

THE *Pioneer Woman*

**BLACK HEELS to
TRACTOR WHEELS**



A Love Story


*1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REE DRUMMOND

The Pioneer Woman

Black Heels to Tractor Wheels
A Love Story

Ree Drummond

 HarperCollins e-books

For my children...Mama loves you.

For my husband...Mama loves you, too.

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INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY a few years ago, I began jotting down the story of how I met and married my husband. I got as far as the middle of the first chapter, then abruptly stopped writing, stuck it in a drawer, and went on to other things. Sometime later, after waking up with an uncharacteristic case of writer's block, I pulled the roughly written story out of the drawer. A regular blogger, I was brain-dead that day, and while I was certain few people would find my love story interesting, I wanted to give the readers of my site something new. I said a couple of Hail Marys, hoped they wouldn't hate it, and posted it on my website.

To my surprise, readers responded...and asked for another chapter. I wrote it that same night. A second chapter led to a third, and then a fourth. Encouraged by readers of ThePioneerWoman.com, I began posting regular, weekly installments of my real-life online serial love story, complete with romantic tension and cliffhangers at the end of each episode. It became an integral part of my writing routine for over eighteen months, and my friends and readers were there with me every step of the way. I loved the entire experience. I loved going back...and remembering.

By the end of that time frame, I'd written over forty installments and had only gotten as far as our wedding day. I decided to end the online version at that point, then immediately began writing the next part of the story, which continues through our first year of marriage.

This book is the complete, combined story—both the rip-roaring romance novel-style saga that I posted on my website (with some new material), which begins the night I met my husband and ends when we leave for our honeymoon, and a new section, which documents the early days of our life as a married couple.

I hope you love the story.

I hope it makes you smile.

I hope it reminds you of the reasons you fell in love in the first place.

And if you haven't yet found love, I hope it shows you that love often can come to find you instead...probably when you least expect it.

Chapter One

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE MIDWEST

FORGET THIS, I said to myself as I lay sprawled on the bed in which I grew up. In my Oklahoma hometown on a self-imposed pit stop, I was mired in a papery swamp of study guides, marked-up drafts of my résumé, listings of available Chicago apartments, and a J. Crew catalog, from which I'd just ordered a \$495 wool gabardine winter coat in olive, not chocolate, because I'm a redhead, and because Chicago, I reminded myself, is a tad more nippy than Los Angeles, which I'd just left weeks earlier. I'd been at it all week—searching, editing, shopping, ordering—and I was worn smooth out, my eyes watery from reading, my middle finger pruney from licking and flipping through pages, my favorite fuzzy socks dingy and rank from languishing on my feet for two days straight. I needed a break.

I decided to head down to the J-Bar, a local dive where some of my friends were meeting for a Christmas break drink. I'd begged out earlier in the evening, but by now that glass of chardonnay seemed not only appealing but necessary. *Mandatory*. But I was a disheveled mess, the downside of not leaving one's bedroom for over forty-eight hours. Not that I had anyone to impress, anyway. It was my hometown, after all, the place that had raised me, and though relatively picturesque and affluent, wasn't exactly the kind of town that required getting dressed to the nines to go out for wine.

With this in mind, I washed my face, threw on some black mascara—an absolute must for any fair-skinned redhead with light eyes—and released my hair from its tired ponytail. Throwing on a faded light-blue turtleneck and my favorite holey jeans, I dabbed some Carmex on my lips and blew out the door. Fifteen minutes later, I was in the company of my old friends and the chardonnay, feeling the kind of mellow buzz that comes not only from your first couple of sips of the night but also from the familiar contentment of being with people who've known you forever.

That's when I saw him—the cowboy—across the room. He was tall, strong, and mysterious, sipping bottled beer and wearing jeans and, I noticed, cowboy boots. And his *hair*. The stallion's hair was very short and silvery gray—much too gray for how young his face said he was, but just gray enough to send me through the roof with all sorts of fantasies of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*. Gracious, but he was a vision, this Marlboro Man-esque, rugged character across the room. After a few minutes of staring, I inhaled deeply, then stood up. I needed to see his hands.

I casually meandered to the section of the bar where he stood. Not wanting to appear obvious, I grabbed four cherries from the sectioned condiment tray and placed them on a paper napkin as I caught a glimpse of his hands. They were big and strong. Bingo.

Within minutes, we were talking.

He was a fourth-generation cattle rancher whose property was over an hour away from this cultured, corporate hometown of mine. His great-great-grandfather had emigrated from Scotland in the late 1800s and gradually made his way to the middle of the country, where he'd met and married local gal and become a successful merchant. His sons would be the first in the family to purchase land and run cattle at the turn of the century, and their descendants would eventually establish themselves as cattle ranchers throughout the region.

Of course, I knew none of this as I stood before him in the bar that night, shuffling my Donald Pliner spiked boots and looking nervously around the room. Looking down. Looking at my friends. Trying my best not to look too gazingly into his icy blue-green eyes or, worse, drool all over him.

Besides, I had other things to do that night: study, continue refining my résumé, polish all of my beloved black pumps, apply a rejuvenating masque, maybe watch my VHS tape of *West Side Story* for the 3,944th time. But before I knew it an hour had passed, then two. We talked into the night, the room blurring around us as it had done at the dance in *West Side Story* when Tony and Maria first saw each other across a crowd of people. *Tonight, tonight, it all began tonight.* My friends giggled and sipped wine at the table where I'd abandoned them earlier in the night, oblivious to the fact that their redheaded amiga had just been struck by a lightning bolt.

Before I could internally break into the second chorus of song, my version of Tony—this mysterious cowboy—announced abruptly that he had to go. *Go?* I thought. *Go where? There's no place on earth but this smoky bar....* But there was for him: he and his brother had plans to cook Christmas turkeys for some needy folks in his small town. *Mmmm. He's nice, too,* I thought as a pang stabbed my insides.

"Bye," he said with a gentle smile. And with that, his delicious boots walked right out of the J-Bar, his dark blue Wranglers cloaking a body that I was sure had to have been chiseled out of granite. My lungs felt tight, and I still smelled his scent through the bar smoke in the air. I didn't even know his name. I prayed it wasn't Billy Bob.

I was sure he'd call the next morning at, say, 9:34. It was a relatively small community; he could find me if he wanted to. But he didn't. Nor did he call at 11:13 or 2:49 or at any other time that day, or week, or month. Throughout that time, if I ever allowed myself to remember his eyes, his biceps, his smoldering, quiet manner, which was so drastically unlike those of all the silly city boys I'd bothered with over the past few years, a salty wave of disappointment would wash over me. But it didn't really matter anyway, I'd tell myself. I was headed to Chicago. To a new city. To a new life. I had zero business getting attached to anyone around there, let alone some Wrangler-wearing cowboy with salt-and-pepper hair. Cowboys ride horses, after all, and they wear bandanas around their necks and pee outside and whittle. They name their children Dolly and Travis and listen to country music.

Talk about my polar opposite.

SIX MONTHS earlier, I sat with J over sushi, telling him I was leaving Los Angeles. "I'm just going home for a pit stop," I told him. He took a nervous bite of sea urchin.

I'd been in L.A. for years and had spent four of them with him. Since blowing into the city as a college freshman, I'd spent my time in the sprawling city, breathing in all the culinary, retail, and urban pleasures the city had to offer. Having come from the relative calm of the Midwest, I was an absolute kid in a candy shop in Los Angeles. My four years at USC had been marked not just by classes, exams, and essays, but by celebrity sightings, delicious cuisine, and boys. I'd experienced it all—partying on the Sunset Strip, running into Sean and Madonna at a movie, kissing James Garner in an elevator, and surviving the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. And strangely, suddenly, as I sat at the sushi bar with J that night, I knew I'd had enough.

Not with Los Angeles. With J.

The sweet Southern California boy sitting before me had no idea any American land existed east of the Mojave Desert. We'd been joined at the hip since college, and now, four years later, I was announcing in between mouthfuls of cucumber rolls and tamago that I was leaving Los Angeles and heading home instead of following him to San Francisco, where he'd accepted a new engineering job the week earlier. He'd taken the job because it was a great opportunity, and because he assumed I'd move there with him; this seemed the logical next step for a couple who'd dated four years. Initially, I thought I'd go, too. But somehow, in the week after he'd taken the job, my better sense had shaken me

violently by the shoulders.

~~I didn't want to stay in California. I didn't want to stay with J. I wanted out of there; I wanted to leave. It had been building for a while, starting with a tiny ache, for life as I'd known it before, and culminating—once J accepted his new job—in a full-blown resolve that I wanted to head back to the Midwest. Chicago probably. It would be closer to home—one short plane ride away rather than two, sometimes three legs and an entire day of travel. I'd be closer to friends, closer to family.~~

I'd be in a climate more suited to my complexion.

Most important, I'd be away from the chokehold of what I'd realized was a textbook dead-end relationship. If I didn't leave now, it would only get harder.

"I'm not going," I told him. "It just doesn't feel right to me." The onslaught of one-liners commenced.

"I just can't follow you up there like this."

"I have to learn to stand on my own two feet."

"I just don't know what I'm doing here anymore."

The pathetic clichés spewed from my mouth as thick as the wasabi paste I stirred into my soy sauce. I hated the way I sounded.

"I'm just going home for a while...to clear the cobwebs," I continued.

"But you'll be right back, right?" J asked. He took a healthy shot of sake.

J.

He'd never quite gotten it.

A FEW WEEKS later I walked through the front door of my parents' house, my normally fair and freckled skin a forced golden brown from walking to and from my car in L.A. for the last several years. Throwing down my California bags in the foyer, I darted upstairs and plopped facedown onto the bed of my youth. I fell asleep almost immediately and hardly left the solace of my 300-thread-count faded peach sheets for a week. My beloved family dog Puggy Sue cuddled up next to me and didn't move for days, her soft velvet ears the perfect security blanket for my confused, in-limbo heart.

My brother Mike sat with me sometimes, too. Eighteen months my senior, he had nothing better to do. His developmental disabilities allowed him to be perfectly content patting my head, telling me how pretty I was, and sharing with me whether he'd had biscuits and gravy or a "*ch-ch-ch-cheese omblett*" for breakfast that morning. I'd take it all in as if I were listening to the State of the Union address. It was just so good to be home. Eventually Mike would ask me to give him a ride to Fire Station no. 3, his regular hangout, and I'd tell him no, I was way too busy. Then he'd leave in a huff and I'd go back to sleep for a while. It was glorious.

I'd wake up occasionally, long enough to thumb through the hilariously dated magazines on my bedside table—one *Seventeen* magazine had Phoebe Cates on the cover—and work on my cuticles and just lie there and stare at my taupe floral wallpaper, mentally rearranging all the delicate white flowers, as I'd always done as a little girl.

I cried sometimes, too. The truth was, I'd given J so, so much. As strong and self-assured as I'd always wanted to believe I was, I'd somehow pathetically allowed myself to become uncomfortably dependent on him in California. I was ashamed I'd allowed myself to settle into that groove—that deep ditch of insecurity and fear into which so many young women are doomed to plunge at least once in their lives. Once...if they're lucky. I also cried as a response to the sheer relief I felt, as if 80,000 pounds of com-pressed emotional air had been released from my gut. I exhaled for days and days; it kept coming out in a steady, hissy stream. I cried because I'd left J, not the other way around, which

really would have sucked.

~~I cried because he was cute, and he'd become a habit.~~

I cried because I missed him.

TO KILL time, I began having dinner with my grandmother, Ga-Ga, and her small circle of close friends in their small town twenty miles away. They had a standing Tuesday-night dinner date at the Ideal Café, and had invited me to tag along. My first dinner with Ga-Ga, Ruthie, Delphia, and Dorothy turned out to be grueling and brutal; I ordered vegetarian side dishes of mashed potatoes and canned green beans and watched the ladies eat horrible things like liver and onions, chicken fried steak, and meat loaf as they talked about the upcoming banquet at the church, how much the Retired Teachers' bake sale had raised, and how much the neighborhood kids had grown. Then they'd all split two pieces of pie—always rhubarb and lemon meringue—while I ordered another Diet Coke and looked restless at my watch. I couldn't believe how important they considered all of this to be. Didn't they know how small their town was? How large Los Angeles was? Didn't they know there was a whole world out there? Didn't they ever get bored? I loved Ga-Ga so much, but her small-town scene was almost too much for me to take. I was meant for larger things than these.

Much larger things.

When their pie was finally finished, we'd all bid one another farewell, and I'd go home and get bed for two more days.

Finally, one morning a couple of weeks later, I sprang out of bed and never looked back. What did I have to mope about? I had a little money in the bank and no real expenses, thanks to my new cushy, rent-free digs in my parents' home on the golf course. I could take my time planning for Chicago. And J, my constant companion for the past 1,460 days (give or take an hour), was nowhere in sight. It didn't take long before the reality of my youth hit home and I began to realize, in all my midtwenties freedom, that I was a free agent.

Even if J didn't quite know it yet.

TRACY a hunky blond attorney from my hometown, was my first voyage into Post-J Dating. We had four dates and laughed the whole time, but he was way too old—nearly *thirty*—and probably found me flighty. After Tracy came Jack, a British assistant tennis pro at the country club. He was gorgeous and I loved his accent, but at two years my junior, he was way too young. Next came an old boyfriend from church camp who lived in a faraway town and heard I was back in Oklahoma. Sweet, but a no-go for the long term. A couple of other miscellaneous, unremarkable dinner dates followed.

That's when I met Mr. B., a man sixteen years my senior and a three handicap, and not a half-ba kisser.

That's basically the extent of what Mr. B. and I did together—kissed. Tracy had sprung for a couple of movies and a dinner or two. Jack and I had taken a couple of walks with his dog. But Mr. B. and I just sat around and smooched. It was all his idea. It was as if he'd never heard of the concept before me, and my lips were in a constant state of chap. It was great, though; there were no strings, no risks, no great rewards. But after a month, I was frankly tired of having to buy so much lip balm, so I delicately broke things off. He called me crying the next night, telling me he'd just added me as the sole beneficiary on his life insurance policy. Sometime during the course of the month, Mr. B. had decided that I was The One, the answer to all of his never-married prayers. He'd figured we'd wind up getting married, he said, and he just couldn't believe I was breaking up with him when we were so

clearly perfect for each other. He'd already begun planning our marriage, apparently, right down to the reception menu and the middle name of our redheaded, blue-eyed, fair-skinned third-born child. He wasn't wasting any time.

Mr. B. carried on and on and cried—blubbered—for two whole hours. And as I listened, trying my best to be gentle and compassionate, I actually found myself missing J, who never was much the kissing type or the demonstrator-of-love-and-affection type but on the other hand wasn't prone to making illogical, ridiculous plans and breaking down in tears.

This, in turn, made me miss city life and start getting serious about Chicago. As eager as I'd been to flee L.A., I knew, based on my brief time at home that an urban environment was really where I belonged. I missed the conveniences, the coffee shops on every corner, and the bookstores open till midnight. I missed the take-out food galore and the little makeup shops and the Korean nail salons where ladies would eagerly swarm me and rub my shoulders in five-minute intervals until I ran out of money.

I missed the anonymity—the ability to run to the market without running into my third-grade teacher.

I missed the nightlife—the knowledge that if I wanted to, there was always an occasion to get dressed up and head out for dinner and drinks.

I missed the restaurants—the Asian, the Thai, the Italian, the Indian. I was already tired of mashed potatoes and canned green beans.

I missed the culture—the security that comes from being on the touring schedule of the major Broadway musicals.

I missed the shopping—the funky boutiques, the eclectic shops, the browsing.

I missed the city. I needed to get on the ball.

That's when Kev called. *Kev*. My first love, my first obsession with anything that wasn't related to Billy Idol or Duran Duran. We'd dated in high school and had remained in deep, abiding, you-were-mine-first love, off and on, for the previous eight years. We'd been involved with other people during that time, of course, but Kev had always, always been there. He'd been mine, after all, before he'd been anyone else's. And I'd been his. And seeing his name on caller ID the evening I broke things off with Mr. B. was like lifeblood being pumped into my veins.

Kev—what a brilliant idea! He'd just graduated from law school and was most likely trying to decide where he was going next. Yes, of course. *Kev*. Finally. We were adults now, and we were familiar, comfortable, and free. The possibilities rushed wildly into my imagination, and within seconds it all became perfectly clear to me: Kev and I, together, could be the perfect solution. I already knew everything there was to know about him; there'd be no nasty secrets hiding under the surface, and we wouldn't even have to go through that nettlesome flirtation/courting stage, an appealing prospect given the dates I'd had. Rather than starting all over, Kev and I could just pick up where we'd left off; I could be packed within two days and join him in whatever big-city locale he'd picked: Chicago, Philadelphia, D.C. I didn't care. I had to get away from Mr. B.'s lips. And his life insurance policy.

“Hey...it's Kev,” the voice on the other end of the line said. He sounded exactly the same.

“Kev!” I said, with a combination of excitement, anticipation, nostalgia, and hope.

“Hey, guess what?” he said. My imagination ran wild: *He's gotten a job and wants me to come with him. Go ahead, Kev. I'm ready. And the answer is a resounding yes.*

“I'm getting married,” Kev said. My knees went weak.

The next day, I began making plans for Chicago.

A month later, I met the cowboy in the smoky bar and he turned my soul to mush. In the four months that followed, I would continue to make preparations to move. While I'd occasionally find

myself haunted by the rugged Marlboro Man character I'd met in the J-Bar that Christmas, I continued to tell myself it was a good thing he'd never called. I didn't need anything derailing my resolve to go back to civilization.

Back where normal people lived.

I DECIDED TO stick close to home through my oldest brother Doug's wedding that April and leave for Chicago a couple of weeks later. I'd always intended for my time at home to be a pit stop, anyway; before too long, Chicago would be my new home. I'd always loved it there—the pulse, the climate, the cute Catholic boys. Moving there seemed such a natural fit, and it would be a great step toward my separating permanently from J, who was technically still in the picture, albeit two thousand miles away.

J and I had not officially broken up. I'd been away from California for months—we'd even visited each other at our respective locations here and there. But in the weeks leading up to my brother's wedding, I'd been distancing myself. The more time I spent away from him, the more I realized just how much of our relationship had been based on my dependence on him during my year in Los Angeles. He was from Orange County, born and bred in Newport Beach, and in J (his parents, too), I'd found a cozy, secure home so far away from my own. I had a place to go on weekends, when the USC campus was a ghost town; I had a family that was always glad to see me when I visited; I'd found a place that was familiar. Comfortable. Easy.

It was around this time that J began calling and pressuring me to move back to California—something I knew wasn't going to happen, though I hadn't yet mustered up the courage to tell him for good. Chicago would provide that opportunity; I just had to hold out a little longer before I'd break the news I was going. J wanted to be together again, wanted to make it work, wanted to work toward getting married. *Work toward getting married*. There was something about the use of the word *work* in that context that just didn't seem to fit. But J kept at it; he wanted things back to the way they'd been. Back when I was in California. Back when I was all his.

But I was over J. My eclectic assortment of dates over the previous few months had only served to cement that I wasn't at all ready to settle down, and that any passion I'd felt for J during the first year or so of our relationship had long since been replaced by a need for stability during my time in Los Angeles—a city which, in between all the parties and the shopping and the all-night glitz, can sometimes be a terribly lonely place.

The week before my brother's wedding, I decided it was time. Too cowardly and lacking in eloquence to adequately explain over the phone, I penned a long, drippy letter to J, effectively uninviting him to our family wedding, which he'd made plans to attend, and euphemizing all the reasons I thought we should end things for good. To my surprise, he agreed not to come to the wedding but eerily avoided talking further about our relationship. "You can just come here in a few weeks," he said. I wasn't sure if he realized what my letter had said. But that had been my relationship with J: Clear communication had never been our strong suit.

The weekend of my brother's wedding, I wound up in the company of Walrus, my brother's best friend from Connecticut. Bespectacled and affectionate, he turned out to be just the fun diversion I needed that weekend, and my sister Betsy wept and wailed and gnashed her teeth that she was only a freshman in college and too young to date a twenty-seven-year-old. Walrus was as cute as it gets, and we were like peas and carrots, sitting together at the rehearsal dinner and joking around at the party afterward. We stayed up late that night, talking and sipping beer and not doing anything either of us would regret. During the ceremony itself, Walrus smiled and winked at me. I smiled back, mostly

because I was feeling free and giddy about Chicago. About my freedom. About my future.

~~Walrus had been just what the doctor ordered, if only for that weekend. He was the perfect date,~~ kissing me good night after the reception and saying, “See you at the next wedding.” So when all the festivities were over, my brother and his new wife left for Hawaii, and my phone rang late Sunday afternoon, I was sure it had to be Walrus, calling from the airport to say a quick good-bye, and maybe go on and on about what a great time he’d had with me all weekend.

“Hello?” I answered the phone.

“Hello...Ree?” The strong male voice on the other end said.

“Hey, Walrus!” I shrieked enthusiastically. There was a long, silent pause.

“Walrus?” I repeated.

The deep voice began again. “You might not remember me—we met at the J-Bar last Christmas?”

It was the Marlboro Man.

Chapter Two

YOUNG HEARTS AFIRE

IT HAD been almost exactly four months since we'd met; four months since we'd locked glances in that bar; four months since his eyes and hair had made my knees turn to overcooked noodles. It had been four months since he'd failed to call me the next day, week, month. I'd moved on, of course, but the rugged image of Marlboro Man had left an indelible mark on my psyche.

But I'd just begun my Chicago planning before I'd met him that night and had continued the next day. And now, at the end of April, I was just about set to go.

"Oh, hi," I said nonchalantly. I was leaving soon. I didn't need this guy.

"How've you been?" he continued. Yikes. That voice. It was gravelly and deep and whispery and dreamy all at the same time. I didn't know until that moment that it had already set up permanent residence in my bones. My marrow remembered that voice.

"Good," I replied, focusing my efforts on appearing casual, confident, and strong. "I'm just gearing up to move to Chicago, actually."

"No kidding?" he said. "When are you going?"

"Just a couple of weeks," I replied.

"Oh..." He paused. "Well...would you like to go out to dinner this week?"

This was always the awkward part. I could never imagine being a guy.

"Um, sure," I said, not really seeing the point of going out with him, but also knowing it was going to be next to impossible for me to turn down a date with the first and only cowboy I'd ever been attracted to. "I'm pretty free all this week, so—"

"How 'bout tomorrow night?" he cut in. "I'll pick you up around seven."

He didn't know it at the time, but that single take-charge moment, his instantaneous transformation from a shy, quiet cowboy to this confident, commanding presence on the phone, affected me very profoundly. My interest was officially ablaze.

I OPENED THE front door of my parents' house the next evening. His starched blue denim shirt caught my eye only seconds before his equally blue eyes did.

"Hello," he said, smiling.

Those eyes. They were fixed on mine, and mine on his, for more seconds than is customary at the very beginning of a first date. My knees—the knees that had turned to rubber bands that night four months earlier in a temporary fit of illogical lust—were once again as firm as cooked spaghetti.

"Hello," I answered. I was wearing sleek black pants, a violet V-necked sweater, and spiked black boots—a glaring contrast to the natural, faded denim ensemble he'd chosen. Fashionwise, we were hilariously mismatched. I could sense that he noticed this, too, as my skinny heels obnoxiously clomped along the pavement of my parents' driveway.

We talked through dinner; if I ate, I wasn't aware of it. We talked about my childhood on the go; about his upbringing in the country. About my dad, the doctor; about his dad, the rancher. About my lifelong commitment to ballet; about his lifelong passion for football. About my brother Mike; about his older brother, Todd, who had died when he was a teenager. About Los Angeles and celebrities; cows and agriculture. By the end of the evening, I had no idea what exactly I'd even said.

All I knew was, I was riding in a Ford F250 diesel pickup with a cowboy—and there was nowhere else on earth I wanted to be.

He walked me to the door—the same one to which I'd been escorted many times before by pimply high school boys and a few miscellaneous suitors along the way. But this time was different. *Bigger*. I felt it. I wondered for a moment if he felt it, too.

That's when the spike heel of my boot caught itself on a small patch of crumbling mortar on my parents' redbrick sidewalk. In an instant, I saw my life and any ounce of pride remaining in my soul pass before my eyes as my body lurched forward. I was going to bite it for sure—and right in front of the Marlboro Man. I was an idiot, I told myself, a dork, a klutz of the highest order. I wanted desperately to snap my fingers and magically wind up in Chicago, where I belonged, but my hands were too busy darting in front of my torso, hoping to brace my body from the fall.

But someone caught me. Was it an angel? In a way. It was Marlboro Man, whose tough upbringing on a working cattle ranch had produced the quick reflexes necessary to save me, his uncoordinated date, from certain wipeout. Once the danger was over, I laughed from nervous embarrassment. Marlboro Man chuckled gently. He was still holding my arms, in the same strong cowboy grip he'd used to rescue me moments earlier. Where were my knees? They were no longer part of my anatomy.

I looked at Marlboro Man. He wasn't chuckling anymore. He was standing right in front of me. and he was still holding my arms.

I'D ALWAYS been boy crazy. From the high school lifeguards at the pool when I was a little girl to the Izod-wearing caddies that traipsed the golf course, cute boys were simply one of my favorite things. By my midtwenties, I'd met and enthusiastically dated practically every category of cute boy under the sun. There was Kev the Irish Catholic; Skip-per the Edgy; Shane the Hood; Collin the Playful; J the Surfer; Mr. B. the Unstable; and many others in between. I'd gone on dates with every flavor of cute boy under the sun.

Except for one. Cowboy. I'd never even spoken to a cowboy, let alone ever known one personally, let alone ever dated one, and certainly, absolutely, positively never kissed one—until that night on my parents' front porch, a mere couple of weeks before I was set to begin my new life in Chicago. After valiantly rescuing me from falling flat on my face just moments earlier, this cowboy, this western movie character standing in front of me, was at this very moment, with one strong, romantic, mind-numbingly perfect kiss, inserting the category of "Cowboy" into my dating repertoire forever.

The kiss. I'll remember this kiss till my very last breath, I thought to myself. I'll remember every detail. Strong, calloused hands gripping my upper arms. Five o'clock shadow rubbing gently against my chin. Faint smell of boot leather in the air. Starched denim shirt against my palms, which have gradually found their way around his trim, chiseled waist...

I don't know how long we stood there in the first embrace of our lives together. But I do know that when that kiss was over, my life as I'd always imagined it was over, too.

I just didn't know it yet.

HE CALLED the next morning at seven. I was sound asleep, still dreaming about the kiss that had rocked my existence the night before. Marlboro Man, on the other hand, had been up since five and, I would explain, had waited two hours before calling me, since he reckoned I probably wasn't the get-

up-early type. And I wasn't. I'd never seen any practical reason for any normal person to get out of bed before 8:00 A.M., and besides that, the kiss had been pretty darn earth shattering. I needed to sleep that thing off.

"Good morning," he said. I gasped. That voice. There it was again.

"Oh, hi!" I replied, shooting out of bed and trying to act like I'd been up for hours doing step aerobics and trimming my mom's azalea bushes. And hiking.

"You asleep?" he asked.

"Nope, nope, not at all!" I replied. "Not one bit." My voice was thick and scratchy.

"You were asleep, weren't you?" I guess he knew a late sleeper when he heard one.

"No, I wasn't—I get up really early," I said. "I'm a real morning person." I concealed a deep, total-body yawn.

"That's strange—your voice sounds like you were still asleep," Marlboro Man persisted. He wasn't letting me off the hook.

"Oh...well...it's just that I haven't talked to anyone yet today, plus I've kind of been fighting a little sinus trouble," I said. That was attractive. "But I've been up for quite a while."

"Yeah? What have you been doing?" he asked. He was enjoying this.

"Oh, you know. Stuff." Stuff. Good one, Ree.

"Really? Like, what kind of stuff?" he asked. I heard him chuckle softly, the same way he'd chuckled when he'd caught me the night before. That chuckle could quiet stormy waters. Bring about world peace.

"Oh, just stuff. Early morning stuff. Stuff I do when I get up really early in the morning...." I tried again to sound convincing.

"Well," he said, "I don't want to keep you from your 'early morning stuff.' I just wanted to tell you...I wanted to tell you I had a really good time last night."

"You did?" I replied, picking sleepy sand from the corner of my right eye.

"I did," he said.

I smiled, closing my eyes. What was happening to me? This cowboy—this sexy cowboy who'd suddenly galloped into my life, who'd instantly plunged me into some kind of vintage romance novel—had called me within hours of kissing me on my doorstep, just to tell me he'd had a good time.

"Me, too," was all I could say. Boy, was I on a roll. *You know, stuff*, and *Me, too*, all in the same conversation. This guy was sure to be floored by my eloquence. I was so smitten, I couldn't even formulate coherent words.

I was in trouble.

WE HAD a second date that night, then a third, and then a fourth. And after each date, my new romance novel protagonist called me, just to seal the date with a sweet word.

For date five, he invited me to his house on the ranch. We were clearly on some kind of a roll, and now he wanted me to see where he lived. I was in no position to say no.

Since I knew his ranch was somewhat remote and likely didn't have many restaurants nearby, I offered to bring groceries and cook him dinner. I agonized for hours over what I could possibly cook for this strapping new man in my life; clearly, no mediocre cuisine would do. I reviewed all the dishes in my sophisticated, city-girl arsenal, many of which I'd picked up during my years in Los Angeles. I finally settled on a non-vegetarian winner: Linguine with Clam Sauce—a favorite from our family vacations in Hilton Head.

I made the delicious, aromatic masterpiece of butter, garlic, clams, lemon, wine, and cream in

Marlboro Man's kitchen in the country, which was lined with old pine cabinetry. And as I stood there sipping some of the leftover white wine and admiring the fruits of my culinary labor, I was utterly confident it would be a hit.

I had no idea who I was dealing with. I had no idea that this fourth-generation cattle rancher *doesn't eat minced-up little clams*, let alone minced-up little clams bathed in wine and cream and tossed with long, unwieldy noodles that are difficult to negotiate.

Still, he ate it. And lucky for him, his phone rang when he was more than halfway through our meal together. He'd been expecting an important call, he said, and excused himself for a good ten minutes. I didn't want him to go away hungry—big, strong rancher and all—so when I sensed he was close to getting off the phone, I took his plate to the stove and heaped another steaming pile of fishy noodles onto his plate. And when Marlboro Man returned to the table he smiled politely, sat down, and polished off over half of his second helping before finally pushing away from the table and announcing, "Boy, am I stuffed!"

I didn't realize at the time just how romantic a gesture that had been.

Later that night, after I'd arrived back home, I smiled when my phone began to ring. I'd grown accustomed to hearing his voice.

"Hey," the voice on the other end of the phone said. But the voice was different. It wasn't the least bit gravelly.

"We need to talk," he said.

It was J.

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