn't dream of it.

I can't text my brothers; they're about as clueless as I am.

Finally, with no other options, I track down the office of the person who roped me into the auction. I know she wore one of those official-looking lanyards, so she works at the town hall, I decide.

Once inside town hall, I check over the directory and eventually find her on the third floor. But, of course, it's Saturday, so there's nobody around.

What was I thinking? Maybe I have time to drive to a mens clothing store in Bozeman...

Just then, Violetta's assistant, Laura, exits through a door and yelps at the sight of me.

"Holy Moses, you scared me! Are you lost?"

"No, ma'am. I need help."

She gazes at me like I'm a nitwit. "City offices are closed today."

"I know. I have to pick up my date in four hours for a wedding, and I have no idea what to wear."

She processes this for a second, but then I see the realization hit her. “Oooh, you want my help now, but last night I knew nothing about how to dress a cowboy. Interesting.”

I deserve that. “I’m sorry. I just really need someone’s help.”

She eyes me and then finally nods. “You’re the one that Whitney bid on, right? Whitney Snow.”

“Yes.”

“Whitney is a good person.”

I nod in agreement. “She’s special.”

The woman levels me with a fierce, protective gaze. “Not just special. She may have won you, but you need to understand something. You won her. You won the opportunity to spend time with her, and I want you to be careful with her. She’s very tender right now—the whole town knows that the police chief dumped that sweet girl like a sack of potatoes. I saw how she was looking at you last night. And if you lead her on and break her heart, she might just up and leave Darling Creek. And we can’t have that. Whitney has served as a ballot judge for every local election since I’ve been alive. Whitney calls bingo every Saturday night at the senior center. She’s attended every barn dance, wedding dance, soup supper, potluck, and cancer-treatment fundraiser that has ever taken place in this tiny little town in the middle of nowhere Montana. So if I help you, I’m helping her indirectly.”

I nod. “Understood.”

“Let’s go.”

The woman begins marching toward the stairs.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To my house. You look like my husband’s size, and he’s much less ornery than you. It shouldn’t be a problem to let you borrow something. Follow me.”

Chapter Ten

W hitney

What's appropriate to wear to a wedding around here can vary wildly.

For some weddings, starched jeans are considered formal wear.

For a Rhodes wedding? Well, the sheer number of bridesmaids is a clue.

Fortunately, I found this dress on clearance at the department store in Bozeman back at Christmastime, and it's perfect for a summer evening outside.

I examine myself in the mirror, feeling proud for achieving a complete look without breaking the bank. The dress is little more than a pale A-line slip overlaid with rosy pink lace. While the tiny straps make the top somewhat revealing, the bottom is voluminous enough for twirling on the dance floor. It pairs well with a lightweight wrap I already had on hand, providing more modest coverage for the ceremony. The open-toed heels are spikier than what I usually wear, but they're surprisingly comfortable and were the only splurge for this outfit. The sparkly purse is a vintage thing I picked up at the junk store in Darling Creek. My jewelry is all modest rose gold pieces that go well with the pink in the dress—also bought on clearance from the department store. With my hair pulled up in a high ballerina bun, I spend less time on makeup and more time curling the flirty tendrils around my face. I

don't want too much foundation melting off my face if I'm going to be dancing. My stomach flutters when I remember watching my big, sexy cowboy moving on the dance floor.

Well, Huck's not my cowboy. He's just a very kind, very attentive date.

The doorbell to my apartment rings at half past five. Oh gosh. He's here.

Instantly I begin second-guessing this too-sexy dress. He's going to think I'm coming on too strong.

Too late now, Whitney. Might as well own it.

If I thought I looked good, I catch my breath when I open the door to see Huck dressed in a suit.

I, for one, have never much cared one way or the other for suits and ties. But this dark blue suit on him is working. A little too good.

"Hi." It comes out in a half-whisper because my heart is beating a mile a minute.

And beats even faster when I notice Huck's eyes traveling down my body and back up and a slight pink coloring his cheeks and ears. "Hello to you," he rumbles, and the tone of it sounds a lot more like he's about to carry me off to the bedroom.

He's still wearing the boutonniere from last night. It looks slightly worse for wear, but my heart squeezes at his thoughtfulness, making me smile.

"Y-you look...great." I want to say *amazing, incredible, red-carpet ready*. But me being me, I don't want to seem too thirsty.

The unfailingly kind Huck responds with a shake of his head and a shrug. "I don't have words. You're a goddess."

I feel Huck's words in places I shouldn't be feeling things. He stares at me so determinedly I can't help it, though. Heat prickles the bare skin of my shoulders as he lets his eyes wander. He looks as if he's drinking in the sight of me. Good

god. Huck is either as attention-starved as I am or an incredible actor.

Would it be too corny if I fanned myself? “Let me just grab my wrap, and we can go.”

Because he’s the perfect gentleman, he lets me clutch his arm as we descend the concrete steps from my second-floor apartment, lest I twist my ankle in these heels I’ve barely broken in.

And, of course, he holds open the door of his truck. When he puts his hands on my hips to keep me steady as I hoist myself into the truck cab, all the fluttering that’s been happening to my heart moves to other places. Every nerve ending between my thighs tingles.

I’m reminded again that his hands are big and strong, even as I am not a woman of small hips. These are birthing hips, as Sandra once declared. And the thought that Huck is sturdy enough to make me feel this dainty sends arcs of pleasure to my core.

Am I going to be heartbroken if he doesn’t kiss me again? Yes. Am I setting myself up for disappointment? Probably.

He’s a good man who decided to do something nice for charity to help the town. He genuinely wants me, a sad single girl who just got dumped, to feel special for one weekend.

He’s certainly milking it. But he doesn’t know that whenever he decides his contract with me has been satisfied, I’m going to be crushed.

I decide to bottle that fact up, pull myself together, and enjoy tonight.

The performance of the perfect date continues through the ceremony. Huck holds the door open for me at the event center. He helps me cover my shoulders with my wrap. He sweetly clasps my hand as the bride and groom say their “I dos.” Huck keeps one hand firmly pressed to my lower back as we slowly make our way through the reception line to offer our congratulations.

When we reach the front of the line, I hug Sandra and offer my best wishes and tell her she looks beautiful. She does, but I can't help but notice the bags under her eyes. Huh. Did none of her important law school friends tell her not to have her bachelorette party the night before the wedding?

Is that mean of me to say? Possibly.

“Whitney! And...you!”

“Huck. His name is Huck. Remember from last night?” I say with a wink.

Sandra smiles generously in her specific way that sets off a tiny alarm in my head. But this is her wedding day so she lets it rip.

“Oh! Silly me. My memory is so scattered from last night, I thought you were Whitney's Uber driver,” she laughs, smacking a hand to her forehead. This seems fake and I don't like it.

Huck looks unaffected by this comment, probably because he doesn't realize it's one of her vague, gentle put-downs.

She then turns to me. “After putting him through all that I'm surprised to see him again! Really, really surprised.”

After all Huck's reassurances that last night was not terrible for him, Sandra sends me right back to that headspace. “He's a good person,” I say quietly.

“Whitney's worth it,” Huck declares. “She's an awesome girl.” Huck's smile is dimmer now, and his voice is assertive. But he also displays unfailing manners. He nods politely at the bride and extends his hand to Arthur, offering his congratulations.

Things take an even more awkward turn for us when we approach the place card table with our assigned tables.

I look everywhere, but don't see any cards for my plus one. I check for Brock's name in case the wedding coordinator was not informed about my breakup. But, nope. No Brock, no Huck. Nowhere is there anything that resembles a plus one for me.

I turn to Huck and say, “Wait here,” softly patting my hand on his chest and then immediately blushing. Why did I do that? It felt like the right thing to do; it felt natural. The heated look he gives me in return tells me maybe I’m becoming too comfortable. I swallow, then offer a hesitant smile. “Be right back.”

But when I find my table, there’s no space for Huck. So, that’s how it is. Sandra simply took my plus one away because she could, even after I told her no.

I scan the room, and sure enough, there’s the sixteen-year-old. About five tables away, a woman who resembles Arthur is seated with who I assume is her husband and a young man who is definitely the youngest person here. The teenager wears a suit two sizes too big and scrolls on his phone, looking miserable.

Mortified, I take the long walk back to Huck. I’m going to tell him he can go home. He can be free of me if he’d rather be doing something else.

Oh, but what’s this? He’s talking to a tall, leggy blonde in a gorgeous sparkly pantsuit, and she’s laughing and nodding at something he said.

Just what I need, another reminder that I am out of my league with this man. Clearly, he has a type, and it’s not me.

I bite back the tears that threaten to undo me as I approach.

Huck sees me, and his eyes brighten. He holds his arm out and draws me into his side like nothing is wrong. Or he’s continuing to pretend to be the best date ever.

Confused, I look between him and the woman, trying to decipher the vibe between them.

“Whitney, I want you to meet Maisy. Maisy’s the wife of my boss. Well, that makes her my boss too.”

Wait a minute. Maisy, the wedding coordinator that I’ve heard so much about...and all the pieces finally come together. My eyes go to her left hand, where she wears a simple but sweet gold band with multiple stones inset. Of course.

It all makes sense now. Despite the number of weddings I've attended here at Hall Ranch and despite her reputation around Darling Creek, I believe this is the first time I have ever set eyes on her.

"You're the wedding coordinator," I say.

She nods and shakes my hand but then changes her mind and pulls me in for a hug. "So glad our Huck finally has found himself a nice girl."

I bite my bottom lip to keep from saying something I'll regret. If I say, "yes, me too," I affirm that we're officially a couple. Huck looks away, his ears turning red.

Maisy says, "I'm so embarrassed, but it seems like there's been a mix-up. You were supposed to have a plus one, but Sandra, the little scamp, went into my binder and moved the stickers around and messed everything up for the caterers who were setting out the place cards. But no worries. Our Huck here is not going to go hungry. Here."

She hands Huck a place card with his name scrawled on it.

I stammer, "B-but I thought she needed a seat for Arthur's nephew?"

Maisy shrugs. "What the Rhodes don't know won't hurt them. But it most certainly *will* show up on the catering bill."

Maisy winks before shooin' us off to our tables.

Chapter Eleven

Huck

Everything's been settled without embarrassment, but Whitney still looks mortified when seated at our table.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put you through that just because I was stubborn in the face of my friend who turned into a Bridezilla."

Whitney looks so sad and down on herself, and I hate it.

"You didn't do anything wrong."

I rest one arm over the back of her chair and lean in, hoping she'll look up at me.

She nods, staring down at her lap, clutching one arm across her middle. "I did. I thought it would protect me to have a date to Sandra's wedding; instead, I didn't think to protect you. That was treating you like an object. You're a human being, not a coat of armor."

I twist off the cap of a water bottle I snagged on the way to our table and hand it to her. "Now, you drink that and let me talk, okay?"

She looks surprised at my tone but drinks her water anyway, gazing at me over the bottle, wide-eyed.

"You didn't do anything wrong. Sandra is not a nice person. Maybe at one time she was, but she's disrespectful."

Somehow you've turned all that in on yourself. And you need to stop it. You're better than anyone else I've ever met."

While I've been yammering at her, Whitney guzzles most of her water, then stops and stares at me. She blinks, setting aside her water.

"Huck, you barely know me."

"I know enough to know that you deserve better friends. And probably better boyfriends."

Whitney worries her bottom lip and then says, "You don't know the half of it."

Through dinner and the serving of the cake, the awkwardness is palpable. I wonder what she means by that. I want to say more, but I feel obligated to talk to the other people around the table. Mainly single cousins from out of town. They're all nice enough people from different backgrounds and decidedly less well-off and more down-to-earth than anyone else I've met because of this wedding, other than Whitney.

I have to smirk at realizing that this is the table where Sandra decided to cloister the "non-elite" singles.

The toasts are barely memorable, but I'm relieved that Whitney doesn't pull away when I turn my chair to the side so I can rest my arm on the back of her chair. Not only that, but when my thumb begins slow strokes up and down the back of her neck, she leans into me slightly. Just enough to feel her warmth. I have to concentrate on the words of the toast just to keep myself from growing fully erect sitting here next to her, touching her skin, stealing glances at her bare shoulders.

Finally, the awful toasts are over, and the bridal couple takes the dance floor for their first dance.

I turn to look at Whitney, who blushes and looks away. So, she's been staring at me, too. So much for trying to control my erection.

And before I can stop myself, I lean in and murmur next to her ear, her soft tendrils brushing my nose. "If I didn't say it before, you're beautiful."

Her throat bobs, and her chest expands in a gasp. All I want to do is throw her over my shoulder and find a dark corner to kiss. Kiss her gorgeous neck, lick her delicious collarbones, feel her breasts pressed against me in that dress.

A better, more PG-rated option presents itself. The music changes, and the deejay plays a second slow, romantic number.

I stand and hold my hand out to Whitney. “Let’s finish that thought.”

She takes my hand and gives me a curious look. “What thought?”

She stands, and I pull her close, speaking in her ear. “You said I don’t know the half of it regarding your boyfriends. So why don’t you tell me what that means?”

She backs up and smiles at me, and relief floods me when her flirty smile is back. “I heard that you’re not supposed to talk about your exes while on a first date,” she says.

Taking her by the hand, I lead her out to the middle of the dance floor, circling one arm around her waist to hold her close, our opposite hands joined close to my chest. “Technically, it’s our second date,” I remind her.

She laughs. “And it’s a wonder you even showed up for this after everything that went down last night.”

I shake my head, wondering when she will stop this nonsense. “I showed up because that’s what a man does. And I wanted to spend time with you. I can say for certain that I’m not having a miserable time because I’m with you.”

She smiles at me, yet I see something sad behind her eyes. “I’m glad you’re here. You’re the kindest man.”

Kindness has nothing to do with it. More like I’m obsessed. If she knew the thoughts that go through my head when I gaze at her. When I first saw her in that dress tonight, I thought about taking her back to my motel room and doing so many things that have nothing to do with weddings. Touching her everywhere, losing myself in her body, in her kiss. Cupping her pretty tits and teasing her nipples. Tasting her. Bending her over the shabby motel room chair, flipping her

dress up and taking her from behind, hot and frantic, filling my hands with her fleshy hips. Even with me quickly yanking one out before our date, I still went hard upon seeing her tonight.

Why any man would break up with her is confounding to me. Whitney is the sweetest, softest woman. And so much fun.

“It was about a week ago now,” she says. “Brock waited until I had left for work, sent me a text, then didn’t reply when I asked why. Didn’t answer a single question about what happened, what was wrong. Was it something I did? Nothing. When I arrived home, he’d already moved his things out. Brock was just...gone.”

“Coward,” I mutter.

Whitney sighs. “To tell you the truth, I wasn’t all that surprised. Things were weird at the end. But we had a nice beginning, and I thought we had something. Are you sure this isn’t making you uncomfortable?”

“I’m sure. Continue.”

If anything, it’s building up a head of steam about this man who mistreated my girl.

“I thought when Brock asked me out while I was working at the Corner Café that he was friendly and charming. It made sense. The cop and the waitress, it’s a rom-com that writes itself, you know? It was cute the way he had first asked me out by writing a note on the check. I remember the way it made me blush.

“Sadly, there wasn’t much ‘rom’ or even ‘com’ in our story after the first few months. Brock and I settled into a routine. Over time, my jobs came and went while he was promoted.

He became more distant in the past year when he became chief. Many people around town asked when we would get married, and he always answered cagily. That should have been my first clue that we were doomed. But I’d looked around and saw not many other options. Besides that, I’m fiercely loyal, and I’ll fight for anything—including a relationship that’s dead in the water.”

She looks vacantly off in the distance. “Whoa. Whitney. Where’d you go? Did I lose you?”

Whitney shakes her head and gives a small laugh. “No. Dead in the water, it just got me thinking. Maybe that’s why I don’t feel sad or anything at all about Brock. Just empty and used up.

“Anyway, As Sandra’s wedding approached, Brock seemed more and more spooked by the day. When I needed to return the RSVP, and I asked him if he wanted chicken or fish, you’d think I was asking him to get me pregnant or something.”

Thank fuck he didn’t, I think to myself. I would not have a problem marrying a single mother and accepting someone else’s child into my life. But the less messy the breakup with that coward, the better. I don’t want her to ever have to see him again if she doesn’t want to.

“But the worst part is, I still have to see him everywhere. He’s the police chief. He drives down Main Street several times daily, right by my office. He knows I’m there; he can see me through the window, for Pete’s sake. But does he text me? Anything? No. If I go to the Corner Café, there’s a 50/50 chance he’ll be there, enjoying his free coffee. I just wish I had an explanation. Anything. Hell, if he said he’d met someone else, I almost wouldn’t care. But to ghost someone in a town the size of Darling Creek? It’s weird, right? I feel like I wasted five years of my life.”

I pull her in closer. “What else did you do in those five years?”

Whitney’s body stiffens at the sudden, closer contact. She’s warm and so soft and feels perfect in my arms. My nose brushes against her long silky hair, and the scent and feel of it is so intoxicating I can see myself grabbing handfuls of it and just burying my face in it. I want to bury myself in her completely until she forgets the names of anyone who’s ever hurt her.

“What do you mean?”

Letting go of her hand, I've now hugged both my arms around her waist, my hands spanning her lower back, more or less compelling Whitney to rest both of her arms on my shoulders and look me straight in the eye while we sway slowly as the sweet song swirls around us. This feels good. So good I have to force my mind back to what I was asking.

"I mean, what else did you spend your time on. Apart from that ex-boyfriend. I think you'll find your time wasn't totally wasted."

"Oh." She nods. Whitney's so adorable when she bites her lip like that, I need to kiss her and suck that pouty lip into my mouth, stroke it with my tongue. Claim her mouth in every way. Stop staring at her mouth, Huck. It's making your dick too hard; she's going to feel that and know what a pervert you are.

"Well, I quit my job at the Corner Café and took executive assistant classes at the community college three towns over. And, when Brock got promoted to lieutenant and wasn't around as much, I started volunteering at the senior center. And I love it. I've made lots of friends there, and they taught me how to play bridge, mahjonn, basket weaving, and quilting. Oh! I took up quilting. In fact, I made Sandra and Arthur a wedding ring quilt for their gift."

"A wedding ring quilt?"

She smiles wide. "I've never been a person who goes by the registry. I like homemade gifts."

I love Whitney. I love her, and I need to marry her immediately. Where is that preacher, anyway? I'd get this done tonight if there's a way.

"Is that the one with the double ring pattern all over it?" I ask.

She nods, and her expression grows excited like I've flipped a switch.

Whitney tells me all about her quilting group at the senior center, about all the different types of meanings behind different quilt patterns. She's absolutely adorable.

I love this animated side of Whitney. She's self-confident, excited, and chatty, and I'm falling even more in love by the second, even though I have no idea what she's talking about.

But I do like quilts. I have an old one in my cabin that I'd love to show Whitney in a purely platonic way. And I like that they make her happy. I can't help but let my mind wander into wedding territory, wondering if she'll make quilts for our bed. I would be proud to sleep under anything that she made.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The song has ended. In fact, we're about two or three songs into this conversation, and now we're the only couple slow dancing. People are wiggling and gyrating drunkenly all around us as the night wears on, but I do not care.

"And in those five years, I got a better job. Well, it pays better. And I have an office. And I like sitting down for once and talking to people on the phone."

She's smiling again, the brightest I've seen from her all evening. I want more of that. What do I have to do to get her to smile at me like that? Whatever it is, I'll do that thing every damn day for the rest of my life.

"You're amazing, Whitney. No, don't look away."

A blush tints her face pink. "Why not?" she says nervously, looking everywhere but at me.

My hand goes to her chin, and I tilt her face up. "Because you need to be kissed now."

"I do?"

I nod. "If you want."

She sucks in a breath. "I do."

Chapter Twelve

W hitney

Huck's mouth descends on mine with a completely different energy from that kiss last night in the parking lot of Willie's.

While that was tender and reassuring, this one is heated and wet.

He breaks the kiss only to angle his face in the other direction and kiss harder, firmer, capturing my lips with his, brushing his tongue along the seam of my lips.

My hands go to his nape. I kiss back just as hard, and my mouth opens to accept his tongue. He licks into me, and the movement of his warm tongue against mine makes me wild. He pulls away, leaving me panting. Need throbs between my legs.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

Do I ... what?

“Huh? Oh. Y-yes. I mean, no.”

I'm messing this up so badly. I don't want this night to end, but I also don't want him to feel obligated to demonstrate to everyone that we're a couple. If that was a kiss of obligation, it's too late for me. I'm done for.

“You don't? Oh. Okay. We can stay,” he says.

My throat constricts even as I speak the words aloud that I've been thinking all evening. “I mean, you can drive me

home now.”

As much as Huck has made me feel like a queen on his arm, I know all this is an illusion.

Huck’s dark brows knit together as if he doesn’t understand. My stomach trembles inside my body; is he going to make me explain further?

“I want you to know I’m so grateful for you. But you don’t have to keep up the pretense anymore.” My chin starts to tremble. God, why now? I have to stop talking before I cry.

I’ve grown attached to an illusion, and isn’t that just a metaphor for my whole life?

Huck angles in so close our noses nearly touch.

I want to get away, but also I don’t. Even as my heart breaks, I can’t look away from those soulful, hypnotic eyes.

Ever so slightly, Huck shakes his head. What could he be saying no to? Is he going to stand here and deny that this is all pretend?

“This is all my fault,” he says.

“Wait, what?”

Huck’s lips purse as he gnaws on the inside of his lip.

My head is spinning because I don’t know what he means. Meanwhile, my voice is cracking through the tightness in my throat, because everything in me just wants to run out of here and cry. I want to go home and take off this underwire bra and end this perfect night before I dig myself an even deeper hole. Before I fall in love.

“What can I do to show you what I really mean?” Huck grits out.

“What do you really mean? This is just a date, right?”

Growling, he takes my hand. “Let’s go.”

Okay. So that’s it, then. I think about saying goodbye to Sandra, but what’s the point? I don’t think she’ll remember I was even here.

I don't ask where we're going; I just let Huck take me, hand in hand, outside the event center and down the long walk toward a barn hidden behind a stand of trees. The next thing I know, he's helping me get settled on the back of a horse. I should ask if he's lost his mind, where he's taking me, but I don't. It's that part of me that doesn't want this night to end, especially now that we're out of the spotlight completely.

With Huck seated behind me, holding the reins, the horse saunters through the woods and up a steep trail that eventually opens into a wide-open area that overlooks the whole valley. I wouldn't know what I was looking at if I didn't know this entire area by heart. Over to the south are the lights from the town. Overhead, the moon and the stars light our way as we dismount.

Now, I finally ask the question. "What are we doing out here?"

The horse nickers, and nuzzles me as I pet its snout.

I look over and thrill at the sight of Huck loosening his tie.

He's removed his suit jacket and placed it on the ground, and works the horse blanket loose. The shirt seams along his triceps strain against the bulk of his arms.

"I wanted to take you away from all the wedding stuff. To tell you that I like you. I genuinely like you. I want to say more, but that's just enough for now. And maybe if we have something to look at, like the stars, it'll be easier to talk about stuff. And to let you know the so-called obligation date, the date you bid on, is officially over."

My heart falls into my stomach. "Oh."

Even though it's dark, I know he sees the disappointment on my face. "And," he continues, "to let you know that this is the beginning of our first non-contractually obligated date."

I suck in a breath. "You're asking me out?"

"Will you go on a date with me, Whitney?"

I smile. "Yes, of course."

"Good."

He spreads the blanket out on the ground, and holds his hand out to me.

I cover myself in my wrap to stave off the breeze and kick off my shoes. My heart stutters as Huck helps me settle beside him on the blanket.

The horse grazes nearby as Huck snuggles me on the ground. I am feeling ... a lot of ways about this. All of them good.

The stars are the perfect canopy under which two people can talk about anything.

Huck's hair mingles with mine on the rough, horse-smelling blanket, delighting every nerve in my body.

“How did you end up a cowboy, Huck?”

Huck's hand reaches up and gently plays with my hair as he talks. “You don't work in child protective services, do you?”

“No.” What an odd question. “You know where I work.”

“I know,” he says, chuckling. “I get paranoid sometimes. I'm the oldest of three siblings. Our parents died when I was 18, and I cared for my younger brothers without much fuss. Then when I turned 21, I went out for my birthday and got a little too rowdy. I headbutted some idiot at a bar and got dragged into a holding cell. The dumb fuck had shoved me first, but the judge didn't care because I'd escalated the fight, so the charges stuck.

“The foster care system was going to split up my two younger brothers. They were going to take them away from me now that I had a criminal record. There weren't enough families who wanted siblings. So my brothers and I disappeared in the middle of the night. We drove and drove on remote highways, avoiding the interstates in case the cops were looking for us. We stopped in Montana, sleeping in the back of my truck for the night. In the morning, I went into Trudy's grocery store for supplies and saw a posting on the bulletin board that Hall Ranch was looking for help. So we drove over there and applied. I think Lincoln could tell we

were lying about my younger brothers' ages, who were 13 and 14 at the time, but he didn't say anything. He let us stay on a trial basis, then eventually offered us full-time work. That was eight years ago. The cops might still haul me in if I ever get pulled over in Colorado, but at least Frank and Dylan are adults now."

Is it possible for my heart to be full and yet break simultaneously? I'm both honored he chose to share this with me but also so sad for everything his family's been through.

"I'm sorry about your parents," I say. "I know they're proud of you for keeping the family together, no matter what."

"Thanks. I still kick myself for almost fucking it up."

I pivot toward him, and rest my hand on his upper arm. "Like you said, you were young and stupid. You have to forgive yourself. I've forgiven my parents for dropping me off with my granddad when I was just a baby. They couldn't shake their addictions, but they did the right thing for me. I don't hate them for it."

Huck adjusts himself on the blanket to face me. "Have you heard from them?"

"I get a scrawled card every year on my birthday. Sometimes with a few bucks in it. Sometimes with nothing. And it's okay. If Granddad never said a bad word about them, I couldn't find it in me to be angry. I'm angry at their demons but not at them."

Something warm and rough nudges my hand where it rests on his arm. It takes me a moment to realize it's Huck's hand.

"You're a sweet soul, Whitney."

I scoff. "Now you sounds like one of the flirty old men at the senior center."

Huck laughs. "Those flirty old men won't have anything on me, you know."

A small part of me conjures an image of the two of us together, as a couple, well into our old age. When I think about that, it sounds so lovely I almost let myself wish for it. Almost.

I smile at him, and he smiles down at me, the two of us still laughing. “I’ll whack you with my cane if I hear about you misbehaving. And I’ll make sure all the gals at the senior center know you flirt with all the girls, so no one dances with you.”

Huck’s laughter dies down, and his expression turns heated. “But what if you’re the only one I’ll be wanting to dance with anyway, Whitney?”

No one says anything for several moments as I let that sink in. Me? He’ll only want to dance with...me?

Surely I’m misreading him.

“Because...you and I will be the only people left in Darling Creek after the apocalypse?”

Instead of laughing at my joke, Huck studies me with a steady fierceness. I hear him swallow, lean away from me, and tip his hat back. He exhales a ragged breath, his broad chest rising and falling slightly more rapidly than a moment ago.

Did I offend him? My gut clenches when he turns his face back to me, then clears his throat.

“Let me be clear, Whitney. I’m saying all these flirty things because I like you and want to be with you. I don’t want just one date. I don’t just want friendship. I want to be your guy.”

His eyes fall to my mouth, where I’m chewing on my bottom lip.

“Huck,” I start.

He hears the hesitance and pounces on it. “Don’t tell me we can’t be together for some dumb made-up reason. I’m not on this date out of pity. Neither of us got anything to prove out here; nobody’s watching. And I’m telling you that I want to be with you. Do you want to be with me?”

“Huck,” I squeak.

“What?”

My voice is barely above a whisper because my throat is now tight with a wholly different emotion than thirty minutes ago when I thought the night was over.

He likes me for who I am and doesn't like me running myself down. And oh my gosh, I think I love him.

At least I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with him already. And he's right. Nobody's opinion matters but ours, so I'll tell him what I want with all my heart instead of what my head wants to say.

"I wasn't going to contradict you," I say. Well, I was at first. Yeah, a little bit of a lie.

"You weren't?" The hint of a smile in his voice squeezes my heart.

"Nuh-uh. I was going to say we should kiss some more to make sure that part works. Romantic chemistry does not always translate to physical compatibility and...."

The outline of Huck's big shoulder against the moonshine suddenly closes in, and I inhale sharply. He angles his face over mine and kisses my lips. And my heart may dance out of my chest.

This is nothing like the contact on the dance floor. This is a full, fierce, and hungry press of mouth on mouth. His lips were made for this, and I can feel his hunger all the way to my toes. The way his mouth moves on mine does all sorts of delicious things to my body, making me ache to kiss back, touch him, and pull him down on top of me.

With our faces so close together, I inhale his masculine scent of spice and pine. Without thinking twice about it, I touch the back of his neck.

The light touch does something to Huck, and the kiss heats up. He licks across my bottom lip, heating my core. My heart flutters. My sex aches with need.

Huck angles his body over mine, his big arms propped up on either side of my shoulders. His fingers play in my splayed-out hair, and the kissing is so charged and overwhelming that I forget how messy I must look to him. My makeup and hair

must be a wreck. My dress is surely rumpled from laying on this blanket.

He breaks away from the kiss with a loud, wet noise that makes my nipples hard, aching for contact. My entire body is on the verge of losing control, roiling with pleasure.

Huck rubs the tip of his nose against mine.

“How was that, professor? Does the attraction translate to compatibility?”

My mind has gone blank with our kissing, and I forget what I was saying before. All the blood is rushing to other places besides my brain. Is this what people mean when they talk about swooning? If so, I’m pretty sure that’s what I’m doing.

“Feels like a yes.”

His devilish eyes crinkle at the corners. “Sounds like you’re not sure. Well, then. We’ll have to keep going until we have a resounding yes.”

And his mouth is on mine again, slicking his warm tongue inside with a claiming kiss.

Huck’s tonguing owns and devours me. And I love it. I want to keep kissing Huck forever, and to do that, he’s going to get everything he asked for. I need to be his.

Huck continues plundering my mouth, tasting like sugar, lemons, and vanilla icing from the wedding cake. Beyond that, it’s a taste I can’t describe. It’s just...him.

The wetness blooming between my legs sets off all sorts of new urges. I allow my tongue to caress his mouth the way his does mine. His breathing is hot against my cheek, and I can feel his chest expanding, as his breath becomes more ragged.

The kissing leaves us both panting when he pulls away. I whimper at the distance between us; I want more. I want to touch and taste and feel his body on top of me.

“What is it, Huck?”

“Just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m wonderful. Your mouth is sinfully perfect.”

This gets a sweet chuckle from him.

“We can stop if you want,” he says, nuzzling against my jawline.

Now that would be a crime. And with the way he’s now dragging his face up and down my throat, making me all kinds of aroused, he’s making it very difficult for me to pump the brakes. “Why...why would I want you to do that? Why would we stop?”

I don’t know where to touch him, so I thread all ten fingers into the hair on his nape. I give the slightest tug, but he’s not going anywhere. I moan, feeling embarrassed at how turned on and needy I am.

Huck kisses the base of my throat where it meets my collarbone. “Because I want your first time with me to be special.”

I run my hand along his jaw, feeling the delicious scrape of the scruff that’s just starting to come in again. “This feels pretty special already. Doesn’t it?”

“Hell yes,” he says. The ache in his voice nearly does me in.

“Then you should keep kissing me,” I say.

“Whitney,” he groans, pressing his forehead to mine.

“Huck,” I say with a teasing smile. “I want you. I wanted to jump your bones the second I saw you on that stage yesterday. And I’m not a virgin. You don’t have to be careful with me. I’m ready.”

This time when I give another gentle tug, Huck lowers his weight down against me, covering my breasts with his big chest.

I am blanketed, covered, and protected by the man I’m pretty sure I love. The only thing I fear is blurting out the L-word too soon.

Chapter Thirteen

Huck

Whitney's kissing has turned from delicious and soft into urgent and needy. And I love all versions of it.

Her satin lips taste sweeter than wedding cake.

In my life, I've only had one other partner, years ago, before my brothers and I moved to Darling Creek. I was young and too eager, and that relationship had not ended well.

I know more now. I know what I want out of life; right now, I want to keep kissing Whitney forever.

She kisses me like she's already my wife. Already mine.

Her kisses, her hands in my hair, her delicate nails scratching the nape of my neck, her small, breathless moans. It's all too much and not enough.

I want more of her, more kissing, more tasting. I imagine pleasing her so well she rakes me with those nails on my bare back. I long to hear those moans become louder and louder until she's screaming my name.

I force myself to slow down, ease up, and let her set the pace. I have to make sure this is what she wants. I need her to say the words and take what she wants from me.

So I continue kissing and licking into her mouth and let Whitney's hands do the roaming. God, she feels incredible beneath me.

My tongue licks into her mouth repeatedly, reveling in her pink mouth, the scrape of her lovely teeth, her softness, her eagerness, her sweet taste.

When her fingers tug at my hair and her soft body squirms under me, my tight cock strains against my zipper.

“Huck. Please. I need you to touch me.”

My hand goes to the outside of Whitney’s thigh, caressing her bare leg up the inside of her dress. I warn, “You’re so soft. My hands are rough; you might not like them touching you everywhere.”

She grabs a fistful of my shirt. “Why don’t you let me decide? Do you...don’t you want to touch my breasts?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ve been thinking about those pretty tits since I first saw you in that dress.”

With a strangled whimper, she takes my hand and presses it against one of her breasts, over the soft material of the dress. I let out a groan into her mouth as I squeeze it, kneading it and teasing out her nipples into hard nubs.

“Oh,” Whitney gasps. “Huck. More. Please.” Her soft pleadings come in short one-syllables, making my cock ache to come out.

She lets go of my hand and circles her arms around my neck, her back arching off the blanket, her body insisting on firmer pressure. Our kisses grow feverish and wet, and soon I’ve got both hands cupping her breasts, squeezing and stroking both nipples. And then she’s hooking one leg around my hips, demanding more of me.

And oh shit, do I want to give it all to her, right here under the stars. But I also want to protect her. Who knows who might see us.

“My hands,” I breathe between kisses. “Callouses snagging on your pretty dress. Gonna ruin it.”

She hums into my mouth, then breaks the kiss. “Then pull the top down and touch me, skin to skin.”

Time to slow down before I nut in someone else’s trousers.

“Whitney. I can’t have you exposed out here like this. Gonna take you back to my cabin.”

“C-cabin?”

“I live at one of the cabins down yonder, past the barn, and up the lane. We can go there...if you want.”

“Oh...oh, Huck, I want to go, but I don’t want this moment to end. I need...I need...oh god, I don’t know what I need....”

Judging by how she’s arching her body against mine, I know what she needs.

I can do that without exposing her body to the elements... If only I’m able to control myself.

Chapter Fourteen

Whitney

Huck must think I'm an absolutely demanding wanton harlot with the way I'm climbing all over him and rubbing up against him.

But he doesn't show it. He's too much of a gentleman.

Huck sweetly kisses me again and rolls to the side, gliding his big hand down over my ribs and lower, and not stopping until his hand is under my dress again. But this time, his hand skims over the skin of my inner thigh, and oh my god...

"That feels so good," I murmur.

With one arm cradling my head, Huck cups the heat between my legs. When I let out a sudden gasp, he swipes a teasing kiss across my lips. "This what you need, baby?"

Baby. That word, on his lips, melts away the last of my control. My muscles tighten of their own accord. From somewhere deep, a flush of heat crawls up to the surface of my skin.

"Yes, Huck. Please."

I need him to have his way with me. To stretch my panties and fuck me with his fingers...and more. So much more.

Instead, he swipes his thick fingers over the soft material at my crotch and lets out a soft groan. "Whitney. I can feel how wet you are."

Huck's voice is tight with restraint. His rigid length pressing into my thigh clues me into what he might be holding back. Oh. I can't wait to see that. And touch it. And taste it. Slow down, Whitney. You have all the time in the world to explore and play and...

"Oh!" I nearly fall apart when Huck's thick digit nudges the material aside and delves into my split. Oh...yes. Those weathered cowboy hands feel as good as I imagined they would. Even better.

"You good?"

Huck's so sweet to keep checking in with me, but it's also maddening. Every time he stops to ask me if I'm okay—if I like something, if I need something else...his thoughtfulness pricks at my heart, yet also makes my touch-starved body all the needier. I'm vibrating by the time he slowly...slowly drags two rough knuckles through my wetness, stretching the fabric of my underwear to its limit.

I'm going to come soon...soon. Huck just needs to find my clit, claim it, and push me over the edge.

Instead, he murmurs against my throat, building my arousal to such heights I could scream. I bite my lip to quiet that urge and push my hips into his hand, chasing the pressure.

"Huck..." I lift my hips off the blanket as he hooks one finger into the waistband of my underwear and tugs them down.

Leaving my underwear around my legs, just above the knee, feels extra dirty, and I love it. It's like he doesn't want me to wrap my legs around him, which is all I want to do right now. I want nothing more than to go fast, but he insists on taking his time.

All thought about Huck being a wicked tease goes right out of my head when he spreads my wetness over my clit.

"Huck. Oh god!" He sinks one finger into my channel and continues his ministrations of my clit. The dual sensations are almost too much.

I feel a powerful need to rub myself all over him. Anywhere. Everywhere. While my body involuntarily bucks against his tormenting hand, I pull his hair, dragging his mouth away from my neck.

“Whitney,” Huck starts, and the rest of his ragged words trail off. I suck his tongue into my mouth hard—a brazen thing I’ve never done—and Huck responds with a desperate, strangled groan. His cock jerks against my hip, and I smile. He may be torturously slow with me, but the knowledge that I can make this big cowboy equally crazed is a potent drug.

With one more strum of his finger against my clit, my orgasm breaks over me.

I shudder, my mouth agape, but no noise comes out. I’ve never felt this out of control.

Huck kisses me tenderly through my release, murmuring my name, prolonging the moment by not letting up on my clit. The pleasure is immense and only builds and builds until finally, a guttural sound I don’t recognize rips from my throat. Am I a rabid feline? God, where did that come from, my toes?

My body begins to relax, and his touch overwhelms me.

“Huck,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

His soft laugh feathers across my neck where he dots my skin with kisses. “Pleasure’s all mine, baby.”

I want so much to return the favor. I push him away about an inch to snake my hand down between us. I cup his length, but Huck grasps my hand, bringing it to his mouth and kissing my palm.

“But aren’t you...?”

“Baby. I’m never not erect when I’m around you.”

“Do you want me to help you with that?” I ask with a wide, languid grin.

“No.”

I’m surprised. “No? But...don’t you want—”

He cuts me off. “This was for you. I wanted to give you something to remember this moment.”

This beautiful man sucks his fingers clean, leaving me gaping at how sexy that is, even in the dark, lit from above by starlight.

All I can do is smile and say stupid one-syllable words. “Oh.”

Chapter Fifteen

Huck

A distant celebrating sound has us turning to look down the mountain.

“The guests are getting ready to line up for the farewell. I should say goodbye,” Whitney says.

Although I could stay out all night with her, and I’d like to remind Whitney of how poorly her so-called friend Sandra has treated her, my girl still wants to return to the event center for the farewell.

We rush toward the scene as quickly as the horse can take us down the trail safely.

But when we arrive, it’s more than just wedding guests milling around and waiting for the happy couple to depart in the white Rolls Royce.

A familiar uniformed man turns around, along with everyone else, when we trot up.

Before I can stop her, Whitney dismounts. “Brock! What are you doing here?”

With a neutral face, her ex and the police chief saunters forward, one hand on his sidearm and one hand rattling handcuffs.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask a little too loudly after my feet hit the ground. Everyone stares.

That's when another someone emerges from the milling crowd. An imposing man in his sixties, with a gray mustache, a pinched expression, and not at all dressed for a wedding in a golf shirt and pajama pants. An odd combination, but I'm not exactly a snappy dress on most occasions.

"That's her. She's the thief. Arrest her, please," the man says.

I move in next to Whitney, putting myself between her and Brock with one arm around her shoulder. "Excuse me, what are the charges?"

Brock lifts an eyebrow. "Sir, you need to step aside before I charge you with interfering with police business."

Whitney is white as a sheet when I turn back to her. She swallows, then says softly, "It's okay, Huck. I think I know what this is about."

"Damn right you do. Consider yourself fired."

"I figured as much, Mr. Clark," she says.

"This is him?" I ask, gesturing with my thumb.

She nods. "I donated some money to the auction when Violetta came to see me looking for donations. I know seventy-five dollars is a lot, Mr. Clark, but it felt like the right thing to do, even though I know it was wrong."

Am I losing my mind?

"Confessing will make this a lot easier; thank you, Whitney," Mr. Clark says. "But you can arrest this man if he doesn't get out of the way."

Brock turns and says, "That will be up to me, thanks. Do you still want to press charges? What if she just gives the money back?"

I don't make a move except to extract my wallet from inside my jacket. "If this is all over seventy-five bucks, I got that right here. You didn't have to make a scene."

Mr. Clark thinks for a moment. "I'll take the money and consider not pressing charges if she does community service."

Brock seems to be growing increasingly impatient with the scene. “You are not the judge. Decide whether you want to press charges so I can get this over with and go home.”

Mr. Clark huffs. I turn back to face Whitney and give her an encouraging smile because I hate to see her so dejected and scared. “Baby, if you’d told me you were such an outlaw, I’d have told you to keep your mouth shut when the cops come sniffing around.”

Her eyes widen. “You mean...you’re not mad that I stole money?”

“Fuck no.”

“I see the company you keep is quite an influence. I stand on principle. Arrest her,” says Mr. Clark.

This is the stupidest shit I’ve ever witnessed. And I’ve seen a greenhorn cowpoke attempt to use bull semen to impregnate another bull, so I know from stupid.

“Let me just ask,” I say, turning to Brock. “Can I post bail now, and can she sign something that says she’ll appear in court on Monday? Let’s not make her friends watch her get taken away in a patrol car. She’s hardly gonna run from this, right?”

While Mr. Clark continues to splutter—clearly, he wanted to make a grand gesture, and an example out of her—Brock thinks it over.

“Fine,” he grumbles, going to his patrol car to, I assume, grab some paperwork.

Someone else picks this moment to chime in, and the voice makes my blood run cold.

“You all are just taking horseback rides at our wedding because you feel like it? I never thought you’d be the one to show me up at my wedding, but I guess I was wrong.”

Everyone turns to see the bride and groom preparing for their grand exit. Everyone else has failed to line up because they’re watching the scene, and Sandra looks pissed.

Oh, shit.

“You’ve changed, Whitney. You and your cowboy friends are out here causing a drunken scene, And now you’re singlehandedly ruining my wedding.”

I curl my arm tighter around Whitney’s shoulder. I focus my energy away from Sandra and the groom, who seems to be wisely backing up his wife. Instead, I keep my eyes on Whitney.

“You want me to handle this, baby?”

My girlfriend—and it feels good to call her that, even if it’s not out loud—shakes her head no.

She rolls her shoulders back, takes a deep breath, and then turns to Sandra. “First of all, no one is ruining your wedding. You’re married. Congratulations, you did it. Second of all, I’m not the least bit drunk. I’m also not your doormat or less important than you. And I’m not silly or strange for wanting to stay in my hometown. Good for you for pursuing your dreams, but your dreams are not superior to anyone else’s. Have a nice honeymoon.”

Brock produces the paperwork, and Whitney signs on the dotted line, promising to appear in court on Monday.

While we’re busy doing that, Sandra and Arthur carry on with their farewell exit as if nothing has happened.

“I didn’t think you’d be surprised, Whitney.”

My back stiffens when Brock says this.

She looks up, hands him the paperwork, and shakes her head at him. “Surprised about what? You leaving while I was at work and breaking up with me over text? Or about you dragging your feet for five years?”

Brock sighs heavily as if he’s been giving her feelings any thought.

“I mean about us breaking up. You kinda...turned into an old lady, you know?”

“The fuck, dude?” I step toward him, but Whitney puts a hand on my arm.

“No, it’s okay, Huck,” she says. “I want to hear this. Brock, please explain.”

“Ever since I started getting promoted on the force, you pulled away. You started spending more and more time at the senior center with those old folks. You quit your job at the diner, and I never got to see you while I was on patrol duty. And then, all your basket weaving and quilting supplies started taking over the apartment. And one day, I realized, I’m going to run for county sheriff. If I do that, I’m going to need a wife. And a wife who’s...I don’t know...a little more ambitious, I guess. I’m sorry.”

I expect some pushback. Arguing. At least a few zingers from my girl. But all Whitney does is smile and nod.

“Thank you, Brock. I wish I’d known earlier that you felt that way, and I wish we could have had this conversation at our breakup instead of just ghosting me. But I’m happy to know that. Good luck with your election.”

And I’m done with all the niceties. “Whitney, can I punch him now?”

“No,” she says, squeezing my arm.

“But I really want to.”

“I’m right here, sir,” Brock says.

“Huck. Think about it. You hit him? That’s assaulting an officer with witnesses. That’s prison. I can’t have my boyfriend in prison. As much as I want to write you dirty letters, it doesn’t sound fun.”

I smile at her. “How dirty?”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Wanna play prisoner and pen pal and find out?”

“Hell yes.”

I have to be satisfied enough with casting a smug look at Brock.

“We’ve gotta run. What can I say? The girl loves her play time.”



Back at my cabin, I'm relieved that Maisy has already cleared out the bridal things from my space. In fact, you'd never even know someone was here. However, there is a faint scent of women's perfume in the air.

"Huck?"

"Yeah?"

"Why does it smell like hairspray in here?"

Oh, that's what I've been smelling. "Seems like your friend wanted to use one of the cowboy cabins for her bridal room or whatever. To put on her dress."

Whitney cocks her head at me. "Why?"

"Don't know other than Maisy said she wanted some authentic cowboy experience."

The way Whitney reacts to this news is somewhat unexpected.

"That's so wrong," she says.

I shrug and throw a log into the wood-burning stove. It's a mild summer night, but it still gets cold in the mountains.

"Doesn't bother me none."

"Well, it bothers me."

When I turn around, Whitney looks pissed, her eyes wide and her hands on her hips.

"Why?"

"Because Sandra had to have her way, she pushes until she gets what she wants. Meanwhile, you get pushed out of your cabin, and it's not fair!"

I could argue that in exchange for that, I got a few days off of work, and if I hadn't, I never would have met her, but it seems like Whitney has been bottling something in for a while, and it needs to get out.

“So, this is a pattern with her?”

Whitney throws up her hands. “Yes! She’s been like this her entire life. When we were in the school play at eight years old, she was jealous that I got to play Fern, and she had to play Charlotte. She somehow convinced me to ask the teacher if we could switch roles, even though I didn’t want to. My whole life, she’s made me feel like I didn’t belong where I was, and yet she always wanted to keep me close anyway. As a kid, I clung to her and did what she said because I wanted a friend. But now...now I feel like I’ve been dealing with a lifetime of bullshit, and I want to kick myself.”

I’ve been listening while also concentrating on making my perfectly swirled scrambled eggs for a midnight snack. Just listening, nodding, and taking it all in. Boy, that Sandra really did a number on this girl. My girl, I remind myself. My Whitney. How dare she?

I shake my head and try to think of something to say when I hear the snuffle.

Turning my gaze to Whitney, I see her wiping away a tear, her shoulders slumped forward.

I’ve heard enough.

Setting down my spatula and clicking off the burner, I go to her.

Whitney melts into my chest, and I exhale, relieved that I did the right thing by offering her my arms. I hate how the world has mistreated this woman. Brock, Sandra, her boss. I have half a mind to confront each and every one of them and give them a piece of my mind. But I know that’s not what she wants. She can take care of her own problems, and all I have to do is stand by her.

I’ve got the better end of the deal, because Whitney fits perfectly in my arms, with her cheek resting against my chest. I stroke the back of her head while I hold her tight, and some strange nurturing instinct has me swaying back and forth.

Whitney’s breath heaves in shudders as she douses my shirt with tears. I hadn’t realized she was still actively crying.

Mental note: she's a quiet crier.

In fact, she does everything quietly. If Whitney is prone to bottling up her feelings, then we have something in common. If I'm going to be good enough for her, I'd better pay close attention.

Which won't be a problem for me because all I want to do is be by her side.

Chapter Sixteen

Whitney

“Now that I have that out of my system,” I say, smiling.

Huck kisses me tenderly, reminiscent of the kiss from last night. But I don't want tender.

I want catharsis.

Without another thought of caution, I grasp the front of his shirt and pull him down fiercely, planting our mouths together in a claiming, furious kiss.

My wrap drops to the floor, and Huck stands back. I think he's going to pick it up, but he simply pulled back to dot my bare skin with kisses.

The delicate strap drops to my shoulder. One, then the other, as Huck's mouth ravages my collarbones, my shoulders, my throat.

I moan as he paints kisses across my chest, down between the mounds of my breasts.

His mouth continues to nuzzle down my breastbone, and the delicate fabric rolls down my front. On and on it goes, and I'm so overcome in the moment, I don't notice until it's too late: my breasts are bare to him, and my dress is bunched down under them.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, working his mouth over my skin, my need throbbing between my legs at the feel of his scruff on

my sensitive tips.

He takes one nipple in his mouth so delicately. My body sings. I sigh his name as he licks over it, coaxing it into a tight peak. My need only heightens when he repeats this with the other nipple, and my leg wraps around his middle to gain more contact.

“I need you, Huck.”

He ignores me at first, sucking more of my breast into his mouth.

“I want to make you come with my mouth, Whitney.”

I gasp at the visual. “I don’t know what or how to do it, though. I’ve never...he never...”

“Do whatever. Pull my hair if you want. Just let me taste you,” he says, his eyes heated.

Oh, good god.

There’s a bed in the corner of his small cozy cabin, and he seats me on the edge of it, my dress still bunched under my tits. It would feel comical if it weren’t for the way he stares at me like he wants to eat me alive.

Kneeling in front of me, Huck slowly tugs my panties down, all the way off my legs this time. Then he spreads me wide and hoists one leg over each of his big shoulders. My body thrums and aches as he kisses down my belly, my pelvis, and the curve of my inner thigh. He brushes his lips too softly along my folds, opening my split with his thumbs.

Chapter Seventeen

Huck

Whitney's slick sweetness is my new obsession.

I hold back, kissing her damp petals as she writhes on the mattress, me kneeling in front of her. Soon, I'm feasting on her, devouring her essence like I'll die without it. All the while, her soft whimpers make my aching cock throb. I sink my tongue into her lovely channel, and her hips arc into me. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging a little, making me smile, and bringing me closer to the edge of my control.

Her hips roll, her thighs squeeze my head, and her fisting of my hair grows tighter. Whitney's honey taste is perfection on my tongue. I want all of it for myself, but I also spread it over her pussy, swirling her cream around her clit.

The small, rigid bead of her clit fits perfectly into my mouth. I suck and tease it between my lips, being extra careful not to overwhelm her.

Her thighs tremble against my shoulders and she comes, drenching my chin. I swallow down her honey and don't stop licking and tasting until her fingers grasp my head, yanking me away from her core.

When I finish, I share Whitney's salty-sweetness with her. Her soft blush when she tastes herself on my lips is a gift.

And I'm so appreciating the view of Whitney splayed out on my bed, with her dress pulled down under her tits and her

skirt hiked up around her waist.

She automatically starts to hike up her bodice over her breasts while I help her stand on her wobbly legs.

I help her straighten out her skirt, then notice the slightly disappointed look in her eye.

“Is it time for me to go? Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“Nope. I’m supposed to still be on vacation. I go back to work Monday morning. And even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t want you to leave.”

“You wouldn’t?” She comes up on her toes, a slight smile coming back to her lips.

I shake my head no. “I don’t want our third date to end.”

Whitney beams. Standing before me, she starts to unbutton my shirt, biting her bottom lip in the cute way that she does. “So...do you want me to go down on you?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she says with a pout. Whitney reaches down and cups my length, rubbing up and down on it. It feels so good, and I’m so damn close I could black out from the exertion of holding back.

Without a word, I take her hand and lead her to the small bathroom in the corner of the cabin.

“Oh,” she breathes. “I think I like where this is going.”

Chapter Eighteen

W hitney

We agree to disrobe at the same time as the steam from the shower fills the tiny bathroom of this log cabin.

Whatever self-consciousness I feel at being naked first dissipates the second Huck slips out of the crisp white button-up shirt. I knew several cowhands on Granddad's ranch growing up, and I knew they were muscular, solid types, and nobody messed with them. But I'd never actually taken the time to stare. Even if I had, I believe Huck is cut from an entirely different cloth. His triceps bunch as he turns and hangs the shirt on a hanger, and I find myself staring at obliques that ripple from his ribcage down past the waistband of his trousers. He's hard, tanned, and ridged everywhere.

Huck keeps his flirtatious look in his eye while bending over to pick up his dropped trousers, then expertly folds them over and hangs them on the hanger.

I don't know if he intends this to be a strip tease, but it's working.

When his thumbs hook the waistband of his underwear, I step forward and cup his length. "Let me," I say.

He says nothing but moves his hands out of the way, resting them high against the edge of the shower stall.

I tug down his underwear and free his cock. It's long and thick, jutting out from his body with a creamy bead on the red

tip. I come closer, closing my hand around it, swiping the bead of precum with my thumb, then let him watch me suck it off.

“Fuck, Whitney. What are you doing to me?”

I smile, his gritted curse spiking my arousal all over again. “How do you want me to make you come.”

He crushes my body against him for a searing, mind-melting kiss. Huck licks into my mouth like he owns it. Breathless, he grits out, “Come on.”

He pulls me under the spray and closes the shower door. I’m still waiting for an answer while we both stand under the warm water, Huck smoothing my wet hair away from my face.

I finally understand what he wants when he hands me a bottle of hair conditioner.

Oh. Okay, then.

Blushing deeply, I squeeze some of it in my hand, laughing at the bottle’s disgusting noise. Then I warm it up with my hands before smoothing the stuff over his cock.

He comes in my hand in less than three pumps. “Sorry, I just...I’ve been so fucking hard for hours and hours...staring at you in that dress...”

I roll up on my toes to press a kiss to his lips. “I’m not sorry.” Huck makes me feel sexy and powerful. Knowing this big, strong cowboy has been working so hard all evening to tame his erection? I shiver.

“Besides,” I say, smiling up at him. “If I’m staying all night, we have plenty of time to do that again, and make it last longer.”

Huck’s hooded gaze in response to that has me trembling. “Girl, you’re getting me hard again, talking like that.”

The slow, licking kiss that follows lights me up with fresh need. Steam blankets us as I lean all my weight against this man, letting my face nuzzle the stubble on his cheek. He pulls back to watch my reaction as he cups my sex, making me come with his fingers. Twice.

Chapter Nineteen

Huck

I'm not sure who wakes up whom. Nor am I sure when my cock found its way to nestle within Whitney's sweet honey lips.

We fell into bed shortly after we ran out of hot water, still naked from the shower, with me spooned up behind my Whitney, the fire crackling in the stove, and the stars shining in through the window.

Now at sunrise, we've had a scant couple of hours' sleep. And yet, all I can think about is slipping inside her sweetness. Whitney's leg reaches back to anchor herself against my body as I thrust forward, sliding my cock through her warmth.

"I didn't mean to wake up like this, baby, I swear," I say between kisses along the warm skin of her bare upper back. I give each pretty freckle there a slow, licking kiss, smiling at how she shivers.

Whitney laughs and pushes her ass back. "Shit happens when people fall asleep naked."

My laughter is cut short when she reaches between her legs and strokes the tip of my cock. I'm awake now.

"Baby."

"Hmm?" Whitney asks teasingly.

I inhale sharply as she teases the tip, her thumb rubbing back and forth along the ridge.

Her petting feels so good I'm losing control. I bare my teeth against her flesh, my words full of grit. "Shit. Whitney. I need to fuck you for real."

"Then fuck me, cowboy."

Growling, I pull away briefly and flip her onto her back, my cock aching all the more at the brief parting. As if we've done this a hundred times before, Whitney automatically wraps her legs around my hips. I love the way she fits around me. I love everything about the way she makes me feel. Her pelvis grinds into my cock, and the friction ... Fuck, I'm going to enjoy plowing this woman every night for the rest of my damn life.

"I have condoms," I breathe into her mouth between kisses, my body screaming in protest on the inside as I rise from the warm bed to wrap myself up with the condom I stuffed into my wallet yesterday, just in case.

When I return to the bed, Whitney folds me in tighter than before, letting my cock slide between her honey lips once again while my mouth plays with her pretty breasts.

Our hips fuse together as I press the tip in, letting her body adjust to me. My Whitney wiggles under me, whispering, "More."

More, she'll get. I push in all the way to the hilt. She gasps, and her muscles clamp down.

"Fuck, you feel so good, baby," I rasp.

"Oh my god, you feel amazing, Huck."

It's never felt this good with anyone, ever. Whitney's body is as strong as her spirit, and she clutches me tight as we move together with every thrust of my hips.

She's strong, but small underneath me, and I worry about crushing her. I ease my weight off her, bracketing my arms around her head on the mattress. This becomes more and more

difficult to sustain the more she clings to me. And I love the way she clings.

Sensing my restraint, even as my hips push in, she murmurs, “Let go. You can’t hurt me. I want to feel all of you on me. I promise I won’t break.”

“Whitney.” I press my forehead to hers, and I thrust again and again.

“Please.”

The lady must have everything she wants.

I lower myself down, and she moans. She kisses me wildly, the clash of our bodies fiercer.

Whitney’s muscles grip as I slide in and out, and soon my orgasm breaks over me.

“Fuck, Whitney,” I breathe against her neck, still moving against her, both of us sweaty.

“Yes, Huck?” She says this teasingly, caressing my ass with her feet like a temptress.

“You’re mine. Forever.”

She gasps, and the surprise on her face is enough to send me crashing into her again, my cum surging out of me.

“Whose are you?” I ask while her muscles wring out every last drop from my ragged body.

“Yours,” she whispers.

“And I’m yours, Whitney.”

“Yes, you are, cowboy.”

“And I love you.”

She freezes around me. “You do?”

I nod, waiting for the moment she rejects me, or tells me I’m moving too fast for her. “I fell for you the second I saw you. I knew I was going to marry you.”

“You did?”

She seems genuinely surprised, which is laughable. Does she still not know how perfect she is? How her inner beauty glows around her every second?

“I don’t say that shit lightly,” I say.

She shakes her head. “I don’t either. And I love you too.”

My heart soars.

It’s the perfect start to my Sunday. Hallelujah.

Chapter Twenty

Whitney

Three months later

Although Huck and I wanted a small, quick wedding, some people were not having it.

When word got out that I was engaged, my friends at the senior center insisted that we let them plan something for us.

And since I'm not all that picky, I told them to go for it.

Huck and Violetta surprised me by secretly securing Pastor Jane to call bingo on Saturday night, shortly after we'd obtained our marriage license.

I was slightly hurt when they told me that Pastor Joan would call bingo instead of me, but when she called us up to the front to exchange our vows, I soon realized what was happening.

The basket weavers and floral arranging clubs put together a beautiful bouquet for me to carry. Ida Simpson and my quilting friends made me the cutest, most chaotic dress and veil out of fabric scraps. And the sugar-free-grape-juice-and-paint club sneaked real wine in for the toast. Of course, they did.

With some help from the older folks, Huck also secretly got in touch with my retired granddad in Florida, who made

the trip to surprise me and walk me down the aisle. It's a good thing I wasn't preparing by putting on makeup that day, because I sobbed at the sight of the old man in his creased jeans and old stetson hat.

No surprise, he and Huck got on like a house on fire.

I should have guessed something fishy was happening when half the town decided to show up for bingo that night.

At first I bristled at seeing the police chief there, but turns out Brock was curious about the hustle and bustle around the senior center, and wanted to check on the old folks, so no harm done.

Brock has moved on to someone else, a single mom who's head of the PTA and sells health shakes to anyone who will stand still long enough to listen to her sales pitch. No hard feelings from me, as they seem happy, and she seems ultra-energetic. Probably from the health shakes. We're all square as long as I don't have to host a party for her.

I no longer work for Mr. Clark, needless to say. Though it must be noted that after Mr. Clark pressed charges, half the regulars from the senior center showed up at the magistrate's office and demanded to testify as character witnesses on my behalf. While the judge tried to explain that it was not that kind of hearing, he eventually gave up and tossed out the theft charge.

My record is clean, but Huck still pretends I'm an outlaw. The idea gets him very, very excited in the bedroom. I am not complaining.

The town of Darling Creek offered me a full-time job at the senior center, working as the receptionist. Because that takes away from my socializing time with the older folks, Ida Simpson has been campaigning for me to move up to activities director when the current one retires.

After Sandra's honeymoon, she and I met for coffee at the new bakery, where she bought me two raspberry jelly-filled donuts. I could only take that as a symbol of her doing some self-reflection. And then she sobbed. I expected her to tell me

the wedding band quilt was not her style, but she loved it so much it made her stop and think about some things.

“I didn’t even know you knew how to quilt,” she’d blubbered.

Although I don’t think we’ll ever be the friends we used to be when we were younger, it was a good talk. She apologized for taking away my plus-one at the wedding, and for how she treated the both of us. With some people, forgiveness and basic respect is better than forcing a friendship.

If we end up with kids the same age, though, and Sandra gets uppity with me at PTA meetings, we might have to have another donut intervention.

As for Huck, he still surprises me.

Like last week, when we signed our marriage license, I discovered his real name is Huckleberry. I did not say a word, as he seemed embarrassed. But I secretly hope he’ll let me use that for at least a middle name for one of our kids.

If he says no, I’ll keep trying. Because with this man, I plan on spending the rest of my life making baby quilt after baby quilt until I’m making them for our grandbabies.

Or, I should say, I’ll be busy making the quilts when we’re not busy underneath them.

Epilogue

Five years later

Whitney

“It says here that Trevor should be kicking by now.”

My wife is poring over her copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, as usual.

I've taken her on this baby moon trip to Lake Tahoe to help her relax, but all she's done is fret over one thing or another.

I appreciate her book reading. I do. I've even picked up that book from time to time just to help me understand what my wife is going through.

But there comes a time to stop worrying too much and just enjoy the moment.

I hold out my hand. “Let me see.”

With a worried look, Whitney hands over the book and shows the paragraph. “Says here he should be kicking...”

“See?” Whitney's eyes widen, her concerns seemingly confirmed.

“...In another week or two,” I say.

She sits back in her cushy patio chair and rubs her belly, pouting. “But he’s part you. I would have thought he’d be running laps in there by now.”

I mark Whitney’s place in the book with her bookmark and set it down on the coffee table in front of us on the veranda, where her decaf has gone cold. Then, I take her hand in mine and say, “Would it make you feel better if we found someone to listen to the baby?”

She nods silently, still worrying her bottom lip. Impossibly, my Whitney is even more beautiful pregnant than not. Even when she’s worrying her head about things she shouldn’t be worried about. It kills me that she can’t calm down, and I’ll do anything to help her relax on this trip.

I lean over, kiss her forehead, and tell her I’ll be back.

“Where are you going?”

I pick up her cold coffee mug and announce that I’m going to change out of this bathrobe and speak to the someone about where to find an obstetrician who can see us briefly on short notice.

Moments later, I’m in the lobby, explaining things to the concierge.

He nods. “Certainly, sir.”

But his search turns out to be fruitless, despite a valiant effort.

As the two of us confer, I notice someone passing by out of the corner of my eye who seems to have stopped abruptly to listen.

I turn and see an older couple speaking quietly to each other.

I thank the concierge and turn to break the disappointing news to my wife just as the older couple walks up to me. The woman, short with long gray hair, smiles at me with compassion. “I couldn’t help but overhear...did you say you needed a doctor to take a look at your pregnant wife?”

Okay, this could get weird. But the woman's face is kind and aged with laugh lines.

"Yes," I answer hesitantly.

She nods. "I'm sorry to intrude. But I'm a retired obstetrician, and if all you need is a cursory check and some reassurance, I might be able to help."

I give her a hard stare, and then when she digs through her wallet, presumably for some sort of ID, I give the same stern look to her husband.

The ID looks legit, as does a hospital badge.

Minutes later, the four of us are seated in the hotel lobby as the doctor listens to Whitney's stomach with a stethoscope.

"There's the heartbeat," the doctor declares with a wide smile. "That never gets old."

Whitney blows out a breath. "Thank you. That helps."

"And don't worry. The little one will be kicking you in the spleen in a matter of weeks, and then you'll be counting down the days until he comes out."

Whitney laughs, and I can see the relief on her face as I rub her tight shoulder.

"In the meantime, congratulations, and enjoy this phase of life while you can. It goes by far too quickly," she says, gazing at her husband, who takes hold of her hand.

"I absolutely will," Whitney replies. "It's easy to enjoy every phase with Huck around. He takes excellent care of me."

My Whitney doesn't always show her emotions on her sleeve, so it makes my heart feel full to hear her say that out loud.

Although she likes to tease me for constantly checking in with her and ensuring she has everything she needs, hopefully, she'll get it one day. Seeing her happy is my life's mission.

And I'm happy to keep proving that to her, over and over again, for as long as it takes.

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About the Author

Abby Knox writes feel-good, high-heat romance that she herself would want to read. Readers have described her stories as quirky, sexy, adorable, and hilarious. All of that adds up to Abby's overall goal in life: to be kind and to have fun!

Abby's favorite tropes include: Forced proximity, opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, age gap, boss/employee, fated mates/insta-love, and more. Abby is heavily influenced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls, and LOST. But don't worry, she won't ever make you suffer like Luke & Lorelai.

If any or all of that connects with you, then you came to the right place.

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