

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CAROLYN BROWN

A Novella

Small Town Charm

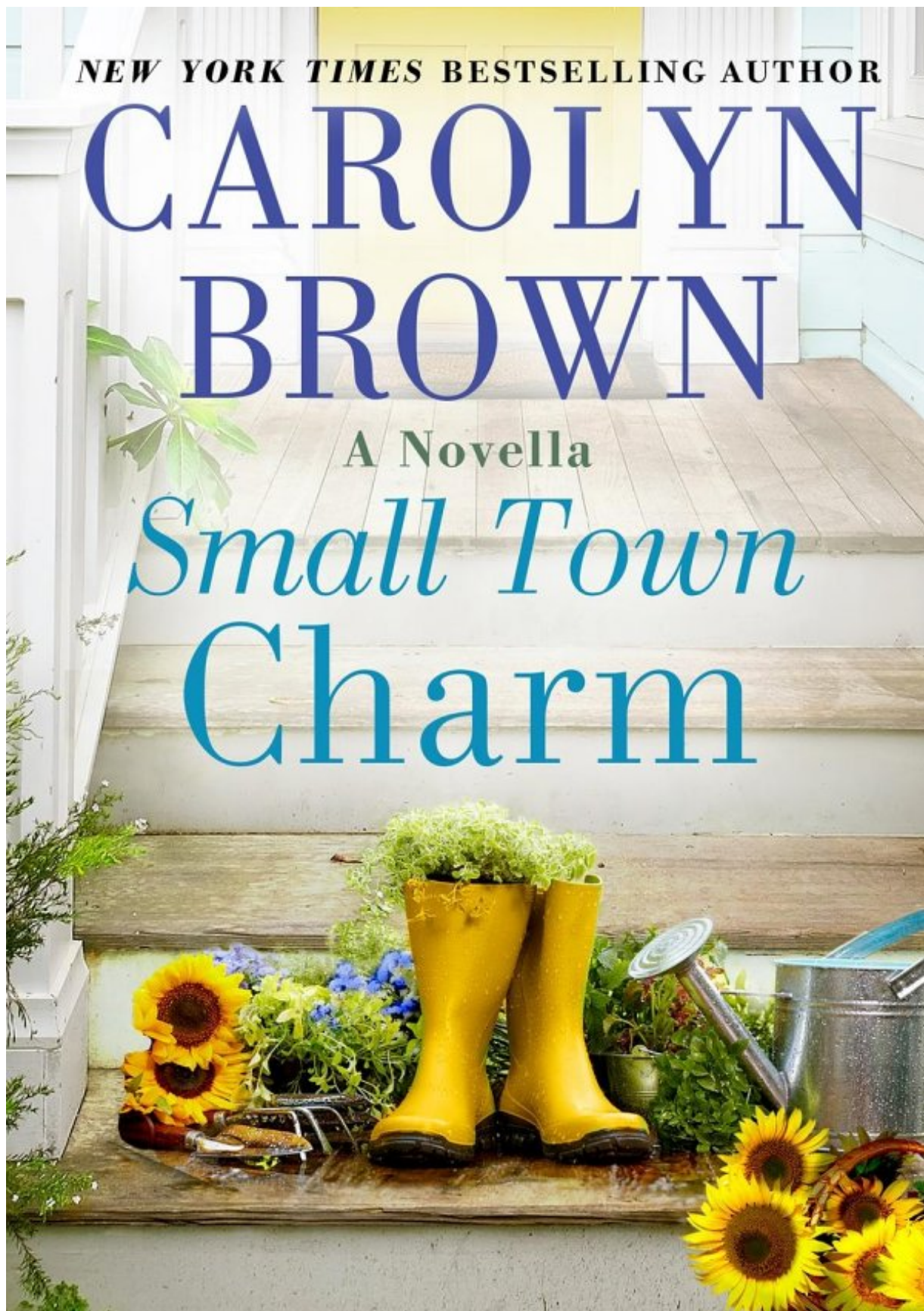


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Carolyn Brown



New York Boston

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Chapter One

If the punishment for being a curvy woman was being sent to live in a big city, then Cricket Lawson would have had to make peace with her maker, because she would surely die if she ever had to move from Bloom, Texas. She'd always been slightly overweight, and she'd tried to lose weight more times than she could count on her fingers and toes. Then she'd come to the realization that *diet* was a four-letter word—and those were a sin to think or even say out loud.

The thermometer on her porch said it was past ninety degrees, so when she got home from working all day in her secondhand bookstore, Cricket changed into a pair of cutoff jeans and a chambray shirt, which she tied up under her breasts, leaving her midriff bare. For the past two days Bloom, Texas, had had rain, rain, and more rain, so she kicked off her shoes at the edge of the garden and waded out in the mud in her bare feet. No one else was within a mile of the huge vegetable garden where Cricket picked tomatoes and beans that hot evening.

“Romeo,” was blasting through her MP3 player, and Cricket sang right along with Dolly Parton. When Billy Ray Cyrus began to sing his part in the song, she did a few line-dance steps. Mud flew up and stuck on the backs of her legs, but she didn't care. She lived so far out of town that no one could see her. If they could, it would sure enough give everyone in the town something to talk about.

She put her hands on her knees and did a little twerking. “That would really set their tongues a waggin’,” she giggled. “Someday, my Romeo will come along, and he'll sweep me right off my feet, but the way I look right now, I hope it's not today.”

It seemed like an omen when the next song on her player was “Something to Talk About.” Holding a cucumber as a microphone, she sang

along with Bonnie Raitt and danced around a half-bushel basket almost full of green beans. She'd just finished doing a little two-step with an imaginary partner when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye.

Her brother Rick and sister-in-law had just taken their two kids on a vacation to the beach the day before and wouldn't be home for two weeks, so it couldn't be either of them. She whipped around too fast, slipped in the mud, and fell flat on her butt. Dirty water splashed all the way up her bare midriff and across her arms. She didn't even try to get up but just sat there and stared at the man standing at the edge of the garden.

"Hello, I'm Bryce Walton," he said. "Were you practicing for a country music video?"

"No, I'm taking a mud bath," she snapped at him. "What are you doing on my property?"

"Lettie gave me your phone number, but there was no answer when I called. She gave me the directions out here and told me you could sell me some fresh vegetables," Bryce explained.

"How do you know Lettie?" Cricket's tone softened a little.

"I bought the Bloom Pharmacy," Bryce said. "Today was my first day to work, and I'm renting Lettie and Nadine's garage apartment until I can find something to buy. Do I need to give you a résumé to buy okra and tomatoes?"

Cricket knew that the pharmacy had sold—everyone in Bloom knew that two hours after the papers were signed. But she hadn't expected the new pharmacist to be so young—or so tall. She'd thought he'd be middle aged, bald, and wearing bifocals perched on the end of his nose. Lettie had told her that he'd moved into the apartment, but Cricket was so busy that she hadn't even gone to the pharmacy to get her daily limeade that day. Now she wished she had.

Bryce had clear blue eyes, a full head of dark hair, and was probably about her age of thirty-one. He wasn't muscled up like a weightlifter, and maybe looked a little soft in his belly, but all in all, he was a good-looking guy.

"I'm Cricket Lawson. I'd shake hands, but I don't think you want a fistful of mud." She got to her feet and made her way out of the garden. She picked up the water hose, sprayed the mud off her body, and then asked, "How much okra and how many tomatoes do you want?"

“Pleased to meet you,” Bryce said. “I’d like a basket of each if you have them. I hear that you own the Sweet Seconds Book Store right next to my pharmacy, and that you usually have fresh produce in that store.”

Cricket vowed that she would carry her phone in her pocket from then on, even if she had to put it in a Ziploc baggie. Lettie and Nadine were her good friends and gossip gals. No doubt, they had tried to call her several times that evening to tell her about Bryce coming out to her little farm. Bless their hearts, they were always trying to fix her up with someone, and she kept telling them that she was going to grow up and be like both of them—old maids who kept track of everything that went on in Bloom.

“I’ve got plenty,” she answered. “There’s a little more than a pound in each basket. Do you want big boy tomatoes or the small cherry tomatoes? And yes, I own the bookstore, and I sell produce as well as used books. Do you like to read?”

“Every chance I get.” Bryce’s smile lit up his whole face. “I’ll be over to visit your store as soon as I can. And I’d like the small tomatoes, please.”

“What I’ve got gathered is in the house. Wait right here, and I’ll bring them out to you.” She walked past him and glanced up at his wide shoulders. Yep, the man was at least six feet, four inches tall—maybe even a little more than that. Cricket was only three inches over five feet and she barely came to his shoulder. She predicted that there would be a lot of sick women in Bloom in the next few weeks—especially those who were single or divorced. She could just imagine them lined up waiting to get prescriptions filled, or to buy bottles of aspirin, or even to get a soft drink or limeade at the soda fountain. The barstools in front of the counter wouldn’t get cold with one woman sliding onto one the moment another left.

“I’ll be right here,” Bryce said.

If Lettie and Nadine liked him enough to give him her cell phone number, then Cricket thought she should invite him in, maybe even for a glass of sweet tea. But if she did that and he mentioned it in town, the gossip vine would burst into flames. She could hear the clucking from the old women’s tongues, sounding like mother hens gathering in their baby peeps before a storm, as they pitied her for trying to latch on to a man like Bryce. No, ma’am! Cricket didn’t need or want anyone to feel sorry for her.

Besides that, everything she’d worn to work that day was hung over the back of kitchen chairs, including her bra and underpants. She’d taken them

off in a hurry and changed into what she called her work clothes—an old bra, a shirt she could tie up under her breasts, and a pair of cutoff jeans. She couldn't bring a good-looking man like Bryce into her house to a sight like that, much less to sit down at the table with him for a glass of sweet tea with mud caked in her hair.

"Some days you win," she muttered as she picked up a basket of okra and piled a few more pods on the top. "Most days you lose." She added half a dozen more tomatoes to that basket.

The phone rang as she was walking out the back door, but she ignored it. If anyone found out that she hadn't answered her phone, the news would probably make the *Bloom Weekly News* under the HEARD column on the front page. She could see the little article already:

Cricket Lawson did not answer her phone. The whole town is wondering if she is sick, and several church ladies are preparing casseroles to take to her.

Everyone in Bloom knew that Cricket liked gossip too well not to answer a call if she was within hearing distance of the ring. Why on earth she'd forgotten to tuck her phone in her hip pocket was a mystery.

"Nice garden you've got here." Bryce had walked down to the end of the plot and was on his way back toward the house. "How do you work full time and take care of this too?"

"My brother Rick does most of the work, but he and his family are on a two-week vacation, so I'm doing double time while he's gone." She set the okra and tomatoes on the porch. "At least, it rained a lot this week, so I didn't have to water."

Bryce made it to the porch and pulled out his wallet. "I'm surprised that you've still got a crop as hot as it's been. How much do I owe you?"

"Consider those two baskets your welcome to Bloom present," she said.

"Well, then thank you very much. I plan to make a skillet full of fried okra tonight to go with my pork chops." Bryce picked up the vegetables. "What time do you close the bookstore, so I'll know next time I want fresh produce to get on over there and buy it?"

"We're open until six Monday through Friday and from nine to noon on Saturday, but you are always welcome to come out here and get veggies," she answered.

Was he lingering? she wondered.

Of course he is, that pesky voice in her head told her. *He's just moved to town. He doesn't know anyone, and he's going home to eat alone tonight.*

"Maybe I'll see you tomorrow when you come in for a limeade." Bryce started for his vehicle that was parked next to her car in the driveway. "The ladies at the store told me you like limeades. I'm not psychic!"

"I'll be there," she called out.

He got into his SUV and stuck his hand out the window and waved.

She hurried into the house and grabbed her phone from the table. There were ten messages from Lettie and five missed calls from Nadine. She plopped down into a chair and scrolled through her contacts until she found Nadine Betterton and called her first.

Nadine answered on the first ring, but instead of saying hello, she started fussing. "Where have you been? I was about to get in the car and drive out there. You're never without your phone."

"You haven't been allowed to drive in years, and I was in such a hurry to get to the garden that I forgot to take my phone with me," Cricket told her.

"We've got the phone on speaker. You've got me too, and I was worried about you, girl," Lettie yelled.

Cricket had repeatedly told them that they should just talk in a normal voice, but they both thought they had to raise their voices when they had it on speaker.

"Did Bryce Walton come out there for okra and tomatoes? Is he still there?" Nadine asked.

"What did you think of him?" Lettie butted in before Nadine had finished the last word.

"He seemed nice enough," Cricket answered.

"We're inviting him to Nadine's birthday party Thursday night," Lettie said. "After all, he lives in our apartment building, and that way he can meet some folks. Did you know that he loves books?"

"He mentioned that he likes to read," Cricket said, and then went on to tell them about falling in the mud.

"He must think you are beautiful if he asked if you were making a video for television," Nadine said.

"Or he was being sarcastic," Cricket told them.

"If he was and I find out about it, he won't be invited to my party."

Nadine's voice rose even higher.

"Wouldn't Jennie Sue and Rick be happy if they came home to find you in a relationship?" Lettie sighed.

"Hey, they're only going to be gone a couple of weeks," Cricket said. "I just met the guy tonight, and he could be engaged or already in a relationship."

"Nope, he's not. I asked him if his girlfriend would be coming to see him or maybe moving to Bloom, and he said he didn't have a girlfriend," Lettie informed her.

Cricket's heart threw in an extra beat, but she scolded herself. "Bryce Walton is way out of my league, Miz Lettie. He's educated, downright handsome, and he's a pharmacist for cryin' out loud."

"Bull crap," Lettie argued.

"Well, let me tell you..." Nadine lowered her voice to her gossip tone. "Mary Lou Cramer has already let it be known that her daughter, Anna Grace, will be married to Bryce by Christmas. She even sent an ivy plant to the drugstore today as a welcoming gift from the Cramer Oil Company, and then a peace lily arrived from the Sweetwater Belles. It would be a feather in Mary Lou's cap to have a pharmacist in the family. Why, Anna Grace, might even get elected to be the president of the Sweetwater Belles Club if she could snag Bryce. Sugar Denton is grooming her daughter, Laura Lee, to step into the president's place of their fancy little elite club, but she's only married to the CEO of her daddy's construction firm."

Anna Grace, like most of the daughters of the charter members of the Belles, had been a cheerleader in high school, but she had risen even further on the social ladder because she had been elected homecoming queen and still got to ride in the parade every year. She had gone on to college, joined a sorority, and then come home to work in her daddy's oil business. She was thirty-one now, and her mother, Mary Lou, made no bones about the fact that it was time for Anna Grace to settle down. What Mary Lou wanted, she got—plain and simple.

"Think a pharmacist is good enough for Anna Grace?" Cricket asked. "A couple of weeks ago, I heard her telling Jennie Sue at the café that she had been dating a dentist, but she really wanted to marry a doctor."

"Her mama seems to think that a pharmacist would be just fine. I heard through the grapevine that she was already looking at wedding venues,"

Lettie whispered.

“Good Lord!” Cricket gasped. “Bryce just took over the pharmacy today!”

“Yep, but when a good-lookin’ bachelor comes to town, you can expect Mary Lou to try to snag him for her daughter. She would like to have grandkids before she’s ninety,” Lettie said.

“So would we,” Nadine sighed.

“You’ve got Jennie Sue and Rick’s two daughters,” Cricket reminded them.

Even though neither Lettie nor Nadine had ever married or had children, they had been surrogate grandmothers to Cricket’s two nieces. They had taken Jennie Sue under their wing when she came back to town six years ago, and Cricket couldn’t remember a time when they weren’t her friends.

“But we want a grandson,” Lettie said. “And your biological clock is ticking, girl.”

“Then you’d better adopt Anna Grace,” Cricket said.

“We’ll do without before we do that,” Lettie declared. “She looks down her nose at me and Nadine like we’re aliens.”

“We ain’t Sweetwater Belles.” Cricket steered Lettie away from the alien subject. Aliens got the blame for everything in her life. If she lost her car keys, then the aliens stole them. If she burned a pan of biscuits, then the aliens had abducted her for a few minutes, and it was their fault. “If you ain’t a Belle, then Anna Grace doesn’t waste her breath speaking to you.”

“That’s the truth,” Nadine agreed. “I’m so glad that Jennie Sue told them to go to hell after her mama and daddy died.”

Cricket giggled. “I’m not sure she said it just like that, but they sure knew what she meant. I was there when the Belles all came to the house after Charlotte and Dill died in the plane crash. I’d always thought I wanted to be in that crowd, but good glory! I learned real quick that I’d rather be pickin’ beans as puttin’ up with those women. That reminds me. I’ve got a bushel of beans and a bucket of tomatoes that I need to bring in and wash, and I’m still covered with mud.”

“Go on then,” Nadine said. “We’ll be in town tomorrow, so we’ll stop by the bookstore. I’ve still got a chapter of *The Great Gatsby* to read before we come to the book club meeting next Monday.”

“I’ll bring the cookies to club that night,” Lettie offered. “I know you’re

super busy since Jennie Sue and Rick are off on their vacation.”

“Thank you,” Cricket said. “That will help a lot. See y’all tomorrow.”

“Bye, now,” Lettie and Nadine said at the same time.

Cricket laid the phone back on the table and headed back outside. She brought in the beans and tomatoes, took care of them, and put them in small baskets to take to the bookstore with her in the morning.

“Poor Bryce,” she muttered as she rinsed the mud from the beans and laid them out on paper towels to dry. “He’d better be fast if he hopes to outrun Anna Grace.”

Chapter Two

Bryce was grateful that the two employees who had worked for the previous owner had agreed to stay on when he bought the drugstore. Ilene, a gray-haired lady who had worked there for thirty years, managed the soda fountain and helped stock shelves. Tandy, a middle-aged pharmacy technician, helped him but wasn't too proud to stock shelves, manage the register, or do whatever needed done. They had sure made the transition was an easy one when he took over the store, and on Wednesday, his second day at work, they were waiting at the back door when he arrived.

"Good morning, ladies," he said as he slid out of his SUV and headed across the small parking area to unlock the door.

"You might be singing a different tune by noon," Ilene told him.

"I thought you'd have more time, but it looks like the vultures are circling," Tandy laughed.

He turned the key in the door but didn't open it. Instead he looked up at the blue sky without a cloud anywhere in sight. "Vultures? What are y'all talking about?"

"You've been earmarked to be married by Christmas to one of the town's most elite women, Anna Grace Cramer. Her daddy owns Cramer Oil Company, and her mother is one of the Sweetwater Belles."

He opened the door and stood to the side to let them enter before him. Ilene flipped on the lights and reset the thermostat, then went to open the front door.

"What's a Sweetwater Belle?" Bryce asked and wondered why the upper crust of Bloom would want their daughter married to him when they didn't even know anything about him.

"A group of women formed a club about thirty years ago here in town. They call themselves the Sweetwater Belles, and they've got their fingers in

everything including the holiday and homecoming parades.”

When two women came in right away, Lettie rolled her eyes toward Tandy and Bryce. Tandy patted him on the back. “The older one is Mary Lou. The tall, blond, younger version of her is Anna Grace. You better think fast because you are about to have to sink or swim.”

Bryce finished putting on his white lab coat and glanced toward the front of the store to see two well-dressed women slide onto the barstools in front of the soda fountain. The older one was wearing black slacks, a white silk blouse, and her diamond earrings sparkled under the fluorescent lights. If rich was a perfume, she would have reeked of it. The younger of the two was wearing a tight red skirt that showed half her thighs, and high-heeled shoes that matched her skirt. She had that competent air about her, but she didn’t come across as royalty like her mother did.

“Sink or swim!” Tandy said out of the side of her mouth.

“You’re joking, right?” Bryce asked.

“Not in the least.” Tandy patted him on the back. “Mary Lou wanted her daughter to marry a doctor, but she’s decided that a pharmacist will do since Anna Grace has passed the thirty mark.”

Bryce wiped sweat from his brow. “But I only just got here yesterday. You’re pranking me.”

“I wish I was.” Tandy removed her glasses and cleaned them on the tail of her blue scrub top. “I can never locate my glasses in the morning, and when my kids do find them, they leave smudges on the lenses. Someday I’m going to get contacts.”

Bryce wasn’t interested in Tandy’s smudged glasses or her four kids right then. He wanted her to tell him that she was hazing him. “Prank? Yes?”

“Prank. No.” Tandy twisted her brown hair up and secured it with a long clip. “Lettie Betterton called me last night and told me to warn you.”

“But...how...what...” Bryce stammered.

“This is a small town,” Tandy said. “Everyone knows what everyone is doing, who they’re doing it with, and where they did it. We only read the paper, which comes out today by the way, to see who got caught. Anna Grace won’t be subtle, and she won’t take no for an answer. Mary Lou has made up her mind, and when she does, it might as well be set in stone. Nobody crosses a Belle, except Lettie, Nadine, and Cricket. Oh, and

Cricket's sister-in-law, Jennie Sue," Tandy whispered. "They never come in here for coffee in the morning, so you've probably got about five minutes to think up a reason not to do whatever she wants you to do. That is, unless you like what you see."

Bryce's neck itched with heat that was fast traveling up from his collar to put a blush on his cheeks. Lord have mercy! He had been a science geek in high school and in college. He'd never been one of those guys that the girls pursued and had no idea how to handle such a thing.

He'd been in town only a couple of days, and he had been brought up not to lie. What was he going to say if she asked him to dinner or to a party? Would not accepting her invitation ruin his business? He sure wished he had time to call his mother, or even his grandmother, and ask them for advice. Even though Bloom Drug Store was the only pharmacy in town, it wasn't all that far to Sweetwater where folks would have a choice of several places to fill their prescriptions. What if he lost all kinds of customers because he refused to fall down at Anna Grace's feet and kiss that big turquoise ring he could see sparkling on her finger? No wonder the previous owner gave him such a good deal on the drugstore—the old guy probably got sick and tired of playing small-town politics.

Tandy picked up a bottle of spray and a dust rag. "Ilene is taking her sweet time getting their coffee. She's trying to give you time to get your ducks in a row, so to speak."

"Bless her heart and thank you for the warning and for explaining to me about the Belles." Bryce let out a long breath of air and tried to think of plausible excuses. His mama and daddy had taken him to church every single Sunday from the time he was born until he went to college. Then he went home on weekends that first four years and drove them to church. He sent up a silent prayer asking God to help him out of this big mess.

Before his prayer ended, Lettie and Nadine pushed through the glass door at the front of the store and headed straight back to one of the little bistro tables with the four chairs around it.

"Mornin', Ilene," Nadine called out. "Me and Lettie will have our usual. Neither of us wanted to cook breakfast this morning."

"Two honey buns and two cups of hot chocolate coming right up," Ilene said.

Anna Grace slid off her barstool and started toward the back of the store,

where the pharmacy was located. There was something about her pasted-on smile and the look in her eyes that let Bryce know Tandy and Ilene were not pranking him.

“Hey, Anna Grace, I heard that you and your dentist boyfriend broke up last week,” Lettie said.

“Is your poor little heart just plumb broken?” Nadine asked.

“No, I broke up with him,” Anna Grace answered.

“Well, honey, if you get down in the dumps, I suggest you watch a good movie. Me and Lettie like all the *Home Alone* movies when we’re feeling blue. They make us laugh,” Nadine said.

Anna Grace’s smile faded, and she tilted her chin up a notch. “I’m sure that little movie would appeal to old folks like y’all, but I’m just fine. Like I said, I broke up with him, so my heart is just fine.” She focused her attention on Bryce and pasted her smile back on. Her high heels on the tile floor sounded to him like .22-caliber bullets heading straight for his heart—or maybe for a spot between his eyes. He needed to think fast, come up with a plan, but his mind was totally blank.

“Hello, I’m Anna Grace Cramer, and I’d like to welcome you to Bloom. We’re having an informal little cocktail party at our house tonight, and we would just love it if you would join us.” Her smile seemed sincere, but it sure didn’t reach her eyes.

“Hey, Bryce,” Lettie called out, “didn’t you tell Cricket that you would help her gather vegetables tonight? She’s kind of swamped since Jennie Sue and Rick are out of town.”

Anna Grace whipped around, and Bryce could only imagine the go-to-hell looks she was giving his two elderly landladies.

“Yes, I did.” Bryce crossed his fingers behind his back like a little boy who had told a lie. “I’m sorry, Miz Anna Grace, but I have plans.”

“Some other time then. Maybe I can pick you up tomorrow night, and we’ll go for ice cream?” Anna Grace pressed.

“That’s my birthday party night.” Nadine raised her voice.

“Sorry again,” Bryce said with a smile.

“Then don’t make plans for Saturday night. We’re going to Sweetwater to the Community Theatre. That’s the opening night for the newest musical they’re doing this summer. I do love musicals, don’t you?” she asked.

“Not so much, and I’ve already asked Cricket to go fishing with me that

night. Why don't you just leave your number with Ilene, and when I have some free time, I'll give you a call?" Bryce hoped that the sassy Cricket wouldn't shoot him when he told her they had plans for at least three evenings that week. Thinking about her telling him that she was taking a mud bath put a broad smile on his face.

"I'll be looking forward to your call." Anna Grace's tone was suddenly as cold as ice. When she got back to her barstool, she whispered something to her mother, and the two of them left without even waiting for their coffee.

"You're welcome." Nadine grinned at Bryce.

"Thank you," he said, coming around from behind the counter and joining them at the table. "That woman is pretty brazen."

"Yes, she is but not as much as her mother," Lettie said, "and Mary Lou always gets what she wants."

Ilene brought coffee and warmed honey buns to the table for Lettie and Nadine. "Thank goodness y'all didn't want to cook breakfast this morning."

"And that you called us, so we were prepared," Tandy added from the checkout counter.

"But now you've caused Mary Lou to put on her war paint," Ilene said.

"What does that mean?" Bryce asked.

"She will never, ever let it be said that her daughter lost out to Cricket Lawson," Nadine giggled.

"Why not?" Bryce asked. "I liked Cricket when I went out to her farm to buy vegetables last night. She's honest and funny, and she seemed down to earth. Why would anyone not like her?"

Lettie rubbed her hands together and giggled like a little girl. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened in Bloom since Jennie Sue came home from New York and thumbed her nose at the Belles. We've got to get a bet going."

"Cricket has never run in the same circles as Anna Grace," Ilene answered. "She hasn't got a dishonest bone in her body, and she'll speak her mind even if doing so gets her put in jail."

"Speaking of Cricket, it looks like she's just now turned down the alley to park behind the bookstore," Nadine said. "Maybe you ought to run over there while there's no one needing prescriptions and tell her that you'll be picking peas with her tonight and fishing with her on Saturday."

“What if she says no and slaps me for being so presumptuous?” Bryce asked.

“Be sure to tell her the whole story about why you made dates with her without asking. She’ll understand,” Nadine told him.

“I hope so.” Bryce pushed back his chair and headed out of the drugstore.

* * *

Cricket turned on the lights and unloaded her tote bag, putting her lunch in the small, dorm-sized refrigerator, and then rolled the cart with the newly bought, used books out to shelve them. She had seen Lettie and Nadine’s vehicle parked in front of the drugstore, so when the bell above the door rang, she figured it was her two friends.

“Y’all have a seat. I’ll make a pot of coffee, and I brought blueberry muffins,” she called out without even looking up from her work.

“Sounds good, but I’m alone,” said someone with a deep, Texas drawl from the end of the romance book aisle.

She looked up into Bryce Walton’s smiling face. “I thought you were Lettie and Nadine,” she said.

Bryce shook his head. “They’re over at the drugstore having hot chocolate and honey buns, and they saved me this morning, so I shouldn’t even charge them for their breakfast.”

For one of the very few times in her life, Cricket was speechless for a whole minute. “Saved you?” she finally asked.

“Yes, and now I’m here to beg a couple of favors from you.” His blue eyes locked with hers and held for a moment until he blinked. “I’ve got a bit of a problem, and it is named Anna Grace Cramer.”

“You better sit down and have a muffin and some coffee.” Cricket pointed to the sofa at the front of the store. “It’s too early for customers to need medicine, and the doctor doesn’t call in prescriptions until he closes at four, so you’ve got a little while before you get busy.” She left the cart in the middle of the aisle and went to her desk, where her tote bag was still sitting. She poured two cups of coffee from her thermos and removed the cover from a plastic container of blueberry muffins.

“How do you know all that?” he asked as he sat down on the end of the

sofa.

“I’ve lived in Bloom all my life. That’s all just common knowledge,” she answered as she set the muffins on the coffee table and went back to her desk for the coffee. “Now tell me about the Anna Grace Cramer problem.”

Bryce reached for a muffin. “It’s embarrassing.”

Cricket set the two mugs of coffee on the table and took a chair across from him. “Hey, you’re talking to the woman who took a mud bath in front of you yesterday.” She smiled. “What could be more embarrassing than that?”

“I was born and raised in Amarillo, but outside of town on a small farm,” Bryce said.

Cricket didn’t want his whole life story. She was just interested in the bit about Anna Grace, but she kept quiet and picked up her coffee.

“I’m not used to small-town politics,” he admitted as he reached for another muffin. “These are delicious.”

“I made them this morning. Next year, I’m hoping my blueberry bushes are producing.” She wanted him to get on with the story. Lettie had sent her a text that morning reminding her that Anna Grace had probably set her mind to become a pharmacist’s wife. She wondered what any of that had to do with her.

“Anna Grace and her mother came into the drugstore this morning.” Bryce turned a faint shade of red. “She asked me to a cocktail party tonight. To begin with, I’m not *that* guy.” He put air quotes around the last two words.

Cricket wondered what kind of guy that was, but she just kept sipping her coffee. So Lettie had been right, and Anna Grace wasn’t wasting any time at all.

“I lied and told her that...” he stammered, and the blush got even redder, “or maybe I didn’t really lie, but just went along with what Lettie said. She told Anna Grace that I was helping you pick peas tonight, so Anna Grace asked about tomorrow night, and Nadine said that was her birthday party. Then she insisted on Saturday night, and I lied and said I was going fishing with you?” His voice rose at the end, as if he was asking a question.

“You know anything about picking peas or fishing?” Cricket asked.

“My granddad had a farm kind of like what you have, and my dad and I both love to fish,” he answered.

“Then I guess you’d better be at my place about six thirty tonight. After we get done in the garden, I’ll fix us some supper. And after work on Saturday, we’ll dig some fishin’ worms and go to the creek out behind our place. There’s some pretty good-sized bass out there. If we catch some, maybe we’ll fry them for supper one night soon,” she told him.

“Thank you, Cricket. I thought you might slap me and tell me to never darken your door again.” He grinned.

“It will take an army to save you from Anna Grace.” She smiled. “I’m just one soldier, but I’ll do what I can.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Bryce asked.

“Because I could never forgive myself if I didn’t help you...” she said, “and because Anna Grace has treated me like dirt since before we even went to school. I wouldn’t want my worst enemy to get tangled up with her, and besides, I can use help in the garden. Jennie Sue and I go fishing about once a month, but she’s not here, so I’d love some company.”

Bryce took a couple of sips of his coffee and then stood up. “I’m available any evening you need me to help out.”

“Thank you. I will remember that and just might call on you. And I’m available to use for an excuse any time that Anna Grace tries to hoodwink you into doing something you don’t want to do.” She followed him to the door and out onto the sidewalk. “I’ve got some beans, okra, and tomatoes to unload. I sell a lot of produce out of the bookstore.”

“I’ll be glad to help you,” he said.

“I’ll be glad to accept,” she told him. Just wait until Mary Lou heard that he had come over to her bookstore and even unloaded produce. That would be like throwing down a red flag in front of a raging bull. Cricket couldn’t have wiped the grin off her face if she’d been sucking on a lollipop made of alum and lemon juice.

Chapter Three

Cricket rushed home after work that evening, changed into a pair of cut-off jean shorts and an oversized T-shirt with a picture of Betty Boop printed on the front, and made sure the kitchen and living room were in good shape. She closed both bedroom doors, gathered up her harvest baskets, and was in the garden when Bryce arrived.

For the second time that day, she was struck speechless when he got out of his SUV. He was wearing a pair of bibbed overalls and a faded T-shirt. He sat down on the back porch, rolled the legs of his overalls up to his knees, and kicked off his flip-flops. Lord, have mercy! In Cricket's eyes he was even handsomer than he had been in his khaki slacks and white lab coat. One thing for sure—Anna Grace had her work cut out for her if she had any notion of ever turning him into a guy who liked cocktail parties.

"This is great," he said as he carried a basket to the end of the first row of peas. "I used to go home every single weekend just so I could smell fresh dirt. I got so tired of being cooped up in the library, studying every spare minute."

"Did you live in the dorm all those years?" Cricket finally found her voice.

"I had a full ride academic scholarship for the first four years," he answered. "Dorm, food, books, and tuition, but the last four years, I worked for a research lab and went to school to help out with the finances. My grandparents were willing to foot the whole bill, but I didn't feel right about letting them do that when I was able to work. Besides, I liked doing research. Not as much as I enjoy farming, though."

"You must've been really smart," Cricket said.

"I just had some good study habits and didn't want to disappoint my parents or grandparents. They had sacrificed a lot to save up the money for

my schooling.” He tossed pea pods into the basket.

“Are they still alive?” Cricket asked.

“Yep, and still living on the family farm. Granddad is almost eighty now, but if you took the garden away from him, he’d probably only last another week. He and Granny take produce to the farmer’s market in Canyon every Saturday. That’s their social outing for the week. He bought me that vehicle out there for my graduation present and gave me the down payment so I could buy the drugstore,” Bryce said as he kept working. “Mama teaches school, and Daddy is a farmer.”

“They must be really proud of you.”

“When I finished my first four years, I got a partial scholarship to pharmacy school in Austin. That’s seven hours from home, and it was a year-round program, so I only got home for holidays. I missed times like this. What about you? Where did you go to school?”

“The University of Hard Knocks,” she answered. “I wasn’t smart enough to get a scholarship, and I’m not so sure I would have gone if I could have. I like living on this little patch of ground, and I love my bookstore. My sister-in-law Jennie Sue bought the store, and we ran it together for a while. Then she had two kids and decided to be a stay-at-home mama.”

“What does your brother do?” Bryce asked.

“He spent time in the military, got injured pretty bad, and was in the hospital for months. Then he was given a discharge and a disability. He was kind of lost for a few years until Jennie Sue came into his life. The farm was like therapy for him, or so he says. These days, he runs the farm for the most part. When he’s home, he takes care of the garden, and he and Jennie Sue go to the farmer’s market on Saturdays,” she answered.

Bryce stood up at the end of the long row and said, “Peas are done. Want to take care of what tomatoes are ripe?”

“Sure thing.” She got two smaller baskets from the back porch and handed one to him. “What does a science geek do for fun?”

“Pretty much the same stuff as a lot of guys: Go fishing, watch football, and I’ve never met a book I didn’t like to read. I’m an eclectic reader. I’ll read anything from Faulkner to the back of the Fruit Loops box.” Bryce gently pulled tomatoes from the stalks and put them into his basket. “I’ll be over to the bookstore to look through your mystery and western sections when I get a chance. I’m kind of on a kick lately with those two genres.”

“Ever read *The Great Gatsby*?” she asked.

“Sure,” he answered. “I had to read it for a lit class, but it’s been a while.”

“Well, we’ve all read that for our book club this month. We meet next Monday night. You’d be welcome to come if you want,” she said.

“I’d love to. What time?” Bryce asked.

“We usually meet at six thirty. I don’t even leave the store on those nights,” she answered.

“I’ll be there as soon as soon as I close up the drugstore, and I’ll bring a pizza for our supper,” he said.

“I’ll have the sweet tea ready.” She was looking ahead to the evening when they reached the end of the row.

He picked up the basket of peas and tucked the smaller basket of tomatoes under his arm. “Want to get these washed before supper?”

“No, I’ll do them later. You must be hungry.” *So this is what it’s like to have a guy friend*, she thought. *Bryce is much too good of a man for Anna Grace. I kind of even feel sorry for her for only seeing him as a pharmacist and a notch on her social belt.*

Bryce set the two baskets on the porch and sat down on the steps. “Mind if I use the garden hose to wash off my feet? I wouldn’t want to track mud into your house.”

Cricket turned on the faucet and handed the hose to him. “When you get done, I’ll do mine, but my kitchen has seen its fair share of dirty feet over the years.”

He reminded her of her brother when he stood and sprayed off his legs and then sat back down on the steps to let them air-dry. Rick did that every night before he put on his shoes and headed back out across the field to his home with Jennie Sue. She missed him living in the house with her, but she couldn’t have been happier for him to have fallen in love with Jennie Sue.

“I’m making chicken and dumplings for supper. We’ll have corn on the cob, and a cucumber and tomato salad to go with it. I popped a blackberry cobbler in the oven when I got home. It should be ready to take out right about now.” She sat down beside him on the steps.

* * *

“Just like home,” he sighed. “I never thought I’d get a meal like this when I came to Bloom. I expected to cook for myself or else eat in that little café a lot, and by the way, blackberry cobbler is my favorite dessert.”

Bryce wasn’t a romantic person, but he could have sworn there was chemistry between them when Cricket’s arm brushed against his. That was crazy, though. As sexy as she was with all those curves and those big hazel eyes, she could have any guy in the whole county. She would never be interested in a plain old geeky guy like himself, Bryce thought.

“One thing my mama did before she died was teach me to cook, which is something I like to do,” she said, “but eating alone does get lonely. Pretty often, I either eat with Jennie Sue and Rick or they come over here. The girls love to help in the garden. Aubrey is five, so she really does know how to pick beans and peas. Dina is only three, but she’s learning.”

“I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know how to work in the garden, or when I wasn’t happiest there,” Bryce said.

“Whatever put you in pharmacy school then?” Cricket got up and headed inside the house.

He stood up and followed her. “I thought about being a doctor, but I’m not real fond of the sight of blood. Then I figured I could work in research, which I did when I got into pharmacy school, but for some reason, pharmacy kept calling out to me. Maybe it was Fate.”

She opened the back door and went on in ahead of him. “If it was Fate, then maybe you should go out with Anna Grace. After all, you were brought here for a reason.”

“I don’t think it’s got anything to do with that woman,” he said. “I’ll set the table for us if you’ll point me toward the cabinet where the dishes are.”

She flung up a hand and it brushed against his biceps. Yep, there were definitely sparks, and Bryce didn’t even believe in love at first sight. In his previous two relationships, he and the women had been friends for months, and there hadn’t ever been electricity with either of them like he felt with Cricket.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “I’ll get the food dished up and on the table. Plates are up there. Utensils are in the first drawer to the right of the sink. Paper napkins are on the table. Glasses for tea to the right of the sink.”

“Just like Mama has her kitchen set up.” Bryce took down two plates and put them on the table. “Everything for efficiency.”

“It’s the only way to run a farm kitchen,” she said as she scooped up chicken and dumplings from the slow cooker.

When everything was on the table, he asked, “Where should I sit?”

“At the head of the table. I always sit right here.” She started to pull out her chair, but he beat her to it.

“Allow me,” he said and then took his place when she was seated. “Do you say grace?”

“Usually silently,” she answered, “but since there’s two of us, maybe you could do the honors.”

“Gladly.” He bowed his head and said a short prayer, and then picked up the crock bowl full of dumplings and started to pass it to her.

“Help yourself first,” she told him.

He took out a healthy portion and then sent them over to her. “I got a confession. I’ve never sat the head of the table before. That’s always been Granddad’s place on one end and Dad’s on the other.”

“Have you got brothers and sisters?” she asked.

“Nope, there’s just me, and I come from a long line of only children. My dad and mama both are only kids, and so were my granny and grandpa,” he answered as he took his first bite. “These are amazing dumplings. They taste just like what my granny makes.”

“That’s some high praise.” Cricket passed the salad and then the bowl of buttered corn to him.

“Just statin’ facts, Miz Cricket,” he drawled. “You reckon Anna Grace can make dumplings like these?”

“The cook at their place might be able to,” she answered. “You should tell her that you really like dumplings and see if she invites you to Sunday dinner after church.”

“Does she go to the same church as you do?” Bryce took a sip of tea.

“Oh, yes, she does.” Cricket nodded. “She and her friends, the Belles’ daughters, sit together on the back pew so they can hurry out as soon as the benediction is over. I guess she wouldn’t invite you to Sunday dinner. They all gather up and go to some place in Sweetwater for dinner every Sunday. I hear they have a standing reservation.”

“Does that mean she goes with her friends, and I’m safe for that day?” he asked.

Cricket shook her head. “Not really. The Belles that don’t have anything

else on their calendars and their spouses and kids all go, so she might rope you into going with them. Mary Lou, that's her mother, would be happy to have her daughter settled. I've heard that Anna Grace has had a long-time affair with a teacher in Sweetwater when she's not trying to find a husband that would make Mary Lou happy."

"That's crazy!" Bryce had heard of small-town rumors and gossip, but he had no idea what he was getting into when he bought the drugstore. "Why doesn't she just take that teacher to Sunday dinner?"

"You might be super smart when it comes to books," Cricket said, "but you need to be educated in the ways of small towns. Anna Grace can sleep with the teacher. She can fall in love with him, and even have an affair with him the rest of her life. But she will marry someone Mary Lou approves of. Anna Grace wouldn't dare disgrace herself in front of the club members by marrying a plain old teacher. Mary Lou would be mortified, and her father would fire her from the high-paying, window-dressing job she has at the oil company."

"Why would he do that?" Bryce asked.

"Because if Mary Lou ain't happy, ain't nobody happy, and her husband doesn't cross her when it comes to Anna Grace," Cricket answered.

"Holy sh...smoke," Bryce muttered. "What else do I need to know about?"

"That's enough of a social lesson for tonight, but if you've got doubts about anything, just call me or else ask Lettie and Nadine. They know everything about everything in Bloom, going all the way back to when they were young, and Nadine will be ninety-five tomorrow," Cricket told him. "Lettie is a couple of years younger than she is, but neither of them act that old. You do know that Lettie believes in aliens, don't you?"

If Bryce hadn't swallowed fast, he would have spewed tea all over the table. "You're kiddin', right?"

"Nope, not one bit, and if you don't want to have to find another place to live, don't ever try to convince her otherwise," Cricket said.

Bryce was so glad that he'd come out to the farm to get some produce the day before. Cricket was a fountain of information. Her cooking was fabulous. He got to play in the dirt and could look forward to going fishing. And she was so damned cute that it took his breath away.

Chapter Four

Cricket had just flipped the lights on at the shop and set down her tote bag on Thursday morning when her phone rang. She fished it out of her purse and smiled when she saw Jennie Sue's name pop up.

"Good mornin'," she answered. "How's the vacation going?"

"Absolutely wonderful," Jennie Sue replied. "We had planned to go to a waterpark and the zoo today, but Aubrey and Dina both cried. They wanted to build another sandcastle on the beach and play in the sand. Rick is getting them into their bathing suits. I've gathered up the sunblock and snacks. Now, tell me all about this new pharmacist and how you are being the damsel in shining armor who is rescuing him from a life of misery with Anna Grace."

Cricket giggled. "I don't know about all that, but he has to be saved, and I'm doing my part to help with that. He helped me pick peas and gather the tomatoes last night. Then he ate supper with me."

"Lettie thinks there might be a little attraction there," Jennie Sue said. "She said that when she and Nadine came to the bookstore yesterday, your eyes were sparkling."

"Anna Grace bullied me in school and has continued to be hateful to me every chance she gets. Getting back at her would make anyone's eyes twinkle." Cricket unloaded her tote bag and made a pot of coffee while she talked.

"Well, don't lose the sparkle. I want to see it when I get home," Jennie Sue said. "We went to a T-shirt shop yesterday, and the girls picked out two for you."

"That will make my eyes twinkle for sure." Cricket poured herself a mug of coffee before it even quit dripping and carried it to the sofa. "I miss those two little angels so much."

“We’re ready,” Rick’s deep voice came through the line.

“Beach, Mama, beach,” Dina said.

“Did you get the snacks and the juice boxes and the towels and the buckets and shovels and...” Aubrey ran out of breath.

“They aren’t acting much like angels right now,” Jennie Sue laughed.

“I love hearing their voices, and they’ll always have little wings and a shiny halo in their favorite aunt’s eyes,” Cricket said. “Give them a hug from me and go enjoy the day. The damsel in shining armor has things under control here.”

“Love you, sister,” Jennie Sue chuckled. “See you at the end of next week.”

“Lookin’ forward to it,” Cricket said and ended the call.

When Jennie Sue first came back to town a few years ago, Cricket had felt the same way about her that she still did about Anna Grace. She’d thought Jennie Sue was uppity and had been glad that she’d fallen on hard times. But with time, and especially after Rick and Jennie Sue started seeing each other, Cricket had seen that she’d been wrong and that she should have never grouped Jennie Sue in with the other Belle girls.

Maybe you’re wrong about Anna Grace too. Cricket’s mother’s voice was clear in her head.

“Mama?” Cricket whispered.

But there was no more from her mother, and before she could figure out why she’d heard the voice so clearly, the bell above the door rang, and Anna Grace came into the store for the first time ever. Cricket blinked a dozen times, but the tall blond woman did not disappear.

“May I help you?” she finally asked.

Anna Grace was wearing a cute navy dress that day with matching high heels and had a matching bag draped over her arm. She crossed the floor with the grace of a runway model and sat down in the wingback chair across from Cricket’s desk. She crossed one long, slender leg over the other and took a deep breath. “I need to talk to you.”

Here it comes, Cricket thought. *She’s going to tell me to leave Bryce alone or else she’ll ruin my business.*

“About what?” Cricket sat down in her desk chair and got ready for the bullying.

“I want to apologize for all the times when I’ve been hateful and mean to

you, and to ask for your help.” Anna Grace kept her eyes on a spot on the wall behind Cricket’s head.

“Thank you for that, but I don’t believe you.” Cricket reached under the desk and pinched her thigh, proving she wasn’t asleep but fully awake. “I think you are here to tell me to step aside where Bryce Walton is concerned, that you intend to start up a relationship with him, and eventually marry him because he’s a pharmacist.”

“If my mother was sitting in this chair, you would be right. She gave me orders to do just that this morning, but...” Anna Grace actually blushed.

Cricket folded her arms over her chest. “I think you will do anything to get what you want, and then later, you and your friends will laugh at me for being so gullible. Well, I’m an adult now. I’m not a teenager who wants to be included in your circle of friends, and I’m not someone you can bully anymore.”

“If I was sitting where you are, I would feel the same way,” Anna Grace said. “I don’t want to date Bryce. I don’t want a relationship with him. I’m in love and have been for a long time with Tommy Bluestone, a biology teacher who lives in Sweetwater. Mama won’t hear of it, and Daddy says if I marry him, I’ll have to move out of the house and find a job elsewhere because he’s not living with Mama when she’s that mad. So I just let them think I’m dating other guys, but I haven’t dated anyone but Tommy in more than three years.”

“Are you serious?” Cricket eyed her carefully. “I heard you just recently broke up with a dentist.”

“I have to invent a reason to break up with my imaginary boyfriends when Mama begins to insist that I bring them home for a weekend, or that I invite him to go out to eat with us so she can meet him.” Anna Grace looked absolutely miserable when she admitted that.

Cricket shouldn’t feel sorry for her after the way Anna Grace had looked down on her all those years, but she did. “That must be tough.”

“You can’t even imagine.” Anna Grace looked like she might break into tears any minute. “I wish Jennie Sue was here so I could talk to her, but then she probably wouldn’t even answer my calls after the way we all shunned her when she married your brother.” She lowered her voice and looked around the store. “I was proud of her for what she did. I’d never admit it to anyone else, but I was. She stood up to her mother and all the

Belles when she came back to town. I want to know how she did it, because I can't live with all this stress any longer."

Cricket still wasn't sure this wasn't just playacting. "She had the guts to go after what she wanted, even before she met Rick. She rented an affordable apartment and cleaned houses for enough money to live on. You know all this, and yes, all her old friends did shun her for doing it. What makes you think she'll even talk to you?"

"I wouldn't blame her if she didn't," Anna Grace said. "I want to make Mama happy, but I can't make her happy and be happy myself. Tommy has asked me to marry him." She pulled a black velvet box from her purse and popped it open to show Cricket what looked like an engagement ring. "Mama would throw a Southern hissy if she even knew I had this. The diamond is barely half a carat, and I think it's gorgeous. I love it. Tommy saved up for a long time to buy it for me."

"That reminds me of your sweet sixteen ring," Cricket said.

Anna Grace held out her hand to show a ruby ring on her right hand. "This is my sweet sixteen ring, and I guess other than my engagement ring having a diamond instead of a ruby, they kind of do resemble each other. My birthday is in January. Mama didn't think a garnet was fancy enough, so she bought a ruby, which is about the same color. But how did you..." She frowned.

"I remember every one of y'all's rings. You came to school showing them off and bragging about them," Cricket said. "I was sixteen that same year, and we were still mourning my mother's death. Rick was in the service and couldn't even come home. I was lucky that Lettie and Nadine brought me a cake that day. So yes, I remember that and every mean thing y'all did to me. I hated school because of you."

"I'm so sorry." A tear made its way down Anna Grace's cheek and dripped off her jaw.

"Apology accepted," Cricket said. "What did you tell Tommy when he proposed, and how did he ask you to marry him?"

Cricket figured Anna Grace would stutter and stammer, but she smiled.

"We took a blanket out into a field of Texas bluebonnets to watch the sunrise. He's very inventive with our dates, and we have so much fun together. He's taught me that money isn't everything and helped me find my inner self," Anna Grace answered. "Right when the sun came up that

morning, he brought out the ring and asked me to marry him, and I said yes. Now what do I do?"

"Well, since you said yes, I suppose that you should marry him," Cricket answered, but she still didn't believe all of this was real.

"I've always dreamed of having a big wedding with the fancy dress, at least eight bridesmaids, a blowout reception, and all the trimmings, but I know if I tell Mama that I'm engaged to Tommy Bluestone, I'll have to give all that up," Anna Grace sighed.

"A wedding is a day. A marriage is a lifetime," Cricket told her. "Jennie Sue and Rick didn't have a big wedding. They went to Las Vegas and got married in one of those funny little chapels out there. You have to decide whether you want a big wedding or a marriage. At least that's the way it looks to me." Cricket didn't give a flip about a huge event, if and when she ever got married, but she did want a man to look at her the same way her brother looked at Jennie Sue. That was pure love, and it beat the hell out of a fancy dress, a string of bridesmaids, and a four-foot wedding cake.

"Tell me more about Tommy. Why are your folks so set against him? Teaching school is an honorable profession."

"That's what I told them back when we had been dating a few months," Anna Grace sighed. "But they informed me that I'd been raised in a better lifestyle than he could ever offer and reminded me that I made five times what he did in a year working at Daddy's oil company, but my job would come to an end the day I married Tommy. That's how much they're against me and him having a happy ever after."

"What's money compared to love?" Cricket said. "You go to work. You come home, have supper together, talk about your day, and then spend the night in each other's arms. Tell me where you would live if you decided to go against your folks."

"Tommy has a small, one-bedroom apartment in Sweetwater. The whole thing is about the size of my walk-in closet. The Belles will shun me worse than they did Jennie Sue if I do this. Mama and Daddy swore three years ago that they would disown me if I marry him."

"Do his parents accept you?" Cricket asked.

"Oh, yes! He's the baby of eight kids, and they all are so sweet to me. They invite me to everything—birthdays, anniversaries, holidays—and they are just awesome. I love spending time with them," she said.

“What do his folks do, as in jobs?” Cricket asked.

“His mother was a high school math teacher. His father was a history professor at the Tech College. They’re both retired now,” Anna Grace answered.

They sounded like pretty influential folks to Cricket, but then in the eyes of the Belles, she could understand where the Bluestones might not make the social cut.

“How much money do you need to be happy?” Cricket asked. “You could get a job at a rival oil company. That would really piss your folks off.”

“Truth is, I’m not qualified for another job,” Anna Grace said. “I’m just window dressing at the company. I answer Daddy’s phone calls, take coffee to him, and take care of his appointment book. I don’t know anything about managing money or living on my own.”

Cricket remembered sitting in the café and seeing Jennie Sue get off the bus when it stopped across the street. Cricket could hardly believe that the famous and very rich Jennie Sue, the daughter of a Belle, was coming home with just a suitcase and riding on a bus instead of driving a fancy sports car. “I guess it just depends on what you want most. Tommy or money.”

“That’s harsh,” Anna Grace said.

“Maybe so, but it’s the gospel truth, isn’t it?” Cricket was almost believing her, but not quite.

“Tommy wants us to get married at the end of summer on the beach at Padre Island. He has a friend who has a cabin down there that he’s willing to let us have for a whole week for our honeymoon.” Anna Grace sighed again. “Daddy said that if I make Mama happy, then I can have a honeymoon on the Riviera in France.”

“Again, Tommy or money? What will make you smile like you did when Tommy opened that box you’ve still got in your hand? What are you going to remember the most about your wedding and honeymoon on your fiftieth wedding anniversary?” Cricket asked. “Answer those questions, and you’ll know what means the most to you.”

Test her, the voice in Cricket’s head whispered.

“Want a cup of coffee?” Cricket asked. “There’s also some leftover blueberry muffins under the cake dome if you want one.”

“I’d love both, but I’ll get them. You don’t need to wait on me,” Anna

Grace said.

“I didn’t plan on it.” Cricket took a sip of her lukewarm coffee and pushed her office chair back. “I’m going to heat my coffee up in the microwave. Those muffins might be better if you give them about ten seconds.”

“I can’t cook. I don’t know jack about cleaning, and I’m afraid I’ll be a big disappointment to Tommy.” Anna Grace dabbed at another tear with a paper napkin.

Cricket put her coffee in the microwave. “Looks to me like you’ve got three months to learn. Do you even know how to run one of these to heat up that muffin?”

“Not really.” Anna Grace grimaced. “When I want something like that done, I tell our cook and she takes care of it.”

What would Jennie Sue do? Cricked asked herself.

She would help Anna Grace. The pesky voice in Cricket’s head didn’t help one single bit.

“All right I hear you loud and clear,” Cricket muttered as she carried her second cup of coffee and a muffin back to her desk.

“What was that?” Anna Grace’s heels made a tapping sound on the tile floor as she followed Cricket back to the desk.

“I can cook. I’m an expert at cleaning and gardening. I have an extra bedroom you can use. And I’ll give you a job here in the bookstore dusting shelves, waiting on customers, sweeping up dead crickets every morning, and dumping the occasional dead mouse out of a trap and into the dumpster out back. Your current friends don’t come in here very often, but if and when they do, are you willing to let them see you doing that kind of work?” Cricket said.

Anna Grace hesitated for a moment but then nodded.

Cricket went on to say, “At the end of the day you’ll go home with me and help me in the garden, then learn how to cook and clean. It will be a crash course in life. That’s what I can offer if you love Tommy enough to leave your fancy lifestyle.”

“You’d do that for me after the way I’ve treated you?” Anna Grace’s expression showed total shock.

“No, I’ll do it for you because that’s what Jennie Sue would do,” Cricket said. “Leave your high heels at home. The closet in the spare bedroom at

my small house isn't very big, so you will need to limit what you bring to no more than two suitcases. If you don't have anything fit to pick beans or dig up potatoes or even to clean house in, you can borrow some of my old shirts, but my cut-off jean shorts will be too big for you."

"I can't believe I'm even considering this," Anna Grace gasped. "I don't know how much you'll charge me for all that, but I do have a little bit of savings, so I can pay you."

"Nope. I'll give you minimum wage for working here in the bookstore forty hours a week. I've been thinking about hiring some help so I can take a few hours off now and then anyway, but the rest of it is free for the help you'll be giving us in the garden and helping me clean the house. You might even pull a few more dollars in if you offer to clean Jennie Sue's house, or Lettie and Nadine's for the rest of the summer. We only work half a day on Saturday and we're closed on Sunday at the bookstore," Cricket told her. "And trust me, I can't believe I'm offering this any more than you can."

"When would I start?" Anna Grace asked.

"I'm going to a party tonight at Lettie and Nadine's. I'll leave the front door open. If you're there when I get home, then you've started. You've got twenty-four hours to make up your mind. If you're not there, then I figure this was a prank, or that dollar bills mean more to you than love. But Bryce is off limits, no matter what you decide. Not because I'm in love with him or want to be a pharmacist's girlfriend, but because he's much too nice of a man for the likes of you if you throw Tommy over and give him back that gorgeous ring for prestige and money," Cricket said. "And another thing—jeans and T-shirts are just fine for work in this place. You can leave all your fancy suits at home too. Who knows? You might be able to save up enough money by the end of summer for you and Tommy to drive out to Vegas and get married there."

"I just might see you out at your place later." Anna Grace smiled.

"I can honestly say that I hope not," Cricket told her, "but it's up to you. I'm not easy to live with, and I speak my mind. You won't bully me ever again or I'll kick your skinny butt out in the yard."

"I've lived with my mother for more than thirty years," Anna Grace said. "That doesn't sound too bad at all, and I can never repay you or thank you enough for this offer. There's just one problem. Daddy says if I ever leave, I won't even have a vehicle. If he's serious, then he'll send someone to take

my car or else make me give him my keys. Mama will be mortified, and Daddy doesn't like it when she's not happy."

"If you need a ride, call me." Cricket didn't figure she'd ever get that call. "You can ride to work with me, and if you want to go somewhere in the evenings, there's an old work pickup truck out at the farm. It doesn't have air-conditioning, and you'll have to put your own gas in it."

Tears began to stream down Anna Grace's face. "Not one of the Belle daughters would ever offer to do all this for me. They'd all be too afraid of my mother and their own mamas."

"Honey, Mary Lou had better be afraid of *me*. I'm determined that no one is ever going to make me feel inferior again." Cricket had actually stretched the truth, because, deep down, she felt rather plain and chubby in Anna Grace's presence.

"You haven't dealt with my mama," Anna Grace said, "but I'm not going to argue with you. Can I have your cell phone number?"

Cricket picked up a business card for the shop, wrote her number on the back, and handed it across the table. "Welcome to the world of the poor and proud."

Anna Grace pulled a tissue from a box and wiped the tears from her face. "I'm going to call Tommy and talk to him on the way back to the office. Thank you again, Cricket. I damn sure don't deserve this, but I appreciate it more than you'll ever know."

She pushed open the door just as Lettie and Nadine were about to open it. She stepped aside and allowed them to enter, then went on her way.

"Am I seeing things?" Lettie asked. "Was that Anna Grace leaving this store without a black eye or bloody nose?"

"Yep, and I still don't know if she tried to pull a prank on me, or if what she said was real, but I think I shut down the joke if it was one, and I made her feel like crap." Cricket went on to tell them what she had said and done.

"Holy hell!" Nadine sputtered. "What are you going to do if she shows up at your house tonight with her things in tow?"

"Teach her how to work and how to cook and clean," Cricket said. "Jennie Sue gave me a chance when I treated her like crap, so I'm paying it forward."

"This is like that one book we read a few months ago, or was it years ago?" Lettie drew her dark eyebrows down and tapped her chin with her

bony finger. “Doesn’t matter how long ago it was, but I remember that someone said that the heroine was letting the villain define her actions. You just proved that Anna Grace doesn’t have any power over you anymore. I’m right proud of you, girl.”

Nadine shook her head slowly from side to side. “Man alive, you’ve got your job cut out for you if you think you can teach that girl a blessed thing in just three months. She’s probably never even pushed the button down to make toast.”

“Don’t I know it,” Cricket agreed. “She doesn’t even know how to work a microwave.”

“I want pictures of her the first time you take her out in the garden and teach her how to cut okra.” Lettie headed for the coffeepot. “That’d be something even more bizarre than aliens.”

“Oh, no!” Nadine grabbed her chest. “If she does this, she will be at your house on Saturday when you’re supposed to go fishing with Bryce. Do you think she’s just initiating...no that’s not the right word...” Nadine pursed her lips. “*Insinuating*, that’s the word, into your life so she can get next to Bryce? Is this just a ploy to be a pharmacist’s wife after all?”

“I warned her about that,” Cricket said. “If it is, she’s going to find herself landing out in the yard flat on her butt, and I hope it’s good and muddy when it happens.”

“I’ll help you,” Lettie said. “Just give me a call, and I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Let me drive and we’ll be there in five,” Nadine declared.

Cricket just hoped that she never had to make that call.

Chapter Five

Rather than get dressed for a party, Bryce would have liked to put on his overalls and go out to the farm to spend the evening with Cricket. Time with her was refreshing to his soul. Even from the beginning, she didn't put on airs or try to cover up what she was thinking, and he liked that in a woman. But tonight, he would be going down the stairs from his apartment into the garage, and then into Lettie and Nadine's house to celebrate Nadine's ninety-fifth birthday. He'd known them for only a few days, but he already wanted to grow up and have the kind of attitude about life that they had. One that said he loved life and living, and that he was so confident in his own skin that he didn't give a rip what people thought of him.

On his way out the door, Bryce picked up his present—a box of fancy chocolates that he'd bought at a local gift store. He'd called his mother to see what he should take, and she'd suggested a bottle of wine, but his grandmother said a box of candy was a better gift since he didn't know if Nadine liked wine or, if she did, what kind.

When he had gone down the stairs and crossed the garage, he stood at the back door, not knowing whether to go in or to knock. A breeze wafted the scent of roses across the space to him. He turned to look over his shoulder, and Cricket waved at him.

"Hey, good evening." She smiled.

She was wearing a cute floral sundress printed with roses, and red sandals. Her brown hair was twisted up on top of her head and held with a bright red rose clip. Surely, he wasn't just imagining that beautiful, clean smell that got stronger as she neared.

"You sure look pretty tonight," he said.

"Thank you." Her smile grew even wider, seeming to light up the whole garage. "You clean up pretty good yourself."

“I do my best with what little I’ve got to work with,” he chuckled. “I didn’t know whether to knock or not.”

“No, just go on in. Judging from all the cars and trucks parked along the road, we’re not the first ones here.” She brushed past him and opened the door.

He motioned for her to go on in ahead of him and then followed that enticing scent through the back door. Nadine was in the kitchen, swiping her finger across the icing on a cupcake, and she just grinned when she saw them coming into the house.

“Busted!” she giggled. “Just remember, when you get to be ninety-five, you can do whatever you damn well please.”

“Nadine Betterton!” Lettie shook her forefinger at her sister as she came into the kitchen. “That’s the third cupcake I’m having to set back.”

“It’s my birthday, and besides, I’ll have those three for my midnight snack tonight.” Nadine slapped her finger away. “You’ve made too much food anyway.”

“Where do we put presents?” Cricket asked.

“We’ve got a table set up in the living room,” Lettie answered. “I’ll take them if you two young’uns will guard this woman and keep her from ruining anything else.”

Bryce handed over his gift but wasn’t sure how he was going to guard Nadine without hurting her feelings.

“Are we the last ones here?” Cricket looped her arm in Nadine’s and pulled her toward the archway leading into the living room. “If so, it might be time to cut the cake and start eating. You sure look pretty tonight. Blue is definitely your color. I hope I look as beautiful as you when I’m eighty years old.”

“Eighty nothing! I’m only thirty in my mind,” Nadine laughed. “And you know very well that my birth certificate says I’m ninety-five, but thank you for the compliment.”

Cricket was absolutely awesome, Bryce thought, and he couldn’t wait to go fishing with her the next evening. For that matter, he already planned to spend as much time with her as he could in the coming days and weeks.

“Hey, hey,” Nadine called out, “the gang is all here.”

“And all ninety-five candles are on the cake. Amos, will you help me light them?” Lettie asked.

“Be honored to help, but only if you’ve got the fire department on standby,” Amos laughed.

“Amos and his wife, who passed a few years ago, owned the bookstore before Jennie Sue bought it,” Cricket whispered as everyone watched Lettie and Amos light all the candles.

Amos reminded Bryce of the late Mickey Rooney. He was short, had a smile that covered his round face, and by golly, Bryce liked the man before he even said a word because he’d worn bibbed overalls to the party.

When they’d finished, Nadine stepped up behind the table. “Okay, Lettie, now you have to help me blow them out. You could have bought a couple of those candles that are shaped like a nine and a five. You didn’t have to put one for every year.”

“Oh, no!” Lettie shook her head. “You’re the one who’s lookin’ a hundred smack in the eyeball. You blow them out, and you better hurry because the ones in the middle are about to burn to the bottom. They’ll ruin the icing and that’s your favorite part so don’t take another second to make your wish.”

“I’ll remember this when you need saving from the aliens.” Nadine took a deep breath, started at one end, and blew out every one of those candles.

A tall man with just a rim of gray hair around his head started the “Happy Birthday” song in a deep baritone, and everyone else joined in. Bryce paid particular attention to Cricket, who had an alto voice and carried a tune very well. Was there nothing this woman couldn’t do?

When the song had ended, Amos and the tall guy helped Lettie remove all the candles and then Nadine cut the first piece.

“I like a corner because it’s got the most icing,” she said with a smile. “I believe in having dessert first because life can be short. Not that I know anything about that business of it being short, but I do like chocolate cake. The rest of you feel free to enjoy all those finger foods that Lettie has worked on for a week, and please eat it all or she’ll make me have it for breakfast, dinner, and supper until it’s gone.”

“Tables are set up in the backyard,” Lettie announced. “Thank goodness it’s a decent night and not too hot.”

Cricket wasn’t a bit shy about loading her plate with finger foods, so Bryce did the same.

“This is some spread,” Bryce said. “I was expecting cake and punch.”

“Not at this house. Lettie and Nadine love to entertain,” Cricket said. “And they’re offended if you don’t eat hearty.”

“Well, I sure wouldn’t want to offend anyone, especially my landladies.” He liked these people. They were like the country folks he had grown up around.

The tall guy who’d led the “Happy Birthday” song fell into line behind Bryce and introduced himself. “I’m Frank Bartell, the pastor at the church that most of the folks here attend. I’ve been meaning to get down to the drugstore and welcome you to Bloom, but this has been a busy week. We’ve already had a funeral, and two members of my congregation are in the hospital in Sweetwater. But welcome, and I’d love to have you join us on Sunday.”

“Thank you, sir,” Bryce said and then turned to face Cricket. “Is that where you go?”

“Yep, been going there my whole life. Lettie took care of me in the nursery,” Cricket answered.

“Can I drive out and pick you up for church on Sunday, and then maybe take you out to dinner?” Bryce asked.

“That sounds great. I’ll be ready at ten thirty. Church starts at eleven,” she said. “Come on outside and sit by me. I need to tell you about today.”

“Lettie said she saw Anna Grace go into the bookstore. Is everything all right?” Bryce asked as they made their way outside, where multicolored balloons were tied to the ends of two eight-foot tables. Framed pictures of Nadine in every stage of her life were strewn down the middles. “Now, this is a party,” he said as he put his plate on the table and sat down beside Cricket.

“Everything is fine, or at least I hope it is,” Cricket answered. “I figured someone would have seen her in the bookstore and spread the gossip.” She told him the short version of what had happened that day.

“That’s pretty sweet of you after the way she’s treated you, but I’ve got to admit, it sure takes a load off my shoulders. I was dreading even filling prescriptions for her and her family,” he said in a low tone.

Cricket shrugged. “I treated Jennie Sue like crap, and she gave me a second chance, so I should do the same for Anna Grace. Besides”—she leaned over and whispered—“if she was just playing a mean trick, I turned it around on her and took the power away from her.”

“If she’s not, you have to live with her for three months,” Bryce said.

“If she’s not serious, she won’t last a week in the garden or the kitchen and she’ll leave for sure on Saturday afternoon when I tell her it’s her turn to scrub the bathroom.” Cricket picked up a stuffed mushroom and popped it in her mouth. “I love food but then that’s evident from the way I look.”

“I think you are gorgeous,” Bryce said with all sincerity.

* * *

Cricket was glad she had food in her mouth and could use that for an excuse not to say a single word. She was even happier that she didn’t have a mouthful of sweet tea or she would have spewed it all over a picture of Nadine when the elderly lady was probably about sixteen.

“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about breaking me with a big hug,” she finally said, “and the way I like to cook and eat, I never will. But I’ve got to admit, I’m probably the clumsiest woman in the whole state.”

“I’ll catch you if you fall,” Bryce said.

Was he flirting with her? Sweet Lord! She had never learned how to bat her eyelashes and flirt like the Belles. While they’d been learning all about fashion and how to make a man fall all over himself to get to kiss their pretty sweet sixteen rings, she had been learning how to cook and plant a garden.

“If you do, I’ll probably just drag you down with me,” Cricket said.

“Sounds like fun if it’s in a muddy garden. We could take mud baths together, and then wash up with the garden hose,” Bryce teased, and stole a small tomato off her plate.

A shiver chased down her spine when his hand brushed against her bare arm. Cricket had started to think that she would grow up to be like Nadine in more ways than just age. She would probably be an old maid who knew all the gossip in town and who took care of her two precious nieces. But that little spark she felt gave her hope that Bryce was serious and that there just might be a better future ahead for her.

Nadine sat down beside her, and Lettie claimed a chair across the table. Cricket loved both of them, but tonight, she wished they had sat at the other table with Amos, Ilene, Tandy, and the other guests.

“Bryce, has someone introduced you to our preacher?” Nadine asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Bryce nodded. “We met when we started around the food

table. By the way, this is an awesome party.”

“I do my best, even though living with her is like sharing a house with an old bear one day and a teenager the next.” Lettie nodded at Nadine.

“Hey, if I got up in the same mood every single day, you’d get bored.” Nadine winked. “Don’t worry, sister, when you get to be ninety-five, I won’t smother you with a pillow even if you act like a teenager. Unless I catch you making out on the sofa with some old bald, toothless man.”

“I could still catch a young guy.” Lettie fluffed up her dyed black hair with the palm of her hand. “I betcha I could even get one who has hair and teeth and doesn’t use a walker.”

“I’ve got ten bucks that says you can’t,” Nadine said.

“You’re on, but you can’t fuss at me for getting protection down at the drugstore. I don’t want to be catchin’ one of the STFs at my age, and besides, if the aliens ever do choose me to go up in the sky with them, I wouldn’t want to spread it around to them.” Lettie grinned. “And it could take a while, so let’s say you have to pay up on my ninety-fifth birthday.”

“It’s not STFs,” Cricket whispered. “It’s STDs.”

“Close enough,” Lettie said out the side of her mouth.

Bryce nearly choked on a sip of tea, but Cricket wasn’t a bit shocked at what they were saying. She’d heard them place two-dollar bets on all kinds of things. “That’s why they sit with us rather than with the preacher,” Cricket told him.

“You got that right,” Lettie said, “but we do try to be nice on Sunday. Which reminds me, you two want to have Sunday dinner with us after church?”

“We’ve already got plans,” Bryce said. “I’m taking Cricket to church and then out to lunch.”

“Is it a real date, then?” Nadine asked. “If it is, that’s the best birthday present you could give this old woman.”

“Old, my stars!” Cricket felt the blush before it started burning her face. “You will never be old, no matter what the numbers say.”

“Thank you, darlin’, but I just love it that you are going out on a date.” Nadine grinned.

Thank God Bryce didn’t ask why that was such a great thing, Cricket thought. Then the preacher came over, with a huge square of cake on a Happy Birthday plate, and sat down beside Nadine.

“Lettie, you outdid yourself on this cake. It’s amazing,” Frank said.

She put on her sweet little angel expression and cocked her head to one side. “You let me know when your birthday rolls around, and I’ll make you one just like it, but one without ninety-five holes poked in it.”

“I’ll only need sixty-five, and my birthday is at the end of August,” Frank said. “I plan on retiring in September. The committee will be looking for a new preacher at the end of this month. You ladies going to be up for interviews?”

“You bet we are,” Lettie assured him.

Bryce leaned over and whispered, “I guess it’s all right then if we go get cake now?”

The sensation of his warm breath on her neck sent even more of those delicious little shivers down her spine. She pushed back her chair and stood up. “We’re going for cake. Can I get y’all anything while we’re in there?”

“No, we’re good for now,” Nadine answered for both sisters.

“I’m just fine,” Frank said.

Cricket could hear them talking about new preachers as she and Bryce started into the house. “They’ve been on the hiring committee for probably fifty years or more. What kind of scares me is that Lettie might fight to hire a widower who has hair, his teeth, and walks without a cane just so she can collect on that bet.”

Bryce chuckled, but the second they were in the house, he couldn’t hold the laughter in anymore, and he guffawed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“They take their bets very serious, and a ten-dollar one is big. They usually only deal in a dollar or two at the most.” Cricket headed for the cake. She handed the knife to Bryce and said, “Don’t be shy. I sure don’t intend to be. I love Lettie’s chocolate cake.”

“Blackberry cobbler is my favorite dessert, and chocolate cake comes in right behind that.” He cut off a big square, then handed the knife to Cricket. When she finished putting her piece on her plate, she turned around to find him grinning down at her. “What?” she asked.

His eyes glittered when he ran a finger through the chocolate on the top of his cake and then wiped it on her lips. Before she could blink, he leaned down and kissed her. “That’s the way to taste chocolate icing,” he said when the kiss ended.

Her knees felt weak, and her heart thumped in her ears, but not to be

outdone, she set her cake on the table, swiped a finger down the side, and smeared it on his lips. Then she rolled up on her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and brought his lips to hers for an even longer, more passionate kiss.

When that kiss ended, she leaned into the hug for another moment, mainly because her knees still felt like they were filled with jelly. “You are so right,” she said between breaths.

Bryce wrapped his arms around her and drew her even closer. “I’d rather have your kisses as chocolate cake. I’m not real good at the romance stuff, but I’ve wanted to kiss you ever since I saw you in the garden.”

“Really?” Cricket couldn’t keep the amazement out of her voice.

The back door opened and they both hurriedly picked up their cake and started back outside. “Hope y’all left me some cake,” Amos said.

“There’s plenty.” Cricket’s voice sounded a bit high and squeaky in her own ears. “But I happen to know that Lettie made cupcakes in case the cake runs out.”

Amos passed on by them and headed to the dining room. “That’s good to know. I might beg a couple of those cupcakes to take home for my breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“I’m sure you won’t have to beg,” Cricket said as she hurried out the door that Bryce was holding open for her. “Me too,” she said as they crossed the yard.

“If you’re going to take cupcakes home, then I might be brazen enough to ask for some too,” Bryce said.

“I wasn’t talking about cupcakes,” Cricket told him. “I like kissing you better than chocolate.”

“That *is* romantic.” Bryce beamed.

Chapter Six

Cricket felt as if her car were floating on air all the way from the party out to the farm. The idea that Anna Grace might be at her house was completely gone from her mind, but it came flooding back when she saw the older-model pickup truck parked in front of her house.

“She really did it,” Cricket muttered.

She sat in her car for a few minutes before she finally got the plastic container out of the back seat. Lettie and Nadine had sent home cupcakes and little bits of the leftovers, including the rest of the stuffed mushrooms that she liked so well.

The door flew open before she even cleared the porch steps, and a tall guy with dark hair said, “Can I help you in any way? I’m Tommy Bluestone, and I want to thank you so much for helping Anna Grace.”

“I’ve got it all,” Cricket said. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Cricket Lawson. Y’all want a cupcake or some of the party leftovers?”

Tommy sure didn’t look anything like she had imagined. He might be as tall as Anna Grace, but not if she was wearing her signature Prada shoes. He had golden skin, jet-black hair, a round face, and a tattoo of a dreamcatcher on his arm. He wore black-rimmed glasses, a faded T-shirt, and well-worn jeans.

“I’d love a snack,” Tommy said. “When Anna Grace called me to say that she was really moving out, I didn’t even take time to get a bite of supper. It’s a wonder I didn’t wind up with a speeding ticket.”

“It seemed like hours instead of thirty minutes until he arrived,” Anna Grace said as the two of them entered the house. “I hope it’s all right if I already put my things away.”

Cricket carried the container of leftovers to the kitchen and took a half-gallon jar of sweet tea from the refrigerator. “Y’all help yourselves, and

Tommy, you are welcome here anytime, but be forewarned, if you arrive right after six any day of the week, I might make you help harvest vegetables from our garden.”

“Not a problem. I grew up on a farm in Oklahoma, and I know all about gardening. My granddad is a member of the Chickasaw tribe, and he thinks that all children need to learn about the land and about growing food.” Tommy removed the lid from the container. “Oh, man! This all looks so good. Thanks for bringing stuff home for us. Come on, darlin’, let’s dig in.” He picked up a mushroom and fed it to Anna Grace.

“My God,” she gasped. “That is amazing, and those cupcakes are homemade, aren’t they?”

“Yep.” Cricket nodded. “You’ll judge all chocolate cake by them forever after you take the first bite. Y’all make yourselves at home. I’m going to have a shower and go to bed.”

“Thanks again,” Anna Grace said. “What time do I need to set my alarm for?”

“Six thirty, but I’m surprised that your folks let you keep your phone?” Cricket asked.

“I have a clock, and I’ll be getting one of those pay-as-you-go phones at the Dollar Store tomorrow,” Anna Grace answered. “My mother checked my purse and took away all my credit cards, my phone, and wouldn’t even let me bring my hair dryer or curling iron with me. I have one month to change my mind about all this, she says, or they’ll take me out of the will.”

Tommy gave her a hug and kissed her on the forehead. “You’ll survive. You are strong, and I love you.”

“Good night.” Cricket left them to encourage each other and headed down the short hallway to the bathroom, which she now had to share with Anna Grace. She turned the water on in the shower, put the toilet lid down, and sat on it. She fetched her phone out of the pocket of her dress and called Jennie Sue.

“You’re never going to believe what I did today, and what happened tonight,” she said.

* * *

Cricket was whipping up eggs in a bowl when Anna Grace came in the

kitchen the next morning. “You can make the toast. Put two slices in the toaster oven.”

“I usually just have a kale shake for breakfast.” Anna Grace yawned and looked around for bread. “What’s a toaster oven, and I don’t see a loaf of bread.”

“I make our bread. It’s in the green plastic box right there by the toaster oven.” She pointed toward the small appliance sitting on the cabinet. This was going to be a bigger chore than she’d thought. Hopefully, Anna Grace was a fast learner. “The bread has been sliced. All you have to do is put two slices in the tray, close the door, and turn the knob to toast.”

Anna Grace followed the directions without being told a second time. Cricket kept a close eye on her while she scrambled eggs to go with the bacon she had already fried.

“Now take it out and smear butter on it. You’ve eaten in enough restaurants to know how to do that,” Cricket said.

“I made toast!” Anna Grace beamed as she carefully spread butter on the thick slices of homemade bread. “This smells so good. How do you make it?”

“That’s a lesson for another month.” Cricket finished the eggs and piled them up on a plate beside six slices of crispy bacon. “Pour two mugs of coffee while I get the orange juice.”

“Mother would scream at me for eating like this,” Anna Grace sighed. “I’ve been taught my whole life that you can never be too thin or too rich.”

Cricket set the plate of eggs and bacon on the table, then brought out a half-gallon container of juice. “I guess those are two lessons you’ll have to unlearn. I’ll say grace this morning. We’ll take turns. Tomorrow it will be your turn.” She sat down and bowed her head.

“Thank you, Cricket,” Anna Grace said when the short prayer ended. “I’ve never prayed out loud before.”

“Another lesson you’ll learn here.” Cricket served herself half the eggs and three pieces of bacon, then passed the plate over to Anna Grace. She poured herself a glass of juice, slid the jug over toward Anna Grace, and picked up a piece of the toast from a plate that was in the middle of the table.

“We never ate together except at dinners when we had guests.” Anna Grace followed Cricket’s lead and put the rest of the eggs and bacon on her

plate.

Cricket hoped that Anna Grace learned to like this new world because, from what Tommy had said, this was the kind of upbringing he had had. If she didn't learn to be independent, all the love she had for him might not be enough.

"If we eat like this every morning, I'll need new clothes," Anna Grace said.

"You'll work it all off." Cricket opened a jar of homemade elderberry jam and put a spoonful on her toast.

"I go to the gym after work at least three times a week, but I'm sure my mother will cancel that membership. She's probably made a list of all the places she'll need to call today." Anna Grace finished off her breakfast and took a sip of her coffee. "Do you think I could make breakfast for Tommy by Sunday morning? And is it all right with you if he sleeps over on Saturday night?"

"You're an adult. You don't have to ask me whether your boyfriend can stay the night here," Cricket said. "I'll give you a crash course in something simple. We'll make French toast and ham for supper tonight, and you can write down the instructions as we go. It's fast and easy."

"I hope so." Anna Grace smiled. "I'll go get dressed. I brought jeans and a shirt like you said to wear to the bookstore this morning."

"Not before we get the dishes done and the kitchen put to rights." Cricket finished off her coffee. "And Anna Grace, if you can read directions, you can cook. During our downtime at the store, why don't you go through some cookbooks?"

"Do they have one called *Cooking for Dummies*?" Anna Grace asked.

"Maybe so," Cricket answered. "I'll wash. You can dry and put away, so you'll learn where things go."

No one ever texted or called Cricket early in the morning, so it startled her when her phone rang as she was washing dishes. She quickly dried her hands and pulled it from her hip pocket, scared that something might have happened to Lettie or Nadine. When she saw Bryce's name, a wide smile broke out, and Anna Grace raised an eyebrow.

"Hello." She carried the phone outside to the porch.

"Good morning! I dreamed about you last night, and wondered if I came out and helped with the garden right after work, if maybe we could get a

couple of hours of fishing in tonight before it got dark?" he asked.

"I don't see why not," she answered. "Anna Grace and I are making French toast and ham for supper. We could make a sandwich out of ours and take it to the creek with us."

"That sounds wonderful. See you then, if not before." He lowered his voice. "So she moved in, did she? Lettie is betting Nadine that she won't last a week, and she's put ten dollars on it, so she's serious."

"Did you get in on that bet?" Cricket asked.

Bryce chuckled. "I'm in for five. I saw that woman in the store. She looks like she's all fashion and makeup. What about you?"

"The jury is still out, but I might have to throw a dollar or two into the pot," she answered. "See you after work."

"Lookin' forward to it," he said and ended the call.

Cricket returned her phone to her pocket and went back into the house to find that Anna Grace had finished the dishes, put them away, and wiped down the stove top, the cabinets, and the table. "I've seen our cook do this, so I figured that was the rest of what you meant by cleaning up."

Cricket smiled and nodded. She was going to put in five dollars on the positive side. If Anna Grace kept this up, Cricket might win the whole pot, but even if that didn't happen, she felt like she'd already won the lottery when Bryce called.

* * *

Lettie and Nadine were in the drugstore before anyone else that morning. They sat down at one of the tables and ordered cherry limeades. Ilene had just gotten their drinks set down when Amos came in and joined them. Since Bryce wasn't busy, he rounded the end of the pharmacy counter and sat down at the table with them too.

"That was some party last night," Amos said. "Ilene, would you be a doll and bring me a cup of coffee?"

"Comin' right up," Ilene answered.

"We was glad for a good turnout." Lettie took a sip of her drink. "I think I need a bag of chips to go with this, Ilene."

Ilene picked up a small bag from the end of the counter with her free hand and brought it to the table along with Amos's coffee. "I hear we've got

a pot going about Anna Grace making it for a week.” She laid a five on the table. “I don’t think she’ll make it until Monday, so put my money on that side.”

Lettie whipped an envelope out of her purse and added the bill to it, then wrote Ilene’s name on the outside. “If anyone bets for *her*, they’re going to win a lot.”

“This is so exciting!” Nadine said. “We haven’t had a good bet going like this in more than a year.”

Amos handed her two dollars. “Put me down for her not making it until Sunday. She’ll be back in Mary Lou’s good graces by church time Sunday morning.”

Lettie did the bookwork and then focused on Bryce. “Now, we want to know if you’re going to ask Cricket on a real date. So far, you’ve just done what you had to do to run from Anna Grace, even though it’s looking like you didn’t need to.”

“Already did,” Bryce said. “We’re going fishing tonight, and if she’s willing, I’m going to ask her to go with me for ice cream tomorrow night.”

Lettie smiled and winked at Amos.

“What’s that all about? Are y’all taking bets on me and Cricket?” he asked.

“We never tell the folks that we’re betting on,” Nadine said. “That would be cheating.”

The phone rang and Tandy motioned for him. “Doc just called to say he was faxing over a whole page of prescriptions for the nursing home patients.”

Bryce pushed back his chair, but he looked over his shoulder and noticed that Lettie had an envelope out. Amos handed her another bill. Bryce was too far away to see how much he was betting, but he figured they had a pot going where he and Cricket were concerned.

The afternoon went by in a flash. There was a constant flow of customers in the store, and the barstools and tables were full most of the time. Bryce filled a hundred prescriptions before closing and had at least twenty on his counter to start filling the next morning. At five o’clock, he closed shop and rushed home to his apartment. He got all his fishing gear together and changed into his most comfortable jeans and a comfortable old T-shirt.

He whistled all the way down the stairs leading into the garage, pushed

the button to open the overhead door, and loaded his gear into his vehicle, which was parked out on the curb. The radio came on when he started the engine, and the song playing put a grin on his face. Bonnie Raitt was singing, "Something to Talk About." That was the song that Cricket had been singing at the beginning of the week when he met her for the first time. Just hearing the lyrics put a visual of her in those shorts with her midriff showing.

The song ended, but he kept humming it through five minutes of commercials. The words were still playing through his head when he turned down the lane to the farm. He got out of the SUV and headed around back to the garden, where he could hear two female voices. He could hardly believe that the woman in shorts and a faded T-shirt with her hair pulled up in a ponytail was Anna Grace. She had freckles across her nose, and dirt had collected in the sweat beads on her neck.

"Hey, I'm here," Bryce called out. "Where do you want me to begin?"

"Could you bring in the watermelons and cantaloupes?" Cricket asked. "Having this much help is great."

"Before you start, could you take a picture of me picking beans?" Anna Grace asked. "I want to send it to Tommy."

"What about your mother?" Cricket teased.

"Her too," Anna Grace laughed. "I figure if I can make it through dusting shelves and sweeping floors at the store, then picking beans here and helping cook supper, I'm on my way."

Bryce just nodded and hoped that Cricket hadn't asked her to go fishing with them, too. He had been looking forward all day to spending time alone with Cricket.

"Tommy is driving up here tonight." Anna Grace's voice sounded excited. "He has to take classes this summer to keep up his teaching certificate, but he's got time off until Monday. Cricket says that he can stay with us, and he's even offered to help out in the garden and at the store."

"Fantastic!" Bryce could have danced a jig right there in the wet dirt. That meant Anna Grace would be busy with Tommy, and he could spend time with Cricket.

Bryce pulled his phone from his bibbed pocket and shot a picture of Anna Grace, and then turned it slightly to take half a dozen shots of Cricket picking tomatoes. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and checked

the pigtail on the first watermelon vine. It was still green, so he moved on to the next one, which was brown. When he picked the melon up, it came off the vine easily.

“Looks like you’re going to have a lot to take to the bookstore tomorrow,” he said. “You want to put some in my vehicle? I’ll bring them over when you open up tomorrow.”

“That would be great,” Cricket said. “And thank you. I’ve been selling everything I take in by noon each day, but I haven’t had watermelons in two days. Folks have their name on a list for me to call when we harvest some more. Lettie and Nadine are always at the top, so you can just drop one at their house.”

“Will do,” he answered and went on to check the next melon. By the time he finished, there were ten cantaloupes and half a dozen watermelons in the back of his SUV. He washed off his feet with the garden hose, sat on the back porch until they dried, and slipped on his flip-flops. The women had gone into the house earlier, and the smell of cinnamon and the sizzle of ham frying met him when he opened the back door.

“Something smells good in here,” he said.

“French toast and ham,” Cricket said. “I’ve got a small container of maple syrup in my tote bag, and there’s a bowl of fresh fruit, and a chunk of leftover blackberry cobbler in the fridge that I’ll tuck in for you.”

Bryce’s stomach growled loudly. “That sounds wonderful.”

Cricket explained everything to Anna Grace as she cooked. When the ham was browned, she put it on a platter and divided it into four pieces. She dipped two slices of thick homemade bread in an egg, milk, sugar and cinnamon mixture and browned them two at a time. When she had done eight, she made four sandwiches, put them into individual containers, and slid them down into her tote bag.

“We’re ready to go,” she said. “Bryce, you can get your fishing gear and the beer, and I’ll carry this and my fishing stuff.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Are we driving to the creek?”

“We’ll take the old work truck,” she said. “We can get within fifty yards of one of the best fishing holes in this part of Texas.”

“Will you show me where that is sometime?” Anna Grace started whipping up an egg mixture. “Tommy loves to fish. I’ve never been, but after today, I’m ready to try new things.”

“Sure thing,” Cricket told her.

“Maybe y’all could go tomorrow evening. If Cricket is willing, I thought she and I would drive down to Sweetwater and get a snow cone,” Bryce said.

“I’m willing.” Cricket nodded. “I’ll show you where to go tomorrow morning before we go to the store, Anna Grace. Are you sure you can do this cooking tonight? I can stay until Tommy gets here if you want me to.”

“Get on out of here.” Anna Grace waved toward the door. “Tommy will be here in a few minutes, and I wrote down what you did step by step. I’m feeling pretty empowered right now.”

“All right then.” Cricket picked up her tote bag and headed out the back door.

“Where’s your fishing pole?” Bryce asked.

“In the back of the truck,” Cricket answered. “It’s parked beside your SUV.”

She was behind the wheel by the time he got his gear and beer all situated in the bed of the truck. He climbed into the passenger’s seat and started to roll up the window, but she shook her head.

“The air-conditioner hasn’t worked in years. Neither has the heater, but it took us to the farmer’s market on Saturdays before I started selling our produce out of the store, and it makes a great truck to drive back and forth to Rick and Jennie’s house. Keeps the old rutted pathway from rattling my car all to pieces,” she said.

“Grandpa has a truck that might even be older than this one.” Bryce propped his arm on the edge of the window. “I got to admit, I never expected to get this lucky when I moved to Bloom. I knew it was a small town, but I figured, for the first year, I’d be sitting in my apartment every night either watching television or reading.”

“Why’s that?” Cricket drove toward a wooded area.

“Because folks in small towns tend to be a little standoffish until they get to know a newcomer,” he answered.

“So is Bloom,” she told him. “At least for some folks. Us commoners are a little more sociable.”

“Well, thank goodness for y’all. I feel like I fell into a gold mine,” he told her.

“Me too,” Cricket said. “I was dreading the two weeks that Jennie Sue

and Rick were gone, but now I've got company and lots of help."

Bryce would have liked to hear her say that she had buried her old feelings about Anna Grace and that he was her boyfriend, but that would have been expecting a miracle since they'd known each other less than a week.

* * *

Cricket parked the truck under a whole grove of pecan trees, slung open the door, and grabbed her tote bag. "This is it. We'll make camp at the edge of the water, toss in our lines, and have supper while we wait on the fish to bite."

"I'll bring all the rest of the stuff," he offered.

"Thank you. I'll get the blanket and the food," she told him.

Is this a date? Or is it just fishing? she wondered as she spread out the blanket on the grassy edge of the creek and set out the plastic containers of food.

"This is the best date ever." Bryce dropped all the fishing gear and his tackle box, then set the small cooler with a six-pack of beer inside it on the edge of the blanket.

"Is this a date?" Cricket asked.

Bryce sat down beside her and kissed her on the cheek. "I hope it's a date and that we have lots more in the future."

Cricket turned to face him. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she wanted to forget fishing and make out with him until the stars popped out, or maybe until the sun came up the next morning. But before the electricity that she felt went on another minute, she had to know the truth. "Are you serious? I don't want to start something that will just end up breaking my heart and making me feel horrible."

"You really are straightforward, aren't you?" Bryce said as he cupped her cheeks in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "I know this is fast, but you're so special, Cricket. I feel like I've known you forever, and that I'm one lucky son of a gun to have found you. Do you believe in Fate?"

Cricket felt like Bryce could see straight into her soul. "I didn't until Jennie Sue came into my brother's life. That had to be Fate, so I guess in some circumstances I do believe in it."

“Well, Fate brought me to Bloom. I was looking at two small drugstores and had decided on the other one. The deal for it fell through at the last minute when the guy’s son and daughter-in-law decided to move back home and run the drugstore, and now I’m glad it did.” His eyes fluttered shut.

She barely had time to moisten her lips before his mouth closed over hers. She’d been kissed a few times in her life, but mostly she had just wished the experience would be over. This time, when the kiss ended, it seemed as if her whole life had changed. The water in the stream was brighter. The sky was bluer, and she could swear that the clouds had formed into a heart just for her.

Chapter Seven

Anna Grace was already in the kitchen and had the table set for two when Cricket came out of the bedroom the next morning. She took one look at Cricket and a broad smile covered her face.

“You and Bryce had sex last night, didn’t you?” she asked.

“No, but we had kissing and we’re having ice cream tonight, and I hope more kissing,” Cricket answered. “What do you want to learn to make today?”

“Quiche,” Anna Grace said, “but we’ll have to do that another day. From the recipe I read, it will take a while.”

“Not really.” Cricket pulled a readymade piecrust from the freezer and unwrapped it. “I keep these on hand for times when I’m too lazy to make the crust. Get bacon, half-and-half, cheese and eggs from the fridge.”

“Are you serious?” Anna Grace asked. “I was just teasing. Quiche is something that the Belles always serve when they have a brunch meeting, and I love it, but it has to bake, and we need to get to work.”

“We can get ready for work while it cooks and take about half of it with us. Tommy can have the rest when he wakes up,” Cricket said. “Put four pieces of bacon on the bottom of the crust while I beat up the eggs. Then we’ll add the half-and-half, cheese, and other ingredients, and pop it in the oven.”

“Is it really that easy?” Anna Grace asked. “From the way Aunt Sugar talked, I thought it took a long time. The recipe in the book I looked through yesterday looked harder than that.”

“Do you know anything about cheeses?” Cricket asked.

“No, but it said to grate the cheese, and doesn’t that take a long time?” Anna Grace measured the half-and-half for Cricket.

“Not if you buy it already grated,” Cricket answered. “There are some

shortcuts. You will have to go shopping with me one evening after work.”

“That would be great,” Anna Grace said, “and now back to the kissing. How did it make you feel?”

“It was totally different from when any other guy kissed me,” she said.

“That’s the way I felt when Tommy kissed me good night on the second date,” Anna Grace sighed. “It was like two soulmates found each other, and he says the same thing.”

“But what if Bryce doesn’t feel the same?” Cricket asked. “He told me that he was lucky to have found me, but what if that’s not real, and when something better comes along, he breaks my heart? I’ve been hurt bad before, and I don’t want that again.”

Anna Grace put all the ingredients back where they belonged. “Just trust your heart. I did mine, and I’m happy for the first time in forever. And, Cricket, the way Bryce looks at you tells me that he’s not going to break your heart. He really does like you a lot.”

Cricket slid the pie in the oven and started for her bedroom. “Thank you for that. Who would have thought I’d be getting romance advice from you?”

“Who would have thought I’d be sharing a house with you and learning to cook and garden?” Anna Grace stopped her long enough to give her a side hug. “This is a whole new world, and I’m loving it.”

Cricket hugged her back and then stepped away. “I don’t think I’d love your world if our situations were reversed. When Jennie Sue’s parents were killed in that car wreck, Rick and I came to the house with her.”

“I remember that night,” Anna Grace said. “You stayed out by the pool most of the evening.”

“Yep, because I let the whole bunch of you intimidate me,” Cricket admitted. “But that’s in the past, and we’re living in the present.”

“And so, looking forward to the future,” Anna Grace grinned.

* * *

Amos, Lettie, and Nadine were all waiting at the front door when Bryce opened the drugstore that morning. The three ordered coffee and honey buns and sat down at one of the tables together.

“Heard you went fishin’ last night,” Amos said. “Catch anything?”

“Nope,” Bryce said. “They weren’t bitin’.”

“Goin’ back tonight?” he asked.

“No,” Bryce answered. “Tonight, Cricket and I are going to Sweetwater after work for ice cream and a drive through the country.”

“So y’all are dating?” Amos asked.

“I hope so,” Bryce said with a grin.

“We’ve got a whole raft of prescriptions coming in,” Tandy yelled from the back of the store. That started a day busier than any he’d had all week. Bryce could hardly believe it when he looked at the clock, and it was ten minutes until five. Ilene was wiping down all the tables, and Tandy was counting out the bills in the cash register.

At exactly five o’clock, Ilene locked the front doors, Tandy put a bag of cash into the safe and locked it, and Bryce hung up his lab coat. “I can’t tell you two how much I appreciate your efficiency. I’m so glad you stayed on to work for me. This could have been a nightmare if you hadn’t.”

“You ever think maybe we’re putting a little more pep in our step because we don’t want you to be late for your date?” Ilene teased as they all three left by the back door.

“Well, thank you for that too.”

Bryce got into his vehicle, drove around to Main Street, and parked in front of the bookstore. He turned off the engine, waited until half a dozen cars went by, and then slung open the door and slid out from behind the wheel.

Anna Grace was sitting on the sofa with a glass of sweet tea in her hands when he went into the store. She looked up and pointed toward Cricket’s desk. “She’s in the bathroom right now, but you can wait on her. How was your day?”

“Fast and furious,” he answered. “I don’t think I stopped counting pills from the time we opened until we closed, but that’s good. That’s what I’m in business to do. How about y’all?”

“The same until about five minutes ago. Cricket says that she sold more books today than she usually does in a month,” Anna Grace answered.

“It’s been crazy,” Cricket said as she crossed the floor. “Are you ready to go get ice cream?”

“Don’t you have to wait until six to close up shop?” he asked.

“Not when I have help. Anna Grace can turn off the lights and lock the

doors,” Cricket replied.

“For real?” Anna Grace asked.

Cricket tossed her the store keys. “Didn’t you ever close up shop at the oil company?”

“Yes, but...”

Cricket shook her head and held up a palm. “No buts. When six o’clock gets here, lock it up and...” She dug around in her purse and laid her car keys on the coffee table. “And go home. Tommy said he would make sure anything in the garden that needed picking got picked. There’s food in the pantry and fridge. You’re on your own. If you’re afraid to cook anything else, make sandwiches and take them to the creek for a picnic. Jennie Sue says that you can skinny-dip this time of year.” She sent a broad wink toward Anna Grace. “Nobody will be home for a while to catch you!”

Bryce ushered Cricket out the front door with his hand on the small of her back, opened the vehicle door for her, and waited until she was settled before he closed it. He hurried around the back of the SUV, made sure no cars were coming, and slid into the driver’s seat.

“This is a real treat, getting to leave this early,” he said, “but what do you say we stop by the Bloom Café and have a burger for supper before we drive down to Sweetwater to the ice cream shop?”

“That sounds great.” Cricket smiled. “But you do realize that if you take me there to eat, folks are going to talk.”

“Then we’ll keep the phone lines hot tonight.” He grinned as he drove to the end of the block and snagged a parking place.

When they were out of the SUV, he draped an arm around her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. Only one booth toward the back of the café was empty, so he drew her close to his side and whispered in her ear all the way from the entrance to it. The whole place was buzzing when they walked in, but even a deaf person could have heard a pin drop until the moment they both slid into the same side of the booth, and he brushed a sweet kiss across her lips.

* * *

Sparks flew around them, and even though it wasn’t funny, Cricket giggled.

“I hope my kisses aren’t that bad,” he whispered.

“Not at all. They make my knees go weak and my heart race. I can’t stop laughing at all the people’s faces. What they’ve heard about the new pharmacist in town is true. He’s spending time with Cricket Lawson when he could have had any woman in Bloom,” she whispered.

“But I like Cricket,” he chuckled. “She’s my kind of woman.”

Laura Kay, the café owner, came over to their table and asked, “What can I get y’all to drink?”

“Sweet tea for me,” Cricket said, “and I’ll have a double bacon cheeseburger and fries.”

“I’ll have the same, and with an extra order of fries,” Bryce added.

“Have it right out,” Laura Kay said, “and welcome to Bloom. I’ve been meaning to get down to the drugstore and meet you, but it’s been crazy in here all week. I’m Laura Kay Franklin, and I own this café.”

“It was busy at both our places today too,” Bryce said. “and thank you for the warm welcome.”

“Sure thing,” Laura Kay said. “Hope to see you in here often.”

“Maybe not, since Cricket has been cooking for me,” Bryce said.

“Well, I’m sure what you get in here wouldn’t be as good as what she makes,” Laura Kay said and rushed off to pour refills of tea for other customers on her way back to put their order in.

“You do know that she’s telling all the folks where she’s refilling tea glasses what you said, don’t you?” Cricket looked up to find that he was staring at her.

“I hope so,” he said. “You have the most beautiful eyes, and your smile lights up the whole room.”

“Flattery will get you—” she started.

He put a finger over her lips. “That’s not flattery. It’s the pure facts.”

She closed her hand over his finger and kissed it. “With all this to feed the rumor mill, the gossip about Anna Grace will fall by the wayside.”

“I told you we’d give them something to talk about, but it’s not rumors, it’s the truth,” Bryce said.

Laura Kay must have refilled the customers’ tea glasses five times each because no one seemed to be in a hurry to leave the café. The place was buzzing with conversation when Cricket and Bryce finished their burgers and fries, and when he paid for the food, the noise got even louder.

They had barely gotten into his SUV when both their phones rang at the

same time. Cricket answered hers, and Bryce stepped out of the vehicle and sat down on the bench in front of the store to talk.

“Hey, I hear that you went to supper with Bryce at the Bloom Café,” Jennie Sue said. “I should leave town more often.”

“Holy smoke! We just walked out of the place,” Cricket laughed. “How did the news get all the way to Florida that quick?”

“You know what they say,” Jennie Sue giggled right along with her. “There’s three ways of fast communication: telegraph, telephone, and tell-a-woman. The latter is the fastest by far. Someone in the café called Lettie and she called me, but she thought y’all were going for ice cream tonight and burgers tomorrow night. She’s not going to be happy when she finds out that someone else jumped the gun on her when it comes to gossip.”

“Tongues were wagging.” Cricket told her what Bryce had said about giving everyone in town something to talk about. “He did an amazing job, but he said it was all real, not just for show.”

“Like I said, I should leave town more often,” Jennie Sue said, “and you should keep me informed a little better. I don’t like getting things secondhand either.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cricket agreed. “Bryce got a call at the same time I did, and he’s on his way back. Talk to you later.”

“I’ll expect details,” Jennie Sue said.

“I know, I know,” Cricket groaned.

* * *

A quarter moon hung in the dark sky with bright stars dancing all around it when Bryce walked Cricket to her door that evening at ten o’clock. They’d had ice cream, talked about anything and everything while they ate it, and then talked some more on the way home. She’d never been so comfortable with a guy in her whole life.

“I told you that the call back at the café was my father, and I’ve been trying to figure out a way to ask you to meet him and my mother. Is that too forward or too soon for you? Dad and Mama are coming to Bloom on Saturday and staying over until Sunday after church. Since my place is so small, they’ll bring their motor home. I called Lettie right after I talked to them, and she said they could park it in the driveway and hook up to the

electricity in the garage. They want to take us out to dinner so they can meet you on Saturday evening. If you're not comfortable with that, or if you think I'm rushing things..." He hesitated.

"I've got a better idea," Cricket said. "Bring them out to the farm when they get into town and have gotten things hooked up. We'll grill some pork chops and cook supper at home. We can visit more that way. Tommy and Anna Grace will be there too, so we'll have a perfect group—three guys and three ladies."

"Like I've said before, you are amazing," he said. "Will you go to church with us on Sunday morning? They'll have to leave right afterwards. Maybe we could take another picnic to the creek after we say our goodbyes?"

"I'd love to," Cricket said, "on all of it."

Bryce caged her by putting a hand on the door on each side of her, and then he leaned down and kissed her good night. Just like all the other times, he could have sworn the earth moved under his feet.

Cricket rolled up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck for the second kiss. "This has been the most awesome week of my life. I'm still not sure if it's real or if I'm dreaming."

"If you're dreaming, then I am too, and I don't want to wake up." Bryce kissed her one more time. and then whistled all the way to his SUV.

Cricket waved at him until she couldn't see his taillights any longer and then went into the house to find Anna Grace cuddled up beside Tommy on the sofa.

"You look like you're in love," Anna Grace teased.

"So do you," Cricket shot back.

"Guilty as charged, and happy to boot," Anna Grace said. "Mama called this evening just before I closed up shop and begged me to come home. She said that Daddy would give Tommy a job in the oil company, and I could have my big wedding. She'd already contacted a planner."

"And?" Cricket stopped in her tracks.

"I told her no," Anna Grace said. "Tommy likes what he does, and I've decided I don't want a big wedding. I do need three more months to learn more about being independent, though, before we have a small ceremony on the beach on Padre Island. I told her that she and Daddy could come to the wedding, but none of the Belles are invited. Not one of my friends has

tried to get in touch with me since I moved out of Mama and Daddy's house."

Cricket slumped down in a rocking chair. "As strong as you've gotten in just the past few days, you should be able to bench-press an Angus bull by the end of three months."

Tommy chuckled. "That's similar to what I told her, and she cooked supper all by herself. We had chicken enchiladas."

Anna Grace blushed. "It was a simple recipe. I can read; therefore I can cook."

"Yep," Cricket said and remembered what Jennie Sue had said. "I should leave you alone more often. Hey, just a heads-up. Bryce's folks are coming over on Saturday for dinner."

"I'll do what I can to help." Anna Grace nodded.

"And I'll take the guys fishing so you ladies can talk about us," Tommy said.

"Thank you both." Cricket pushed up out of the rocking chair. "I'm glad you're staying all summer, Anna Grace."

"Will you and Bryce come to Padre with us, and will you be my bridesmaid?" Anna Grace asked. "I'm only having one, and it will be really simple. We've decided on the first weekend in August."

"I'd be honored," Cricket said, "as long as the dress isn't too frou-frou."

"I can guarantee that," Anna Grace assured her.

Cricket went to her room, and sent Bryce a text: *Will you go with me to a wedding on Padre Island the first weekend in August?*

The answer came right back: *Yes!*

She fell back on her bed and stared at the ceiling. If someone had told her a few months ago that her life would turn completely around in one short week and that Anna Grace Cramer would ask her to be her only bridesmaid, she would have thought they were drunk or insane.

"But it's real," she whispered, and picked up her phone to call Jennie Sue.

Chapter Eight

Cricket, I'd like you to meet my parents," Bryce said. "This is my mother, Darlene, and my father, Tim."

"I'm pleased to meet both of you." Cricket shook hands with them. "And this is my friend and roommate, Anna Grace, and her fiancé, Tommy Bluestone."

"This is really sweet of you to invite us out here," Darlene said.

"Yes, it is, and I hear there's a good fishing hole right here on your property," Tim said.

"There sure is," Tommy said. "I caught several catfish yesterday. I thought us guys might grill them along with whatever we catch today. Or we can have a fish fry. Whichever way y'all like them best."

"Grilled," Darlene and Tim said at the same time.

Bryce leaned down and whispered in Cricket's ear. "Do you want us guys to stick around awhile?"

Cricket shook her head. "Anna Grace and I have already made a blackberry cobbler and a chocolate cake for dessert, and the vegetables are prepped for supper, so we thought that us girls would go fishing with y'all."

"Well, halle-damn-lujah!" Darlene grinned. "I love to fish. Let's have a contest. If the ladies catch more fish, the guys have to do cleanup after supper. If they bring in a bigger haul than we do, then we'll do cleanup."

Bryce shook his head. "That's not fair. We'll be doing the grilling, and that's half of making the meal."

Cricket raised both eyebrows. "And we've made dessert and will be making the sides."

Darlene took a step over to stand beside Anna Grace and Cricket. "I think they're afraid we'll show them up, girls."

Cricket liked this woman. She reminded her of Lettie and Nadine twenty

years ago. “Losing a fishing contest would be humiliating,” Cricket added, taunting the men.

“You’re on,” Bryce said. “And we won’t lose. Let’s gather up the equipment. Can we all go in the truck?”

“Sure.” Cricket grinned. “You guys can have the back of the truck. Just hang on tight. I’m driving, and I could hit a few potholes.”

“Want some pillows to sit on?” Anna Grace teased.

“We’re tough.” Tommy gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. “I’m just glad that dessert is already made. If you ladies lose the bet, you might burn it, and my sweet tooth would cry if a cobbler was ruined.”

“I’ll get the keys then and meet y’all at the truck.” Cricket headed into the house. She went straight to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and took out a plastic container. She put it, several bottles of water, and some cookies into her tote bag; grabbed the keys for the truck from the end table; and went back outside.

The guys were already sitting in the back of the truck, but none of them was brave enough to sit on the tailgate.

Anna Grace pointed to her bag. “What’s that?”

“A few cookies in case we get hungry, some water if we get thirsty, and what’s going to help us win this bet,” Cricket answered. “And we are willing to share with the guys. We don’t want them to say they lost the bet because they were so thirsty and hungry that they couldn’t concentrate on their fishing powers.”

Anna Grace giggled. “I can’t believe I’ve missed out on all this fun for so many years.”

“Why’s that?” Darlene asked as she got into the truck and slid over to the middle of the bench seat.

“You’re the smart one,” Cricket said, smiling, as she settled in behind the steering wheel, “but there are no gates between here and the creek.”

“What does that mean?” Anna Grace asked.

“It means that the smart farmer always sits in the middle. Then she doesn’t have to get out and open and shut the gates,” Darlene explained. “Now, tell me why you missed out on fishing.”

“A week ago, I was employed by my father in an oil company,” Anna Grace began and went on to give her a brief explanation of what had happened in the last week, “and Cricket was kind enough to forgive me and

hire me, and she's teaching me to be independent. Today is the first time I've ever been fishing. I hope I don't hold y'all back any and cause you to lose the bet."

"You'll be our ace in the hole. Beginner's luck will be with *you*." Darlene patted her on the knee. "And Cricket, please be careful with the potholes. I would like grandchildren in the near future."

Cricket laughed out loud. "Yes, ma'am." She had always been skeptical of people until she really got to know them, but she really did like Darlene—just like she'd been drawn to Bryce from the first time she met him. She parked under a tree, and a vision flashed through her mind of those kisses she had shared with Bryce a couple of nights ago. A nice rosy glow filled her cheeks, and her pulse jacked up a few notches just thinking about the way his lips on hers had heated her from the inside out.

"The race is on!" Bryce called out as he and the guys unloaded and carried the fishing rods and tackle boxes to the edge of the creek.

"I have no idea how to bait a hook," Anna Grace whispered.

"I'll teach you," Darlene said. "There's nothing to it. Just think of the worm as a piece of spaghetti. Come to think of it, we could use cooked spaghetti."

Cricket opened the truck door. "That's part of my secret recipe for bait. I brought some along, and we won't be sharing that with the guys."

"Do you share your recipe?" Darlene asked as she and Anna Grace got out on the other side.

"Not with many people, but I might with you," Cricket whispered. "Men think that bait has to stink to high heaven. I'm of the opinion that any smell will bring a catfish to see what it is. Let's see how you like it before you write it down."

"Fair enough." Darlene nodded.

The guys went upstream twenty yards and sat down on the bank. Cricket took Darlene and Anna Grace downstream about ten yards. "This is a better spot. It's a little deeper and a little colder, and there's shade. Catfish like murky waters. If you go follow the creek that way"—she pointed to the west—"the water clears up, and it's a perfect place to lay out and let the clear water cool you off on a hot day."

"Or go skinny-dippin'," Anna Grace giggled.

"I remember being young and doing that," Darlene said.

Cricket got a visual of Bryce with the clear creek water flowing over his body, and immediately felt her cheeks burning. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, ladies,” she said to get the picture out of her head, “grab a fake worm and put it on your hook.”

“Are those fettuccine noodles?” Anna Grace asked. “But what’s the smell?”

“A little cinnamon, some nutmeg, and ginger whipped up in a flour mixture and made into balls, then the noodles are wrapped around them so that when they get into the water, the pasta kind of comes undone and wiggles like live worms,” Cricket answered.

“Beats the devil out of stink bait.” Darlene grabbed one of the balls, slipped it onto her hook, and tossed her line out into the creek.

“Okay, here goes,” Anna Grace said when she’d baited her hook. “I watched how y’all did it, so I’m going to give it a try. I hold this button down, and throw, and oh my gosh, I did it! I can’t believe I did it!”

“Beginner’s luck. It’s going to be with us today,” Darlene assured her.

Minutes after Anna Grace sat down on the bank, her red and white bobber went under and her line got tight. “What do I do now, Cricket? Help me!”

Cricket laid her fishing rod down and hurried over to Anna Grace. “You reel it in just a little at a time. Looks like a nice-sized one, but the bigger they are, the harder they fight. Easy now, just a turn or two, and let him think he’s won.”

“I can’t believe I’m catching a fish,” Anna Grace squealed.

“It’s not caught until it’s on the bank and on ice,” Darlene reminded her.

“All right, now a little more,” Cricket said.

“Tommy, I’m catching a fish!” she yelled.

“That’s great,” he hollered back. “Need some help?”

“No, we’ve got it,” Anna Grace answered.

In another five minutes, they brought the catfish to the bank, and Anna Grace stared at it as if it were made of pure gold. “I can’t believe I caught the first fish.”

“Now you pick it up like this.” Cricket held it up. “And put it in the cooler on the back of the truck.”

Anna Grace flinched only once when she took the four-pound catfish by the gills and carried it to the cooler. Cricket was as proud of her as she

figured she would be when her first child started kindergarten.

“She’s doing pretty dang good for a woman who’s never done anything for herself,” Darlene whispered.

“Love kind of does that for you.” Cricket grinned.

“Yes, it does.” Darlene nodded.

Cricket noticed that the woman was staring at Bryce when she said it and wondered what was on her mind. “We should have bet on the greatest number of pounds rather than how many fish.”

“We’ll win either way,” Darlene said with so much conviction that Cricket believed her.

By the end of the time they had to fish, both teams were tied with two fish each. Bryce had caught two, and Darlene caught the second one on the girl’s team.

“Looks like we’ll be sharing the cleanup,” Bryce said as they all piled back into the truck to return to the house. “But we do have enough to grill along with the pork chops you’ve got marinating. Let’s make a deal. We’ll clean the fish and fillet them if y’all will do cleanup.”

“You got a deal,” Anna Grace said. “I’m not quite ready for the fish-cleaning lesson just yet.”

“Honey, I’ll always take care of getting the fillets ready, and I’ll be the master of the grill at our house if you’ll always have a dessert ready.” Tommy stopped and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

“That sounds good to me,” Anna Grace agreed as she climbed into the truck behind Darlene. “That was so much fun. Can we go again soon?”

“You and Tommy should go together. Take a blanket with you and some beer. If you don’t catch a single fish, you’ll still have fun.” Darlene winked at Cricket.

Sweet Lord! Had Bryce told her that he and Cricket had gone fishing and wound up making out on a blanket?

* * *

On Sunday morning, Bryce knocked on the door of his folks’ RV. “Y’all awake in here?” he asked.

“Come on in,” his mother said and stood back to let him enter. “We had breakfast burritos. There’s one left. You want it?”

“You bet I do. I just grabbed a doughnut and a glass of milk.” He felt cramped in the tiny trailer, even when he sat down at the small, booth-type table with his father.

“We’re going to drive the RV to the church parking lot so we can leave right after services,” his father told him. “I want to know how you really feel about Cricket.”

“That was blunt,” Bryce said.

“We like her a lot,” Darlene said. “She speaks her mind, and she’s so much fun to be around. We don’t want to influence you, but she fits right in with our family so much better than your other girlfriends.”

“I really like her a lot,” Bryce confessed. “I feel like I’ve known her forever, like we grew up next door to each other. I was disappointed when that other opportunity for a small drugstore fell through, but I’m so glad it did because I’ve got Cricket in my life now.”

“Good enough.” Tim grinned. “Finish up that burrito and let’s go to church.”

When he’d finished eating, Bryce helped his dad get things unhooked and ready to travel, got into his SUV, and rolled down the window. “Wait for us in the parking lot, and we’ll all go in together,” he said.

Tim waved in agreement, and Bryce hummed Blake Shelton’s “Honey Bee” all the way to the farm. When he knocked on the door, Anna Grace answered and motioned for him to come on into the house. “Cricket will be out in a minute. Would you mind if Tommy and I rode with y’all this morning?”

“Not a bit. Afterwards, let’s all four go down to the café and have Sunday dinner,” Bryce suggested. “I hear that Laura Kay has a chicken and dressin’ special on Sundays.”

“I’d love that,” Tommy answered for them. “I’ve never eaten at that café, but now that the cat is out of the bag about me and Anna Grace, we can go in there together.”

“I’m ready,” Cricket said, coming in right at the end of what Tommy was saying. “I broke the strap on my sandal and had to find another pair of shoes. I almost decided to put a toe ring on and go barefoot.”

Bryce tucked her hand into his and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Anytime you want to do that, let me know, and I’ll do the same.” He led her outside.

Anna Grace and Tommy headed on out to his SUV and got into the back seat.

Bryce stopped and said, “Hold up just a minute.”

“Is something wrong?” Cricket asked.

“How do you think her old friends are going to react to her decision? This will be the first time she sees them since she moved in with you.” Bryce had something else on his mind, and he knew he was stalling, but he wasn’t quite sure he was ready for her answer.

“She’s pretty tough,” Cricket said in a low voice. “I think she’ll be fine with whatever comes her way today. I heard you offer to take them to dinner with us. That was so sweet.”

“I’m a sweet guy,” he said with a smile, “who would be even sweeter if he could tell everyone that Cricket Lawson is his girlfriend.”

Cricket looked up at him with a twinkle in her eyes. “Really?”

“Never been more serious in my whole life,” he said. “I want us to be dating exclusively. I don’t want to share you with anyone else.”

“Yes!” she squealed. “Yes, I will be your girlfriend, and honey, after spending so much time with you this week, I don’t even want to date anyone else.”

He picked her up and swung her around until they were both dizzy. “I’m so happy that...” He stopped and kissed her. “There are no words, except that I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Me too,” she said and wrapped her arms around his neck and tiptoed for another kiss. “And I love this feeling.”

Epilogue

Several weeks later.

Good morning,” Anna Grace called out as she came in the back door of the bookstore. “Looks like it’s going to be another hot one.”

Cricket looked up from her desk. “How was the honeymoon?”

“It was amazing.” Anna Grace smiled. “Mama called this morning and offered to give me my old job back, and Daddy wants to buy us a house right here in Bloom as a wedding gift.”

“And?” Cricket’s heart fell to her shoes. She didn’t want Anna Grace to leave the store. If Bryce hadn’t moved in with her the previous week, she would have been super lonely at the farm. Jennie Sue and Rick didn’t pop in as often now that gardening season was over.

“I told both of them no,” Anna Grace said. “I like it here, and we’ve found an old farmhouse on an acre of ground about halfway between Sweetwater and Bloom that we will be signing a contract on this week. It’s a lease-to-own thing, so that all the rent money goes toward buying it in three years. It will be a great place to raise the six kids we want to have.”

Instant relief washed over Cricket. “Have you seen the *Bloom Weekly News*? I picked one up off the newsstand on the way in today.” She flipped the newspaper to the society page and pointed. “Who would have thought we’d get our pictures in the paper in the same week?”

“Well, would you look at that.” Anna Grace smiled and read the first few lines of the article out loud: “*Anna Grace Cramer of Bloom married Thomas Arrington Bluestone of Sweetwater in a private ceremony on the beach at Padre Island. Bluestone’s brother, Harry, served as best man. Cricket Lawson served as her friend’s bridesmaid...*”

“I told Mama if she didn’t put it in the paper exactly as I wrote it that she

would never see her six grandkids.” Anna Grace laughed. “Besides, by now Lettie and Nadine have already spread the news. Folks just read the paper to be sure those two haven’t lost their touch.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Cricket smiled and flipped the paper around so she could read: “*Cricket Lawson and Bryce Walton have announced their engagement. They plan a December wedding right here in Bloom. Bryce is the owner of the Bloom Drug Store, and Cricket is the proprietor of the Sweet Seconds Book Store in Bloom...*”

“One marriage, one engagement. Hopefully, by Christmas next year, there will be two baby announcements,” Anna Grace said.

“One marriage, one engagement, and one very good friendship that started most of it.” Cricket held up her coffee.

Anna Grace took a bottle of sweet tea from her purse and clinked it against Cricket’s cup. “May the friendship last forever!”

“Amen.” Cricket nodded.

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Keep reading for a peek at

Second Chance at Sunflower Ranch,

the first book in the Ryan family series.

Chapter One

Honey Grove billed itself as “The Sweetest Town in Texas.” Jesse Ryan certainly hadn’t agreed with that when growing up there, but as he drove back into town, he hoped things had changed in the past twenty years. The morning he had left—a lifetime ago—the sun had been low in the eastern sky. He’d hoped his best friend, Addy, would have at least shown up to wave goodbye, but she hadn’t. Jesse remembered all too well the lump in his throat that morning and the same feeling returned as he drove past the familiar sights in the small town.

He remembered how his mother, Pearl, had managed to hold back her tears until she had hugged him in front of the Air Force recruiter’s office in Paris, Texas. She had clung to him and wept on his shoulder.

“Mama, this is no different than if I was going to college,” he had said.

“It seems different to me.” She’d stepped back and looked at him like it was the last time she’d ever see him. “I love you, son.”

His father, Sonny, had kept a stiff upper lip, but had shaken his hand firmly. “This has always been your dream. Go make us proud.”

“Call and write when you can,” Pearl had whispered.

“I promise I will,” he had managed to get past the baseball-sized lump still in his throat. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“We’ll look forward to that.” Sonny had grabbed him in a fierce hug.

Jesse had kept his promise and come home when he could, sometimes twice a year, but most of the time just around Thanksgiving so his team members with wives and kids could be with them at Christmas.

The sun peeked up over the horizon beyond the rolling hills of North Texas. That he had left at sunrise and was now coming home twenty years later at dawn seemed fitting. With the sun rising ahead of him, he was beginning a new chapter in his life—right back on Sunflower Ranch, where

he'd grown up.

Not much had changed. The OPEN sign in the window of the same old doughnut shop that had been there forever flashed on just as he passed, and he was tempted to stop and buy a dozen to take home. But he forgot all about that when he saw a banner strung up across Main Street, announcing the Honey Grove Rodeo in a few weeks.

The banner wasn't the same one that he'd seen in the rearview mirror when he left all those years ago, but it reminded him that not much ever changed in a small town. He made a left-hand turn at the first of two traffic lights, drove down the familiar road about three miles, and braked before he entered the ranch property. He rolled down the window of his pickup truck and inhaled the fresh country air. A south wind kicked up and caused the Sunflower Ranch sign above the cattleguard to squeak as it swung slowly back and forth on rusty hinges.

"First order of business after breakfast is to grease that sign," Jesse said as he drove under the sign and down the long lane to the house. When he'd left, his two foster brothers, Lucas and Cody, had waved goodbye from the porch, but they weren't there to greet him that morning. Cody was working for a program similar to Doctors Without Borders, and Lucas traveled all over the world training cutting horses.

A light from the kitchen window sent a long, yellow shaft out across the yard. He glanced down at the clock on the dashboard. "Mama will be making breakfast, and Dad will be sitting in his recliner reading the newspaper," he muttered as he parked the truck beside two others just outside the yard gate. "I hope I can get used to rural life again."

Truth be told, he was a little leery about getting out of his vehicle. Every time he called home—which was at least twice a week when he could get service—his mom and dad talked about what a good job Addison Hall was doing since she had moved to the ranch several years ago to help take care of Jesse's father.

Addy would be in the house, and Jesse hadn't spoken to her in nearly twenty years. Up until he went to the Air Force, she had been his best friend. His first memory of her was the two of them mutton bustin' at the Honey Grove Rodeo and tying with her for first prize. They had been inseparable from then on, but that old saying about "out of sight out of

mind” was sure enough true when it came to him and Addy. About six weeks after he left for basic training, her letters and calls had stopped, and he hadn’t seen her since the night before he left home—the only time they’d crossed over the friendship line.

He opened the door of his black pickup truck, slid out of the seat, and rolled his neck to stretch the kinks out before he made his way up on the porch, which wrapped around three sides of the long, low ranch house. His father would have already come out and gotten his paper off the porch, or maybe from out in the yard if the person throwing it didn’t have good aim, so the door would be open.

A blue heeler dog turning gray around the muzzle got up from where he’d been resting under the porch swing and came to greet him. Tail wagging, the animal sat down right at Jesse’s feet.

Jesse knelt on one knee and scratched the old dog’s ears. “Good mornin’, Tex. You still keeping the cows herded?” He was procrastinating, but he just wasn’t ready to face Addy after all these years, or to meet her daughter, either, for that matter.

“Pearl, darlin’, are we expectin’ company?” Sonny’s voice rang out from the living room. “I hear someone talkin’ out on the porch.”

“That’s my cue.” Jesse straightened up. “See you later, Tex.”

He yelled as he opened the front door, “Is breakfast ready?”

“Jesse, is that really you?” His father tossed the newspaper to the side and grabbed a cane. Leaning on it, he opened up his other arm for a hug. “Hurry up, son, before your mother gets in here. I won’t get a bit of attention when she finds out one of her boys has come home.”

“Oh. My. Goodness!” Pearl joined them for a three-way hug. “We weren’t expecting you until the first of next week.”

Jesse swallowed the huge lump in his throat. When he’d been home eighteen months ago, his dad only had to use the cane sporadically, but the way he leaned on it now meant that things were definitely on a downhill slide. “I wanted to surprise you,” he said.

“Well, you surely did that.” His mother took a step back but kept a grip on Jesse’s arms. “Let me look at you. You’ve got a few gray hairs in your temples, and your eyes look tired. You need some good old home cooking and hard ranch work to put the sparkle back in your life, my son.”

“I’m thirty-eight years old, Mama,” Jesse chuckled. “I’ve earned those

few gray hairs. It's been a long week of getting things done so I could retire from the Air Force, but a few days on the ranch and I'll be right as rain. I hope that's breakfast I smell cookin'?"

"I know exactly how old you are, son," Pearl said, smiling, "and that is sausage gravy and biscuits that you smell. I hope you haven't eaten already."

He bent and kissed his mother on the forehead. "When it comes to your cookin', Mama, I'd never settle for second best."

Her eyes looked weary, too, he thought. Somehow every time he came home, she seemed smaller. When he was a little boy, she had looked to be ten feet tall and damn near bulletproof, but these days she barely came up to his shoulders. She had always had chin-length hair, but it had more salt in it these days than pepper. Seeing Sonny on the decline had to be tough on her, but Jesse was home now, and he could and would take a load off her shoulders.

"And I'm glad you're home. This old man right here"—she glanced over at Sonny—"needs your help running this place. Addy and Mia do what they can, and Henry is still a fine foreman, but he's past seventy." She talked as she pulled him into the kitchen.

"Don't you be callin' me old, darlin'," Sonny called after her and started that way.

"The MS is getting worse," his mother whispered. "It won't be long until you will have to make all the decisions."

Jesse draped an arm around his mother's shoulders. "I'm here. What can I do to help with breakfast?"

"Good morning." A voice from Jesse's past floated through the air. "I've got the waterin' troughs cleaned out and..."

Addy stopped in the middle of the floor. Her face lost all the color and she stammered, "Jesse, what...when...we weren't..."

"Surprise!" he said, but his voice sounded hollow in his own ears.

Addy certainly didn't have any gray in her kinky, dark brown hair, which she had swept up in a ponytail. Ringlets escaped and framed her delicate face. She met his stare, and their gazes locked over the top of Pearl's head. Her crystal-clear blue eyes still mesmerized Jesse as much as they had in the past. She had put on a few pounds, but every one of them looked fine on her. Her jeans dipped in at a tiny waist, and her T-shirt dipped low in the

front to show a little cleavage. She probably still got carded when she tried to buy a six-pack of beer.

“I thought you were a nurse. Why would you be cleaning troughs?” He wanted to kick himself the moment the words were out. Not a hello, how are you doing, good to see you, like he should have said.

“I am, and when Sonny or Pearl needs my nursing skills, I’m right here, but I’m also a farmhand. If you’ll remember, I was raised on the ranch right next door to this one, so I know how to clean troughs, herd cattle from one pasture to another, and—”

“Mornin’.” Another woman came into the kitchen by the back door. “Hello, Jesse. I’d know you anywhere from the pictures Nana and Poppa have on the mantle. You’re early.”

She stuck out her hand to shake with him. Her grip was firm, and her green eyes sparkled. “I’m Addy’s daughter, Mia. Does this mean the big welcome home party next week is off, Nana?” She let go of his hand and went over to the kitchen chair where Sonny was sitting to kiss him on the forehead. “Did he almost give you a heart attack, Poppa?”

“Yes, he did,” Sonny admitted. “We’ve talked so much about Addy and Mia the last few years that you probably feel like you already know all about them.”

“Yes, I do, but it’s really good to put a face to a name.” When his mother had told him that Addy had a baby and was raising the child on her own, Jesse figured that Addy had gotten involved with someone right after he had left for the military. At least knowing that made him understand why she had cut him off so suddenly and wouldn’t even take his phone calls all those years ago.

“Well, now that we’re all here, let’s get breakfast on the table. We’re burnin’ sunshine,” Mia said. “I’ve got hay ready to bale, and then this afternoon, I need to spend some time in the office with the books.”

Jesse shot a look over toward his father. Sonny flashed a smile and said, “Mia just got home from college last week, and she’s missed the ranch.”

Mia opened a cabinet door and took down six plates. “I wouldn’t even be in college if I hadn’t promised Nana and Poppa that I’d go. I can learn more right here on the ranch than I can sitting in a classroom.”

“If I’m going to turn all the bookwork over to you, then you need to understand agriculture business and learn all that computer crap that you

can. It confuses the hell out of me, and Pearl refuses to have anything to do with it,” Sonny said.

“Some of us old dogs don’t want to learn new tricks.” Pearl took a pan of perfectly browned biscuits from the oven.

Jesse watched as Mia set the table. There were only five of them, but she was getting ready for six people.

“Is someone else coming for breakfast?” he asked.

“Dr. Grady Adams comes on Saturday morning,” Mia answered. “He comes early so he can check Poppa before he does his rounds at the hospital over in Bonham.”

“You’ll remember Grady Adams.” Pearl dished up a bowl full of scrambled eggs. “He graduated with you and Addy. He’s your dad’s doctor.”

Of course Jesse remembered Grady. As a kid, he had always had his nose in a book, so it wasn’t any wonder that he had become a doctor. But Grady Adams wasn’t the person causing his heart to pound out of his chest, and his breath to come in short gasps.

At that very moment, Grady poked his head in the back door. “Anybody home?”

“Come on in.” Sonny motioned him inside with a flick of his wrist. “We was just about to say grace, so you’re right on time. Have a seat, and we’ll have some breakfast before we go talk medicine and cures for this disease.”

Grady set his black leather briefcase on a side chair and stopped to kiss Addy on the cheek. “How’s my patient today?”

“I’m fine. This new trial drug seems to be helping a lot,” Sonny said.

Grady hadn’t changed all that much. His light brown hair was a little thinner, and he’d either traded his thick glasses for contact lenses or else he’d had Lasik surgery. He still had a round, baby face and he’d put on a few pounds that had collected mostly around his middle.

“Hello, Grady.” Jesse took a step forward and stuck out his hand. “Been a long time.”

“Well, hello to you, too. You weren’t supposed to arrive for a few more days. So you’re out of the service now?” Grady’s handshake was firmer than Jesse thought it would be. “It’s good to have you back home, and yes, it has been a long time. I don’t think I’ve seen you since the night we all graduated from high school.”

“That sounds about right, but it’s great to be back home.” Jesse pasted a smile on his face. “So you’re a doctor, and you make house calls?”

“Just for Sonny,” Grady answered. “I’m the head of the ER over in Paris, but I come out here once a week to check on this new trial drug that Sonny is taking, and to get a free breakfast.” He winked across the table at Jesse.

“Married? Kids?” Jesse asked.

“Was married. No kids. My wife died a while back, but I’m moving on a baby step at a time. I’m dating a really nice woman who works in pediatrics at the hospital. She can’t make biscuits and gravy like Pearl does, though.” Another wink.

Jesse almost sighed with relief. *At least Grady wasn’t dating Addy.*

“I’m so sorry to hear about your wife,” Jesse said.

“Thank you,” Grady replied. “You and Addy were best friends if I remember right. Bet y’all have got a lot of catching up to do.”

“Yep, we sure do.” Jesse shifted his focus over to Addy. Their eyes caught for a moment, and then she blinked and turned toward Mia.

“Before you start on the books, you should take care of your sheep and the alpacas. They’re your responsibility when you are home,” Addy said.

“I’ll start that tomorrow,” Mia said.

Her expression and tone reminded Jesse of a few recruits he’d gone through basic with—full of defiance and attitude.

“No, darlin’,” Addy smiled. “You’ll start right after breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mia said with a head wiggle. Jesse was glad that he had never married and had kids if that was the way they acted.

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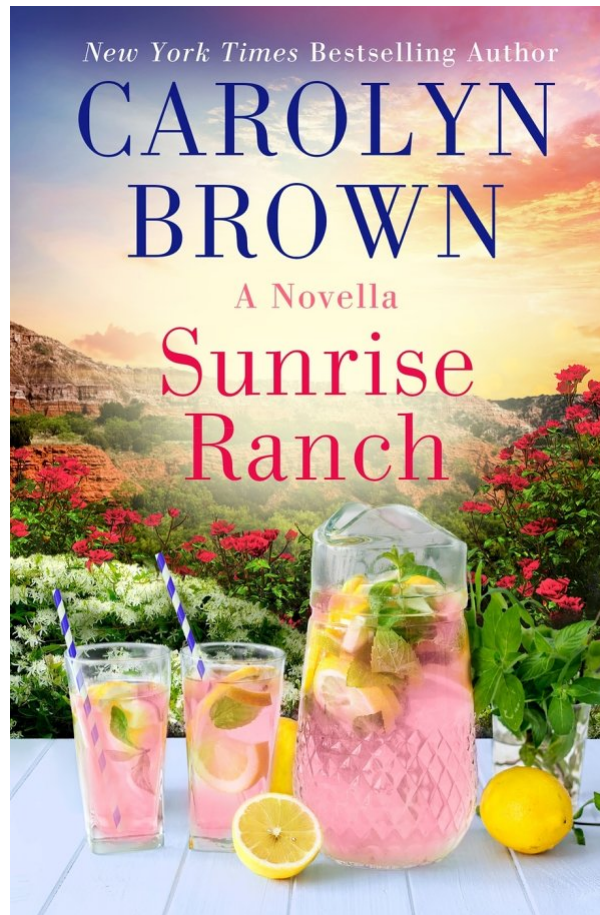
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Sunrise Ranch

About the Author

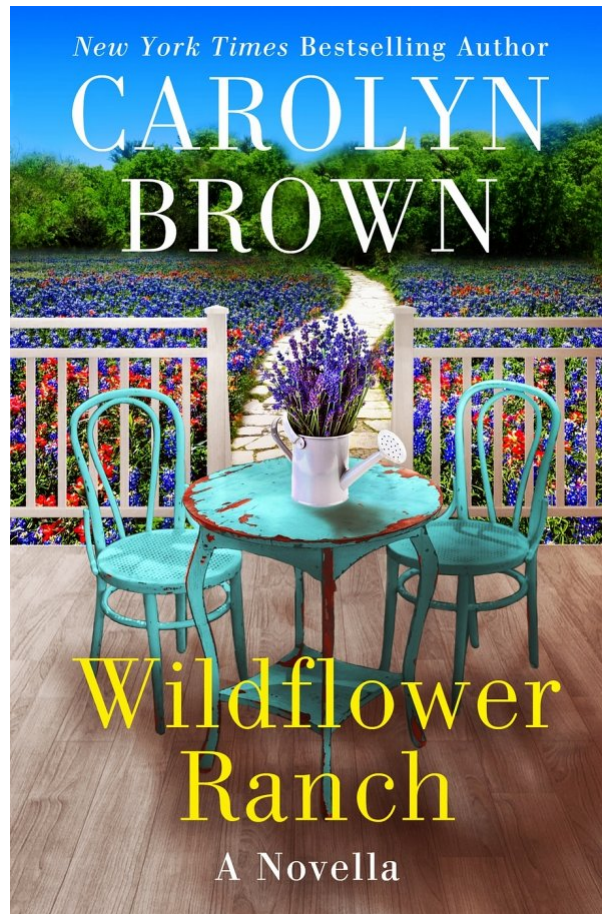
Carolyn Brown is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling romance author and RITA finalist who has sold more than 8 million books. She presently writes both women's fiction and cowboy romance. She has written historical and contemporary romance, both stand-alone titles and series. She lives in southern Oklahoma with her husband, a former English teacher who is not allowed to read her books until they are published. They have three children and enough grandchildren to keep them young.

For a complete listing of her books (in series order) and to sign up for her newsletter, check out her website at CarolynBrownBooks.com or catch her on Facebook/[CarolynBrownBooks](https://www.facebook.com/CarolynBrownBooks).

Looking for more small-town charm and romance?
Check out these swoon worthy novellas from Forever!



Bonnie Malloy never knew the meaning of home. But now she has a chance to run her very own Texas ranch. The only catch? To inherit the ranch, Bonnie must live there for a whole year with cowboy Rusty Dawson—and he thinks the property is rightfully his. As both try to drive the other out... will they realize just how much they enjoy being together?

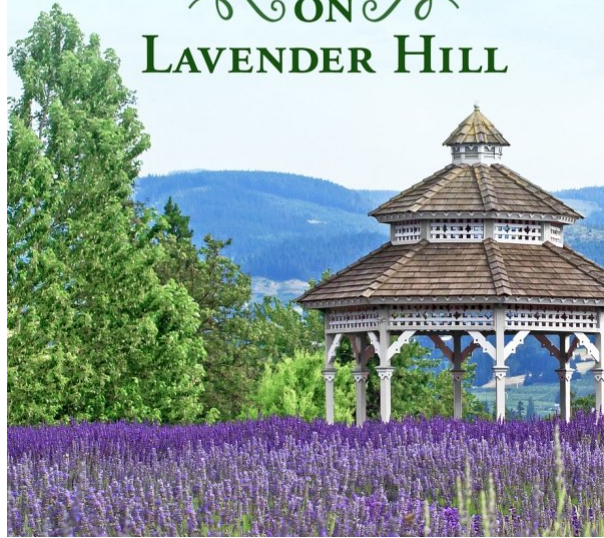


Shiloh Walker always imagined what it was like to have sisters. Now she's finding out that she has *two* when they all inherit a Texas ranch. The only catch: They must stay for a year or forfeit their stake. So when a neighboring cowboy is injured, Shiloh staying with him a few days to help out turns into her toughest decision yet: follow her heart or win the ranch?

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNIE RAINS

A WEDDING
ON
LAVENDER HILL



Event planner Claire Donovan loves giving clients the weddings of their dreams. But that gets tricky when must work with the man who broke her heart—Bo Matthews. As the son of the groom and owner of the perfect venue in Sweetwater Springs, Bo will be impossible to avoid. But can Claire be this close to her sexy ex without falling for his charms all over again?



Lacy Shaw has no intention of reliving the worst years of her life at her upcoming high school reunion. She's just the bookworm that blossomed into...the shy town librarian. Ditching the event seems best until a hot alternative roars into Sweetwater Springs. Perhaps riding in on the motorcycle of the new town hunk will show her classmates how much she's changed...