



Buck Me, Cowboy

(Sweetheart County Fair #6)

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Category: Romance

Description: One cocky cowboy + One spicy, curvy heroine + One fake relationship = One whirlwind of a romance at the Sweetheart County Fair!

Im a bull rider. Every year, my reputation is made or broken in eight seconds. Sure, I also work with horses, but nothing makes my blood sing and give my life meaning like when Im riding a bull.

Until I see the curvy cutie at the chili competition. One glance and Im rethinking my past life as a cowboy casanova. She has big dreams and its not just her chili that makes my mouth water.

When a reporter assumes shes my girl, I dont hesitate to say she is. Who am I to say no to spending more time with the woman who takes my breath away? Ill do anything to spend more time with my gorgeous future wife, even if she doesnt know thats where were headed.

I knew from the moment I laid eyes on her that she was special, but the more time were together, the more I feel deeper connection to Rebecca. She has a closeness with her family that Ive always longed for and she makes me want a family with her. This may have started as a fake relationship, but every part of me wants this for real. She awakens a love in my heart that I didnt know existed, and now will do anything not to lose.

But is this fake relationship only going to last eight seconds? Or will I be able to convince this spicy, curvy goddess to be my one and only?

Buck Me, Cowboy is a standalone cowboy romance, with a connection to the Heartland Heroes series. If you like small-town and cowboy romance with a strong sense of community, featuring an alpha man and the curvy women he cant live without, get ready for a cowboy romance youll fall in love with, because thats what youll get! Steamy HEA guaranteed, no cheating, no ex-drama just two people who cant resist each other forging a new and loving future together.

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REBECCA

Grandpa would be so proud of you, Becca. Taking his recipe to the Sweetheart County Fair.”

I shift the strap of my bag higher on my shoulder as Grady and I walk through the main gates of the fairgrounds.

“I just hope I don’t mess this up.” My boots crunch on sawdust as we navigate toward the exhibition hall. “The recipe is solid—it’s won so many local awards for forty years—but this is different. With the prizes for this competition, the stakes are the highest I’ve ever competed for.”

Grady adjusts his cowboy hat against the strengthening sun. “And a real shot at a distribution contract if you win. That magazine feature could change everything.”

The weight of possibility sits heavy in my chest. After what happened with Kinwood Foods—their smooth promises about preserving Grandpa’s authentic recipe, followed by their proposal to “streamline” it with cheaper ingredients and artificial preservatives—my grandpa would have rolled over in his grave if I had agreed to that contract.

“This competition is our best shot at getting in front of legitimate distributors.” I pull out my phone to check the time. “I need that magazine profile to prove Grandpa’s recipe can compete with the big brands. There has to be someone better than Kinwood that will work with me.”

“You’re burning for this, aren’t you?”

The question stops me mid-stride. I look at my cousin and nod. He knows the answer. Grady’s known me since we were kids stealing cookies from Grandma’s kitchen. I’m surprised he even has to ask the question.

“His legacy deserves to live on—exactly the way he made it.”

We approach the exhibition hall, a massive metal building that houses everything from quilting competitions to livestock judging.

Through the open doors, I can see rows of cooking stations being set up, each one equipped with propane burners and prep tables.

The familiar anticipation of competition builds in my stomach.

“Let’s find our station,” Grady says, consulting the paperwork in his hand. “Number forty-seven.”

We wind through the maze of equipment and early-arriving competitors. Some booths already smell like garlic and onions, and I catch snippets of conversation about secret ingredients and cooks good-naturedly debating bean vs no-bean chili and which one is the best. These are my people.

Station forty-seven sits in a prime location near the center of the hall.

I set my bag down and survey the space, mentally arranging where everything will go.

The cast-iron pan with “Cooper Chili” etched on the side will sit front and center.

The space will be cramped with the two of us, but it should work out fine.

“Perfect spot,” I say, running my hand along the prep table’s steel surface. “Grandpa would love this—right in the thick of things.”

Grady chuckles. “Remember when he used to say that? ‘Rebecca-girl, cooking is the most important thing in the world. Cooking with love is nourishment for the soul.’”

The memory hits me with unexpected force.

Eight years old, standing on a stepstool beside Grandpa in his kitchen, carefully measuring cumin while he guided my hands and taught me his secret spice recipe.

The kitchen windows were open to catch the evening breeze, and his voice carried the firm authority he learned commanding a galley in the Navy.

“The secret isn’t just the ingredients, Becca-girl. It’s the love you put in every stir.”

I touch the turquoise necklace at my throat—Grandma’s, passed down through the women in the family.

The weight of it reminds me that I’m not just cooking for myself tomorrow.

I’m cooking for every Cooper who worked on this recipe, for every family gathering where it brought people together, for the legacy that deserves to have greater recognition.

“What time do you want to start prep tomorrow?” Grady asks, opening the small notebook where he’s been making notes.

“Early. Seven AM at the latest. It’s going to take time for all the flavors to develop.

” I start visualizing the process—browning the meat in small batches to build the foundation, layering the spices at precisely the right moments, letting everything simmer until the flavors meld into something greater than their individual parts.

“Good thing I’m a morning person,” Grady says. “We’ll need to load the cart tonight so we can—”

He stops mid-sentence, his face suddenly draining of color. His hand shoots to his side, clutching just below his ribs.

“Grady?” I move toward him, alarm bells ringing in my head. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” His voice comes out tight, strained. “Feels like someone’s stabbing me with a hot poker.”

He doubles over, one hand braced against the prep table, breathing hard through gritted teeth. Sweat beads across his forehead despite the cool morning air lingering in the hall.

“We need to get you help.” I’m already calling 911 on my phone and trying to flag someone down to come over and help us, my heart hammering against my ribs. “Can you walk?”

“I think—” He tries to straighten and immediately hunches over again. “Something’s really wrong, Becca.”

I flag down a security guard, who immediately gets some fairground medics to help while we wait for the ambulance to arrive. Within minutes, paramedics arrive, their calm efficiency both reassuring and terrifying as they whisk him away rapidly.

“I’m sorry, Becca,” Grady whispers, grimacing in pain. “I know what this means to

you.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just get better.”

But as they take him away, I’m left standing alone in the exhibition hall, staring at station forty-seven and feeling the full weight of what tomorrow means.

Not just the cooking—I can handle that. But everything else Grady was supposed to help with: hauling equipment, managing logistics, being my moral support when the pressure builds.

I’m going to have to do this completely on my own.

“For the love of habaneros! Come on, you stubborn piece of—” I throw my full weight behind the cart handle, but the wheel remains wedged in a rut of hard-packed dirt.

My grandfather’s cast-iron pan shifts dangerously, and I grab for it before it slides off the cart or worse, bumps into my ingredients and sends them flying into the dirt.

The morning sun beats down harder now, and sweat trickles along my hairline. I’ve been fighting this cart for ten minutes, determined to get my equipment to the exhibition hall without asking for help. If I’m doing this competition alone, I want to prove I can handle every aspect of it.

Even the parts that want to break my back.

I reset my stance, plant my feet in the packed earth, and pull again. The wheel budes an inch before catching on something buried in the dirt and goes backward. Again. Everything on the cart rattles ominously, and I quickly reach out to grab the photo of Grandpa before it tumbles to the ground.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter, wiping perspiration from my forehead with the back of my hand. Grady should be here helping me navigate this mess, but instead, he’s in the hospital about to have an emergency appendectomy.

I circle the cart, studying the stuck wheel from different angles. Maybe if I can work it back and forth, create some momentum... but the cart is filled with everything I need to cook, and it weighs a ton.

“Whoa there, lil lady. Let me help you with that.”

Strong hands appear beside mine on the cart handle before I can protest. I look up into the most beautiful hazel eyes set in a face that belongs on magazine covers rather than dusty fairgrounds.

The man attached to them wears a Stetson that’s seen real work, jeans that look like they’ve been painted over muscular thighs, and a championship belt buckle that catches the morning light like a signal flare.

I recognize him instantly. His face is all over the promotional material for the fair, usually accompanied by words like “champion” and “heartthrob.”

Amos Cross. Rodeo star. Exactly the kind of charming cowboy I have zero time for.

But the sudden rush of heat to my core makes me squirm, and my body screams he’s exactly the kind of man I should make time for. At least for a night or two. Or maybe a week...

“I don’t need saving, cowboy.”

He chuckles, a sound that fuels the fire building in my core. “Good thing. I’m not in the business of saving. My momma taught me to be polite and help people when I

can. And you look like you could use some help.”

Before I can argue, he shifts his grip and frees the wheel with an easy motion that puts my ten-minute struggle to shame. The cart rolls forward so suddenly that I nearly lose my balance. His hand shoots out to steady my elbow, fingers wrapping around my arm with surprising gentleness.

An electric shock shoots straight through me, fueling the heat filling my core. I don’t usually react to men like this, but something about Amos Cross is making my heart race and waking up the woman in me.

He doesn’t immediately step back...but neither do I. For a moment, we stand closer than strangers should, his hand warm against my skin, his eyes holding mine with an intensity that makes me forget why I’m here. Looking into his hazel eyes, the only thing I want to do is touch him.

“Better?” His voice is low and smooth like honey.

“Yes. Thank you,” I say, a blush burning across my cheeks. “I’m Rebecca.”

“Amos Cross,” he says, smiling at me and causing a fresh wave of desire in my core.

“I know.” I chuckle, tipping my head toward one of the life-size posters of him around the fairgrounds.

Amos laughs and shrugs. “This is a lot for one person to manage,” he nods toward the cart loaded with all my equipment.

“I’m competing in the chili competition.

My cousin was supposed to help, but he fell over in pain and is at the hospital now.

He'll be fine, but it'll be a little more work for me.

"When I see a hint of concern in Amos' eyes, I add, "Nothing I can't handle.

I've cooked this chili more times than I can count. "

Something shifts in his expression—a shadow that passes quickly. "Must be tough, doing this kind of thing alone."

"I'll manage." I grip the cart handle, ready to continue my journey to the exhibition hall. I have a lot to do, and no time to chit chat, no matter how much I don't want to continue talking to Amos. "I don't have much choice."

"Family recipe?" He gestures toward my grandpa's pan with "Cooper Chili" etched on the handle.

I smile and nod. "Third generation. My grandfather's. He always said the secret wasn't just the ingredients—it was cooking with love."

"Sounds like he was a wise man."

"He was." I touch the turquoise necklace at my throat, the familiar weight comforting me. "This competition is about honoring his legacy."

Something in his expression grows wistful, almost hungry. "Must be nice having family to count on like that."

The comment catches me off guard with its loneliness. Before I can respond or analyze why I care about the sadness in his voice, he tips his hat and winks at me.

"Good luck with your competition, darlin'. Hope your grandfather's recipe brings

you everything you're hoping for.”

As he walks away, I catch myself watching the way his shoulders fill out his shirt, the raw masculinity of the way his strong body moves. Then I shake my head and focus on getting to the exhibition hall.

But as I push the cart, now rolling smoothly thanks to his intervention, I can still feel the warmth of where his hand touched my arm.

And despite my best efforts to focus on getting to the exhibition hall so I can set up, my mind keeps wandering back to Amos Cross and wondering how it's possible I felt such a bolt of desire when his hazel eyes met mine.

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AMOS

Y ou hear about McCoy?”

I look up from checking my bull rope, the leather worn smooth from countless rides. Wyatt Callahan leans against the metal chute, having already finished his equipment check. Behind us, bulls snort and shift in their holding pens, hooves scraping concrete.

“No, what happened?”

“Got trampled by a bull last week. Completely smashed his pelvis and one of his knees. Doctors say he’ll never ride again.” Wyatt’s voice carries that careful neutrality cowboys use when talking about injuries that could happen to any of us. “Thirty-two years old and it’s over for him.”

My hands still on the rope. Jim McCoy—I rode against him in Austin two months ago. Watched him take second place with a ride that looked effortless. Now he’s done. Forever.

“Makes you think, doesn’t it? What we’re gonna do when our bodies can’t take this anymore.”

I test the wrap on my rope, buying time before answering. At forty-one, I’m not much older than McCoy. This life is hard on the body, but most of us cowboys keep going until our bodies give out.

“Yeah, it does.” I scan the familiar chaos around us—cowboys adjusting gear, the smell of leather and dust, the constant background noise of livestock. “This is all I know how to do.”

“At least you don’t have family breathing down your neck about settling down and taking over the ranch.” Wyatt adjusts his hat brim. “My old man calls twice a week asking when I’m coming home to help with the farm. Three brothers, and they all want me to be the one who gives up rodeo.”

The irony cuts deep. Wyatt has what I’ve always wanted—family land, roots, people who want him home—and he’s running from it. Meanwhile, I check my phone, hoping for a message from my mother.

Nothing. Just like yesterday and the day before and the days before that.

She hasn’t spoken to me much since I decided to stay on the circuit instead of taking that desk job in Tulsa, where she settled with her new husband. Steady paycheck, she said. Benefits. A chance to build something stable. Everything she worked double shifts to give me the opportunity to have.

Instead, I chose the same path that broke her heart when my father took it. This life is all I know, and I’m pretty sure I’d lose my damn mind sitting behind a desk all day long.

“Your mama still giving you grief about staying on the road?” Wyatt asks, reading my expression.

“She’s not giving me anything. That’s the problem.” I coil my rope with more force than necessary. “Hasn’t returned my calls in weeks.”

Despite the weight of the conversation, my mind keeps drifting to this morning.

Rebecca—the serious woman with drive and a dream, and a solid love and respect for family.

It impressed me that she obviously recognized me, but didn't throw herself at me like most women do.

She's different than other women, in more ways than one, and in ways that make my soul yearn to spend more time with her.

"You listening to me?" Wyatt waves a hand in front of my face.

"Sorry. Just thinking."

"About what? You look like someone hit you with a branding iron."

I finish my prep work, mind still half elsewhere. "Nothing important. I should get ready for this ride."

But as Wyatt walks away to flirt with a barrel racer, I find myself heading in the opposite direction. Away from the chutes and toward the exhibition hall. Toward Rebecca.

I tell myself I'm being friendly. But the truth fills my chest and heart in a way I've never felt before—I want to see her again.

I need to see her again. I want to taste whatever she's cooking – whether it's chili or anything else.

I want to watch her eyes light up when she talks about honoring her grandfather's legacy.

Everything in my body and soul aches to be with her.

The exhibition hall buzzes with energy as the chili cooks work at their prep stations. The air carries a dozen different mouth-watering aromas—garlic, cumin, smoke, heat—but the only chili I’m interested in is Rebecca’s.

She stands behind her station wearing an apron over jeans and a fitted t-shirt that hugs her curves.

Her dark hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and she’s completely focused on stirring the simmering pot.

Behind her is a photo that I assume is her grandfather, laughing at a picnic, surrounded presumably by his children and grandchildren.

“This smells incredible.” I approach slowly, relishing watching her do something she obviously loves.

She glances up, and I catch the slight surprise in her expression before she gives me a big smile. “Amos. What brings you to the cooking competition?”

“Curiosity.” I gesture toward her pot, but stare deep into her blue eyes. “If you’re willing to share a taste with me.”

She ladles a small portion into a paper cup, steam rising between us. “Tell me what you think, cowboy.”

The first spoonful stops me cold. Heat builds slowly on my tongue, layered with smoky depth and spices I can’t identify.

“Damn, darlin’. That’s got some serious heat. I like things with a little spice.”

Her eyebrow arches, and a playful look sparks in her eyes. “You say you want spice, cowboy, but can you really handle it?”

The challenge in her voice makes my pulse zoom faster than when I’m on a bull.

I lean closer, genuinely intrigued by this woman who doesn’t seem impressed by championship buckles or rodeo charm.

“Try me, Spice Girl. I’ve been riding angry bulls since I was sixteen.

I think I can handle whatever heat you’re serving. ”

“Bulls are predictable. They buck hard, then they’re done.” Her eyes hold mine, direct and unapologetic. “My kind of heat builds slow and lasts all night.”

I cough quickly and shift how I’m standing, my jeans suddenly too tight as blood rushes south and wakes up my cock.

The provocation in her tone makes me want to throw her over my shoulder and see what else she likes to do with that sassy mouth.

The way she’s flirting with me is different from the calculated, empty flirting of the women who throw themselves at me.

Rebecca is a woman who knows exactly what she’s offering and clearly expects me to prove I’m worthy of it.

“Well now, that sounds like a promise I’d like to see you keep.”

I take another taste, deliberately licking my lip as I savor the complex flavors. Her gaze tracks the movement, and her pupils dilate slightly. When our fingers brush as

she hands me a napkin, I don't pull away immediately.

"Your grandpa?" I nod toward the photo behind her.

"It is, yes." Pride fills her voice as she points to different faces. "He taught me everything about cooking. My family means everything to me."

The wistfulness that hits me must show on my face.

She studies my expression with sudden gentleness. "What about your family?"

"It's complicated. Being a cowboy is a hard life."

I deflect by asking how long she's been cooking and competing. She shares her dreams about the distribution contract, how winning is something she wants to do to honor her grandfather.

I find myself genuinely interested, asking questions about her grandfather's methods, the way she describes balancing flavors like an artist mixing paint.

This isn't small talk. I want to understand what drives her, what makes her eyes brighten when she talks about preserving family legacy – and the more I talk to Rebecca, the more I'm deeply impressed with her.

"Excuse me, I'm Polly Williamson from Heartland Tastes magazine."

We both turn as a polished woman approaches with a photographer in tow. She carries herself with professional confidence, tablet in hand and press badge hanging from her neck.

"I'm chatting with all the competitors. We're doing a feature on the winners and

mentions for the runners-up. I'd love to talk to you about your story—oh, I didn't know you had your husband with you. We'd love to talk to you both."

Rebecca's expression is startled, then a shadow of disappointment clouds her eyes. "Oh, we're not—"

Polly Williamson continues as if she didn't hear Rebecca. "We love featuring stories about couples building something together. Much more appealing to our readership than single competitors."

I instantly understand the importance this publicity would mean for Rebecca. This magazine feature could change everything for her—the visibility, the credibility, just getting her name out there. If fudging things a little helps her get what she wants, it's worth any awkwardness.

"We'd be happy to talk. My girlfriend has an incredible story for you."

Rebecca's eyes widen, but she keeps her mouth shut as she stares at me.

Polly Williamson lights up. "Wonderful! This is exactly the kind of authentic love story our readers adore. Can we schedule something for tomorrow morning?"

"Absolutely." I slide my arm around Rebecca's waist, feeling her stiffen slightly before relaxing against my body. "Whatever helps get Rebecca's story out there."

After Polly Williamson walks away with promises to call later, Rebecca turns to me with exasperation and something that might be gratitude.

"I bet they didn't ask the men if they had their wives with them."

"Probably not." I keep my arm around her, not wanting to let go of her.

“But you know what? I didn’t have to do that, but it’s plain as day how important this is to you.

If fudging things a little helps you get what you want, it’s worth it.

Plus, this means I’ll get to spend more time with you, and that is all this cowboy could hope for. ”

Color rises in her cheeks as she bites her lip, and I know I have a shot. Not just at helping her, but at something real with this woman who challenges me and makes me want to be better than I’ve ever been.

“I’m riding this evening, and there’s the square dance after. I’d be honored,” I tip my hat at her, “if you’d join me for both.”

She’s fully blushing now, but smiling in a way that unlocks something deep within me and makes me think this is the kind of moment – and Rebecca is the kind of woman – that you get a shot at only once in a lifetime. “It’s a date, cowboy.”

As I walk away from her station, I catch myself glancing back at her workspace, watching her return to work with complete focus and a big, beautiful smile on her face.

I can’t stop thinking about the passion that lights her up when she talks about family legacy, the challenge in her eyes that sees beyond what other women see.

She’s the kind of woman I want to build a legacy with.

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REBECCA

Ladies and gentlemen, Amos Cross on Blazin' Fury!"

My heart races as I watch Amos position himself on the bull in the chute. The rider before him got thrown hard into the dirt, and the rodeo clowns had to distract the bull while two paramedics came into the arena to help him. The danger is real, but it's still exciting as all get out.

I also can't look away. His reputation precedes him—the people in the stands around me are talking about Amos' skill, his fearlessness, and the way he makes eight seconds on an angry bull look easy. I know he knows what he's doing, but that doesn't stop me worrying about him.

The chute opens, and I hold my breath. The bull—massive and furious—spins and bucks with violent energy, but Amos moves with him like he knows exactly how the bull is going to move.

His thick thighs grip the bull's sides, muscles straining against the denim of his jeans.

His free hand cuts through the air for balance while his riding hand grips the rope tightly.

Amos is magnificent. When Blazin' Fury spins left, Amos is already shifting his weight. When the bull bucks high and kicks, Amos flows with the motion like water, never losing his balance.

A fire builds in my core as I watch him ride the bull.

The memory of our flirtatious exchange floods back—the way he called me Spice Girl, how his voice dropped when he promised to handle whatever heat I was serving.

Seeing him like this, showcasing his skill with power and confidence, sends a tug of yearning straight through my core.

I want to know what it would like to ride Amos.

Eight seconds feel like an eternity. The crowd roars around me, but I'm transfixed by the strength of his body and his amazing skill.

When the buzzer sounds and Amos leaps clear of the still-bucking bull, I'm on my feet cheering before I realize what I'm doing. The score flashes on the board—eighty-seven points, well into winning territory—and pride swells in my chest like he's actually mine to celebrate.

“Oh my God, did you see that ride? He's incredible!”

The excited female voice behind me breaks through my euphoria. I turn slightly to see a group of young women a few rows back, all eyes glued to Amos as he waves to the crowd.

“I'm definitely getting ‘ride a cowboy’ checked off my Fair Bingo card tonight. He's the hottest one here.”

“Good luck! Half the women here are after Amos Cross.”

I force myself to look at them— really look.

They're everything I'm not. Thin and conventionally pretty, with carefully applied makeup and cut-off jean shorts that leave little to the imagination.

The kind of women who probably get every man they set their sights on.

They're not the kind of woman a man says no to.

I glance down at my pretty cotton dress, suddenly self-conscious about my thick curves and minimal makeup.

I'm not in the same league as these women.

The confidence I felt during our flirtatious exchange at my booth wavers.

Why would a man like Amos—who could have his pick of women in every town—want someone like me?

The doubt twists in my stomach as I watch those confident women eye him like prey. Maybe helping me with the magazine was just cowboy politeness. Maybe the heat I felt between us was one-sided attraction on my part.

But then Amos appears at the base of the bleachers, still dusty from his ride, scanning the crowd. When his eyes find mine, the smile that spreads across his face is warm and genuine, and filled with what looks a lot like unfiltered joy.

He takes the steps two at a time until he reaches my row, then wraps his arms around me and swings me off the ground in a spontaneous celebration that takes my breath away.

I'm vaguely aware of camera flashes going off—one of the magazine photographers catching the moment—but all I can focus on is the solid warmth of his chest against

mine and the way he's looking at me like I'm the only person in the arena.

"Did you see that?" His voice carries pure joy and adrenaline.

"I saw it." My feet touch the ground, but his arms stay around me. "You were amazing up there."

The doubt from moments before melts away under the intensity of his gaze. Whatever this is between us, it's not one-sided. The Fair Bingo girls can have their fantasies—I have his arms around me and his attention focused solely on my face.

"Come on." He takes my hand as the next rider prepares. "Let's get out of here."

As we leave the arena together, I catch a glimpse of the women who were discussing their conquest plans. Two of them are flirting with other cowboys, but one is looking at me with daggers in her eyes.

"You're sure you know how to do this?"

Amos grins as he leads me onto the wooden dance floor surrounded by hay bales and strung with lights that cast everything in a warm, golden glow. The live band warms up on the small stage, fiddles and guitars creating the kind of music that gets into your bones and makes you want to move.

"Darlin', I've been to enough county fairs to fake my way through a square dance. Besides, how hard can it be?"

Famous last words. Within minutes of the caller starting the first song, we're laughing as Amos spins me in the wrong direction and we nearly collide with another couple. But he's a quick learner, and soon we're moving together with surprising harmony.

“We need a believable story for people who ask.” He speaks quietly as we allemande left with another couple. “How we met, how long we’ve been together.”

“You tried my chili at a charity event, and it was so good you asked me out on the spot?” I suggest as we promenade around the square.

“Perfect. And we’ve been seeing each other for... three months?”

“That works. Long enough to be serious, not so long that people wonder why they haven’t seen us together.”

Creating our fake history should feel calculated, but dancing with Amos makes everything feel natural.

I’m laughing at something he whispers about the overly enthusiastic caller when I notice them. The Fair Bingo girls from the rodeo have entered the dance area, and they immediately spot Amos. Like predators identifying their target, the one who glared at me earlier starts moving in our direction.

“What’s wrong, darlin’?” Amos notices my sudden tension as we bow to our corner.

“Nothing. Just...some women are staring at you.”

He follows my gaze to the approaching woman, then looks back at me with something warm in his expression. “That’s nothing new, Rebecca. I only have eyes for you, darlin’.”

Before I can respond, he reaches up and strokes my jaw with his hand. The touch is gentle and intimate, sending a flutter through my chest and making my breath hitch. Amos’ tender touch is more personal than a kiss.

The music shifts to a slower song, and Amos leads me into what the caller announces as a “sweetheart waltz.” Couples around us move into closer embraces, and when Amos pulls me against him, the heat of his body through his shirt makes me dizzy.

“This feels nice,” he murmurs against my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

“It does.” I let myself relax into his arms, following his lead as we sway to the music. For a moment, I forget about the approaching woman, the fake relationship, the magazine story. It’s just us dancing together like we’ve been doing this for years.

Then I catch sight of the Fair Bingo woman closing in, her determination clear in her predatory smile.

The blonde woman locks eyes with me over Amos’s shoulder.

Her expression is calculating, like she’s measuring me as competition and deciding I’m not competition at all, but merely someone for her to swat away easily so she can take what she wants.

“She’s getting closer,” I whisper, hating how insecure I sound.

Amos follows my gaze again, then looks back at me with mischief dancing in his hazel eyes. “Well then, I guess I better make this convincing.”

Without warning, he leads me into a dramatic dip that drops me low enough to see the string lights overhead. My heart pounds as his face hovers inches above mine, and then he’s kissing me.

It starts as a big, showy kiss, but the moment our lips meet, something shifts. There is nothing fake about this kiss. Amos deepens the kiss, and I respond with a lusty hunger that surprises me.

His hot mouth moves with a confidence that makes my knees weak. When his tongue sweeps across my lower lip, I part for him without thinking. The taste of him—clean and masculine—goes straight to my head.

Amos kisses me like he means it, like this kiss and relationship are real. Truly real.

When he finally brings me upright, we're both breathing hard, and I'm completely speechless. All I see is the way Amos is looking at me—surprised, heated, and slightly overwhelmed.

“Well,” he says quietly, his voice thick with desire. “I’m all in if you are.”

I nod, not trusting my voice. Because that kiss felt completely real to me, and the terrifying part is how much I want it to happen again.

I barely know this man, but my heart knows no other man has ever had a fraction of the effect on me that Amos has.

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AMOS

So what's our first date story?"

Rebecca slides into the booth across from me at Mel's Diner, a small place near the fairgrounds that's seen better decades. The vinyl seats are cracked, and the coffee is hot and strong.

"After tasting your chili at that charity event, I took you on a picnic."

She wraps her hands around her coffee mug, steam rising between us in the morning light filtering through dusty windows.

"That's believable. What about our families? They'll ask about that too."

Her face lights up immediately. "Mine's huge and loud and wonderful. Four cousins, three aunts, two uncles, and more second cousins than I can count. Sunday dinners at my grandmother's house with everyone arguing over who makes the best cornbread." She grins. "They love you."

The confidence in her voice hits me unexpectedly. She talks about her family like a given—of course they'll accept me, of course I'll fit into their chaos. Like belonging is something that happens naturally instead of something you spend your whole life chasing.

"What about yours?"

I stall by taking a sip of terrible coffee.

This is the part I've been dreading. How do you explain a father who was Bull Rider of the Year three times but couldn't stick around long enough to teach his son to tie his shoes?

A mother who worked double shifts to keep us afloat while I chose the same unstable path that broke her heart?

"Let's just say... it's complicated."

"Complicated how?"

Rebecca's voice carries genuine curiosity, not the polite interest most people show when they're making conversation. She leans forward slightly, and I find myself wanting to tell her things I've never said out loud.

"My dad was famous in this world. Bull Rider of the Year three times running." I trace patterns on the worn Formica table. "But he couldn't stick around long enough to be a real father. Mama worked two jobs to keep us fed while he chased the next prize, the next ride, the next town."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead. Thrown by a bull in Texas when I was twelve." The words come out flatter than I intend.

"Mama remarried a good man who tried to be a father to me, but by then I was already following in Dad's footsteps."

She wanted me to take a desk job in Tulsa, where they've settled down, and have a

steady paycheck, benefits, a chance to build something stable of my own. ”

“But you chose the rodeo instead.”

“I think deep down I’ve always yearned for a connection with my dad, so I chose the same path as him. But it’s also the one that destroyed our family.” I meet her eyes, expecting judgment but finding only understanding. “Mother hasn’t returned my calls in three weeks.”

Rebecca reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers.

The contact is warm and reassuring. It makes me feel like my problems are ones that she stands beside me to help me deal with, like I’m not alone.

“Maybe this season could be different. Maybe you could find a way to have both—the riding and the stability.”

“How do you do that? Balance what you love with what’s practical?”

“You find something worth building toward.” She squeezes my hand. “For me, it’s building on my Grandpa’s legacy. What would yours be?”

The question sits heavy between us. I’ve spent so many years focused on the next ride, the next prize, that I’ve never thought about what I’m building toward.

But sitting here with Rebecca, listening to her talk about family Sunday dinners and belonging, I’m overwhelmed by a longing that makes me weak.

“Maybe I don’t know yet. But I’m starting to think I want to find out.”

We spend the next hour creating our fake history, but something strange happens.

As we invent details about our relationship, Rebecca starts sharing real stories about her family.

How her grandmother taught all the women to cook, but none of the men.

How family reunions turn into cooking competitions that last for days.

How her grandfather would make everyone tell their favorite memory of him before they could eat dessert.

I find myself sharing too. The loneliness of constant travel. Hotel rooms that all look the same. The way other cowboys have families to go home to, while I just move to the next town, the next ride.

“You could come to Sunday dinner sometime. For real.”

The offer catches me off guard. “What?”

“After all this fake dating stuff is over. You could meet my family. If you wanted to.”

My chest clenches with longing. Does she even realize the power her invitation has for me?

The idea of sitting around a table with a huge family, is all I’ve ever wanted.

Despite the distance between us, I love my mom, but it was always just us when I was young, and even then I craved the community and belonging of family.

“I’d like that. More than you know.”

“So, tell me how you two met.”

Polly Williamson settles into her chair in the small conference room, her tablet ready, as the photographer adjusts the lighting behind her. The professional setup makes everything feel official, but Rebecca's hand in mine feels completely natural.

"I was judging a charity cook-off in Raytown." The lie comes easily, maybe because it's essentially true—just compressed in time. "One taste of Rebecca's chili and I knew I had to know the woman behind it."

"He kept asking for more spice." Rebecca's laugh is genuine, and I remember yesterday's flirtation, the way she challenged me about handling heat. "He calls me his Spice Girl."

"And how did that first date go?"

"She made me wait two weeks before she'd even consider going out with me." I grin at Rebecca, improvising. "Said she needed to make sure I could handle more than just her cooking."

"Could you?"

"Still working on proving myself worthy." I look at her, and my heart just about stops. There aren't even words for how badly I want her to be my girlfriend. To be my wife.

Polly makes notes, clearly charmed by our banter. But the strange thing is, it doesn't feel like a performance anymore. When I look at Rebecca, the words coming out of my mouth feel natural and true. Every moment with her has been easy like this.

"What do you love most about each other?"

Rebecca answers first. "His authenticity. He sees right through pretense—mine and

everyone else's. And he genuinely listens when I talk about my family, my dreams. Along with all my family, Amos is my biggest supporter. He makes me feel like anything is possible."

The photographer captures her expression as she speaks, but I'm too focused on her words to notice. She's describing qualities I'm not sure I actually possess, but hearing her say them makes me want to become the man she sees.

"Amos?"

"Her passion." The words come without thought. "The way she lights up when she talks about her grandfather's legacy. She's passionate and driven, and the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Polly leans forward. "That's beautiful. What about your families? How do they feel about the relationship?"

"Sunday dinners with her family are my second favorite thing in the world." The lie feels less like fiction and more like prophecy.

"And what's your favorite thing?"

I look directly at Rebecca. "Rebecca."

Her eyes widen, and I wonder if I've gone too far.

"What are your future plans together?" Polly asks, beaming with happiness, like we're giving her the juiciest interview she's ever had. It's clear that she's on our side and favors our story.

This is dangerous territory. We haven't discussed how to handle questions about the

future because we don't have one—not a real one. Not yet. But watching Rebecca talk about preserving family traditions and building something lasting, I hear myself saying things I've never planned.

“I want to be part of something real. Something that matters.” I squeeze Rebecca's hand. “She's taught me that home isn't a place—it's the people you choose to build a life with.”

The photographer snaps rapidly as Rebecca stares at me, something vulnerable and surprised in her expression.

“That's incredibly romantic. And very different from the typical rodeo cowboy image.”

“Rebecca changes everything.” The words come out more intense than I intended. “She makes me want to be better than I've ever been. When we met, I realized I'd been searching for something more for a long time, but I didn't know it until I met her. She changed my life.”

For the posed photos, we move around the room—Rebecca leaning against my chest while I point to something in the distance, both of us laughing at the photographer's directions, my arm around her shoulders as we look at her family photos.

But it's the unguarded moments that feel most real.

When Rebecca touches my cheek to adjust my position, and her hand lingers longer than necessary.

When I brush a strand of hair behind her ear, and she leans into the contact.

When our eyes meet between poses, and something electric passes between us.

“You two have incredible natural chemistry,” the photographer comments as he reviews shots on his camera. “These are going to be beautiful.”

As we wrap up, Polly shakes both our hands. “This is exactly the kind of story our readers love. Thank you for being so open with us.”

Walking out of the administration building, I’m hyperaware of Rebecca beside me. The performance is over, but her hand is still in mine, and neither of us seems inclined to let go.

“That felt...”

“Real,” she finishes quietly.

“Yeah. It did.”

We stop walking, standing in the shadow of the building, while fairgoers stream past us toward evening events. The question hanging between us is whether what we felt in there was good acting or something more dangerous.

“Amos, when you said those things about wanting to be part of something lasting—”

“I meant them.” The admission comes out before I can stop it. “Every word.”

She studies my face like she’s trying to read the truth there. “This is getting complicated.”

“Maybe complicated isn’t the worst thing that could happen to us.”

Before she can respond, my phone buzzes with a text. I glance at it and my chest tightens.

“What is it?”

“My mother. She wants to talk.”

Rebecca’s expression immediately softens with concern. “That’s good, right?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t usually...” I trail off, staring at the simple message: Call me when you get a chance. We should talk.

“You should call her back.”

“Yeah. I should.” But I don’t move to dial. Instead, I find myself looking at Rebecca, thinking about the way she described family Sunday dinners, the easy belonging that’s the foundation of her family.

“I’ll call her tonight. After the People’s Choice competition.” I slide my phone back into my pocket. “Right now, I want to help you win this thing.”

As we head toward the exhibition hall, Rebecca’s hand still in mine, I realize something has shifted.

This started as helping each other out—her getting magazine coverage, me having a distraction from my uncertain future.

But somewhere between the diner conversation and the interview, it became something else.

I love this woman.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:17 am

REBECCA

The large outdoor tent hosting the People's Choice competition is buzzing with activity and people. The semi-final round of the competition just ended, and I'm already on pins and needles as the judges confer. They've said they'll announce the results after the People's Choice voting concludes.

"This recipe has been in my family for three generations. My grandfather taught me to cook this almost before I could walk."

I ladle another sample into a paper cup, steam rising between my face and the fairgoer's as I hand it over.

The outdoor tent area buzzes with activity—families strolling between booths, the competing aromas of different chilis creating a complex symphony that makes my mouth water despite having tasted my recipe a dozen times today.

The older woman tastes my chili, and her eyes go wide. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but this is better than my mama's chili. You've got my vote!"

The woman smiles at me as she drops her token into my voting jar before moving on to the next booth. I watch her go, pride and nerves warring in my chest. The people's choice competition runs parallel to tomorrow's juried event—different prizes, but both matter.

"Between you and me," Sam—a stunningly beautiful woman who is an acrobat and one of the guest judges—says, leaning over my booth to talk to me. "You have a

winner here. I don't know how the finals will go, but I'm unofficially telling you that you'll be in the finals."

I nearly drop the paper cup of chili I'm holding. "Are you serious?" I whisper. My heart and mind are racing.

"Girl, you don't need me to tell you this chili isn't just good—it's blue ribbon good. Even Thor, my boyfriend who thinks bean chili is a travesty, even he loved it." Sam reaches up and smooths her hand over her dark hair, then straightens as she smiles at me.

"That's..." I stare at Sam, my mind in overdrive as I think of what to say. "Thank you."

"Rebecca, you have something special here. However everything goes, you've earned it. I hope to see you around."

"Likewise," I say, watching as Thor, who was one of the judges for the no-bean chili competition, comes over looking at her like she hung all the stars in the sky. He's tall and smiling, and clearly deeply infatuated with Sam.

"Good luck," Thor says, smiling at me as he wraps his arms around Sam and gives her a big kiss. "I've been on the circuit a while, so believe me when I say you've got a good thing here. I hope to see a lot more of you."

I stand there, stunned as I watch them walk away and replaying what Sam said. It's like, I know my chili is good, but there's still the fear that someone else's is better and I won't make it past the semis. I'm also scared about the finals, because the competition will be stiff.

"Need any help, Spice Girl?"

I turn to find Amos approaching with a sexy swagger that makes me want to jump on him. He's changed out of his rodeo gear into dark jeans and a button-down shirt that emphasizes the breadth of his shoulders.

"I thought you'd be off signing autographs or something."

"I'd rather be here." He steps behind my booth without invitation, surveying the setup with genuine interest. "What can I do?"

The offer surprises me. He seems genuinely invested in helping me succeed.

"You could help serve samples, if you want," I say, standing aside behind my table to make room for him. "But don't be a distraction, okay?"

"Wouldn't dream of it. You're the star here. I'm just backup."

For the next hour, we work together with surprising ease.

Amos chats with fairgoers while I focus on the chili, but he defers to me at every turn.

When someone asks about ingredients, he steps back and lets me explain.

He's a much bigger star here than I am, but he goes out of his way not to steal any attention from me.

I'm surprised and appreciative of his generosity and respect.

I'm standing in front of my table, good-naturedly laughing as I talk to a man who's trying to tell me no-bean chili is the best chili, when someone behind me bumps into me and makes me stumble backward.

As I reach out to keep from falling, suddenly Amos's hands are around my waist, steadying me with firm pressure that sends heat shooting through my core.

"You okay?" he asks, his hazel eyes intent on mine.

"Fine. Just—" The words stick in my throat as I become acutely aware of his proximity. His chest is inches from my back, his hands spanning my waist. My breath catches as his touch makes me yearn for him.

"Rebecca?"

I should step away. We're supposed to be performing a relationship, not creating actual intimacy in front of half the county. But his touch feels too good, too right, and I find myself leaning back against his solid warmth instead of pulling away.

"I'm fine," I manage, but my voice comes out breathier than intended.

His hands linger longer than necessary before he releases me, and when I turn to face him, something heated passes between us. The way we've been working together, the growing comfort of his presence—it's all building toward something that feels increasingly real.

Dangerous thoughts flood my mind. What would it be like to spend the night with him?

Really spend the night, not just the performance we've been maintaining.

How would those strong hands feel exploring my body?

What sounds would he make when I touched him?

What if we built something for longer than a few days?

I clench my thighs together, trying to control the way my clit throbs as I imagine him backing me against a wall, his mouth hot on my neck, his hands roaming my body. The fantasy is so vivid that I have to grab the edge of the table to steady myself.

“Rebecca.” His voice has dropped to something rough and intimate. “You’re looking at me like—”

“Like what?” I challenge, meeting his gaze directly despite the fire building in my cheeks.

“Like you’re thinking the same thing I am.”

Before I can respond, another wave of fairgoers approaches our booth, and we’re forced back into performance mode.

But the tension between us has ratcheted up several degrees, and every touch—his hand on my lower back, my fingers brushing his when we both reach for the same spoon—feels charged in a new way.

As the evening winds down and we pack up together, working in comfortable synchronization, I realize something has fundamentally shifted. The easy partnership, the way he supports without overwhelming, the growing heat between us—none of it feels fake anymore.

“This didn’t feel fake today,” I admit quietly as we load the last of my equipment onto the cart to take everything back to the kitchen hall.

He stops what he’s doing and looks at me, something vulnerable flickering in his expression. “No. It didn’t.”

The admission hangs between us, heavy with implication. We're supposed to be helping each other out—him having a distraction from his uncertain future, me getting magazine coverage for my competition. But somewhere along the way, the lines have blurred beyond recognition.

“What does that mean for us?”

“I don't know.” He steps closer, close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in his hazel eyes. “But I know I don't want this to end when the fair does.”

My heart hammers against my ribs as I process his words. This cowboy, who could have any woman he wants, is standing in front of me, admitting he doesn't want our fake relationship to stay fake.

“Amos—”

“Think about it,” he says quietly. “That's all I'm asking. Just think about whether what we have is worth exploring.”

As he walks away, leaving me alone with my cart and my racing thoughts, I already know the answer. What we have feels like the most real thing that's ever happened to me.

The question is whether I'm brave enough to risk everything to find out if he feels the same way.

“If I win tomorrow's competition, the distribution contract could mean everything.”

I measure cumin into small glass bowls, organizing my mise en place for the next day's judged competition.

The exhibition hall has mostly emptied except for a few dedicated competitors doing final prep work.

The overhead lights cast harsh shadows across the cooking stations, but I've grown comfortable in this space over the past few days.

Even without Grady's help, everything has gone perfectly and easily.

Amos appeared twenty minutes ago without explanation, settling into the chair beside my prep table like he belongs there. Instead of feeling crowded, his presence has become surprisingly soothing.

"Your grandfather would be proud of how you're fighting for his legacy."

The comment makes me pause in my measuring. "How do you know that matters to me?"

"Because I watch you and I pay attention." His voice carries something deeper than casual interest. "This isn't just a hobby for you. Your voice changes when you talk about your family and this chili—you're clearly invested in creating something greater than yourself."

The observation catches me completely off guard. In three days, this cowboy has seen something in me that people in my life have missed entirely. The recognition sends warmth spreading through my chest.

"What about you? What are you passionate about besides riding bulls?"

He's quiet for so long that I wonder if he heard the question. When he finally speaks, his voice carries a vulnerability I haven't heard before.

“Honestly? I’m still figuring that out. My dad was famous in his world, but he couldn’t stick around long enough to teach me to tie my shoes.

I’ve spent so long focused on the next ride, the next prize, that I never thought about what I was building toward.

I’ve avoided settling down because I didn’t think it was in my blood. I do now.”

The admission hits me unexpectedly. Beneath his confidence lies someone searching for the same kind of belonging I’ve taken for granted my entire life.

“You must be lonely.”

“I was.” He meets my eyes. “Until I met you.”

The words hang between us, and the boundaries of this fake relationship blur. As I process what he’s really saying, I stop moving and rest my hands on the spice containers.

“Amos—”

“You have this incredible family that grounds you. Roots that go back generations. I watch you with your grandfather’s photos, the way you touch that necklace when you talk about your grandmother, and I realize I’ve never had anything like that.”

Without thinking, I reach out and touch his face, my palm cupping his jaw. His skin is warm beneath my fingers, rough with evening stubble that sends tiny shivers up my arm. “Family isn’t just blood. It’s also the people you choose.”

He covers my hand with his, pressing my palm more firmly against his face. The contact sends electricity shooting straight to my core, but it’s the expression in his

eyes that goes straight to my heart—hungry and hopeful and achingly vulnerable.

“Rebecca.” My name comes out rough.

We lean toward each other without conscious decision, drawn by a magnetism that’s been building since that first morning when he helped me with my cart. His breath mingles with mine, warm and coffee-scented, and I see the exact moment his gaze drops to my mouth.

My heart pounds so hard I’m sure he can hear it. This isn’t performance or strategy—this is pure want, the culmination of three days of growing attraction and deepening connection. When his free hand slides into my hair, angling my face toward his, I part my lips in anticipation.

Just as we’re about to kiss, a tremendous crash echoes through the hall. One of the other competitors has dropped a pot, the metal clanging against concrete loud enough to wake the dead.

We spring apart like guilty teenagers, the spell broken by the intrusion of reality. But my skin still burns where he touched me, and the look in his eyes suggests he wants me as much as I want him.

“This is getting real,” I whisper, touching my lips with shaking fingers.

“Maybe real is what we’re supposed to be.”

He stands, putting a little distance between us. “But you’re right. This is complicated. You have a competition to win tomorrow, and I don’t want to be a distraction.”

“You’re not a distraction.” The words come out quickly. “You’re the opposite of a distraction. You make everything...better. More real.”

His expression softens, and his hazel eyes meet mine. “Rebecca.”

“I know. I know it’s crazy. We’ve known each other for three days.”

“Sometimes you don’t need a lot of time to know that something is real.”

The certainty in his voice sends my pulse racing. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that whatever this is between us, it’s worth exploring. After you win tomorrow, after the magazine story comes out, after all the performance is over—I want to find out what we have when it’s just us.”

As he walks away, leaving me alone with my prep work and my racing thoughts, I press my fingers to my lips where his kiss would have landed. The ghost of what almost happened sends heat coursing through my body.

I need Amos.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:17 am

AMOS

M an, you should've seen me last night. Hooked up with this barrel racer from Oklahoma."

Wyatt Callahan falls into step beside me as we leave the arena, both of us dusty and coming down from the adrenaline from our rides. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows as we walk across the fairgrounds, with crowds of families streaming all around us.

"She rode me all night long, if you know what I mean." Wyatt grins like he's won the lottery instead of describing another meaningless hookup.

I bet he won't remember the woman's name a week from now.

Though I can't fault him too much—there was a time we were both out there tom-catting around, having fun with all the women who said yes.

"Yeah, sounds great." The words come out flat, distracted. My mind keeps drifting to Rebecca's booth, wondering how the voting is going, whether she needs help with anything. They're doing the semi-finals today, which I'm confident she'll make it past.

"What's with you? You find a sweet piece of ass yet? This fair's got plenty to choose from. Don't tell me you can't get it up anymore..."

The crude description makes me wince. Three days ago, I might have responded the

same way. Now it feels wrong, disrespectful to the way I want to live now, not the past me who saw women as conquests and used my fame to get laid.

“Watch your tongue, boy,” I warn, but I know Wyatt is just giving me a hard time, not insulting me. “Actually, I met someone. Rebecca. She’s different.”

It feels strange to say that I’ve met a woman who has gotten under my skin. I’ve spent so long chasing a good time that even admitting I like a woman for more than just a good time conjures a strange vulnerability in me. This is new ground for me.

Wyatt stops walking and stares at me. “Different how? She not putting out?”

“Different like special.” I adjust my hat, suddenly unsure about the wisdom of having this conversation with Wyatt. “She’s got me thinking about a different kind of future.”

“Whoa, hold up.” Wyatt reaches out and grabs me by the arm, turning to look at me like I’ve announced plans to join the circus. “You’re talking about settling down? You ?”

The question hits hard. Six months ago, the idea would have been laughable.

I’ve spent nearly twenty years avoiding anything that looked like commitment, following my father’s path of temporary everything.

Yet watching Rebecca and seeing her passion and commitment to her family, listening to her talk about Sunday dinners and belonging, has awakened something I didn’t think I could ever have.

“Maybe. I don’t know. She makes me want things I never thought I wanted.”

“Huh. More power to you, man. I’ll never settle down, but if that’s what makes you happy, I hope she feels the same way.” Wyatt shrugs, already losing interest. “I’ve never met a woman who’d make me consider giving up my freedom.”

“What about—”

“Don’t say her name.” His expression shuts down completely, his eyes darkening in an instant. “We’re not talking about that.”

I’ve known Wyatt for five years, and in all that time, he’s only mentioned the woman who broke his heart so badly once, when we were shit-faced after a night we both lost.

“All right. But you know what I mean about finding someone who changes everything?”

“No,” he says quickly, adjusting his hat brim to hide his eyes. “And I plan to keep it that way.”

As we reach the gates leading back to the main fairgrounds, my thoughts drift to yesterday morning’s conversation with Rebecca at the diner.

The way she talked about her family’s Sunday dinners, with lots of family gathered around the table.

The casual invitation to join them sometime, like belonging was something she could offer.

“You heading to find your girl?” Wyatt asks, nodding toward the exhibition hall.

“Yeah. Want to see how her competition went.”

“Good luck, man. Hope she’s worth all this soul-searching you’re doing.”

As Wyatt heads toward the beer garden and I walk toward Rebecca, I know with absolute certainty that she is. Worth the soul-searching, worth the risk, worth changing everything I thought I knew about my future.

“You came to watch me ride.”

I find Rebecca as she’s leaving the arena. I’m still dusty from the event, and my eyes search her face.

“I wanted to see if you could back up all that swagger,” she says, her voice breathy and sexy as hell.

“And?”

“I’m impressed.” She steps closer, her eyes fixed on mine.

This woman has no fucking idea how much her opinion means to me. Every time she shows up, smiles at me, just fucking shares the same air I’m breathing? Nothing else matters.

“Enough about me. Tell me about the semi-finals. How did you do?”

“I’m going to the finals!” Rebecca’s face lights up and she jumps up.

My heart leaps as I watch her excitement and enthusiasm. “I knew you would, Spice Girl. Your chili is going to win you a lot of awards.”

“Awww,” she says, a beautiful blush spreading from her chest to her cheeks. “Walk me back to my hotel?”

“It would be my pleasure,” I say, tipping my hat to her before extending my arm for her. When she slides her hand in the crook of my arm, my body lights up with the rightness of how it feels. This right here, Rebecca on my arm, telling me she’s impressed? Best fucking day, ever.

Now, we’re outside her hotel room, and I’m reluctant to let this evening end. My craving for Rebecca shakes me to my core. Every moment in her presence tugs at something deep inside—a need for a future with her, for something strong and lasting.

“I had a good time tonight. Watching you was thrilling. I know it’s dangerous, but you make it look...not easy, but like you’re completely in control.” Her voice is softer than usual as she searches for her key card.

I lean against the doorframe, drinking in the sight of her.

“It pleases me to hear you say that. I wouldn’t say I’m in control, but when you’ve done this as much as I have, you learn how the bulls react and how to read the way they move.

Your event went well. I hear a lot of folks talking about your chili.”

“Thanks to you helping.” She finds the card but doesn’t immediately move to unlock the door. “You didn’t have to stay for as long as you did.”

“I wanted to,” I say, and it’s the honest truth. I genuinely crave her company and will do whatever it takes to be with her. Nothing else in my life ever has felt as right as being with Rebecca. “I can’t seem to get enough of you, Rebecca.”

The admission slips out before I can stop it. My eyes find hers, and I see my hunger reflected in her eyes.

“Amos.” My name comes out soft, uncertain. “What we talked about earlier, about this feeling real—”

“I meant every word.” I step closer, close enough to catch the faint scent of vanilla and spice that always surrounds her.

“Rebecca, I know this is probably taking you by surprise. It’s sure as hell like that for me, my feelings for you consuming me.

Being with you is the only thing that feels right. ”

“What do you feel for me?”

How I answer her question is loaded with possibility and risk. Looking at her face in the hallway’s soft lighting, I realize I have to lay it all out.

“It’s like I’ve been sleepwalking my whole life, and you woke me up. Like every town I’ve been to was killing time until I found you. Like you’re the home I’ve been looking for without even realizing I was lost.”

Her breath catches audibly, and her blue eyes glisten. “Amos.”

“I know it’s too much, too fast. But Rebecca, I can’t get enough of how being with you makes me feel. You’re everything I want. I swear on my life this is true.”

For a moment, we look at each other.

Then she steps forward, eliminating the space between us, and reaches up to cup my face in her hands. “It’s the most real thing that’s ever happened to me too.”

When she kisses me, it’s nothing like the performance at the square dance. This is

soft and exploratory, her lips parting under mine with a sigh that goes straight to my cock. I slide my hands into her hair, angling her face to deepen our kiss, and she responds immediately.

The kiss builds slowly, heat spiraling between us until we're both panting when we pull apart. When she pulls back slightly, her eyes are dark with want.

“Do you want to come in?”

“More than I've ever wanted anything.”

She unlocks the door with shaking hands, and I follow her into the room, my heart pounding with anticipation and overwhelming need. This isn't just attraction—it's the culmination of three days of growing connection, of finding the missing piece of myself I never knew existed.

The door closes behind us with a soft click, and suddenly, we're alone in the dim space lit only by the lamp she left on.

“Rebecca.” I reach for her, but she steps into my arms before I can complete the motion, her body fitting against mine like she was made for this exact moment.

This time when we kiss, there's no hesitation. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer, and I back her toward the bed with careful pressure. I'm torn between wanting to make love to her urgently and wanting to take it slow and savor every moment of pleasure with her.

I slide my hands under the hem of her shirt, my palms exploring her soft, luscious curves, and she arches into the touch with a breathy moan that makes me dizzy. Her skin is silk, and when I lift the fabric over her head, she doesn't hesitate or try to hide.

“You’re so beautiful.” The words come out reverent, awed. “So incredibly perfect.”

My cock is already hard and throbbing, straining against my jeans as I drink in the sight of her.

Full breasts that fit perfectly in my palms, soft curves that make my mouth water, skin that glows golden in the lamplight.

She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and the fact that she’s here with me, wanting me, feels like a miracle.

“You’re amazing, Rebecca. Absolutely amazing.” I trace the line of her collarbone, then follow the path with my lips. “I can’t believe you’re real.”

She reaches for my shirt buttons, her fingers surprisingly steady as she works them free. When her palms spread across my chest, skin to skin, I close my eyes and concentrate on breathing.

“You feel so good,” she murmurs, her mouth finding the hollow of my throat.

I work at the clasp of her bra with careful fingers, desperate to see more of her, to worship every inch of perfect skin. When the lace falls away, I groan at the sight.

“God, you’re gorgeous.” My hands map the curves of her breasts, thumbs brushing over peaked nipples that make her gasp. “You’re my Spice Queen, Rebecca. You’re so perfect.”

The desire coursing through me is overwhelming and needy. My cock aches, but this moment is about her—I don’t want to rush this.

“I want you so much,” I whisper against her ear, my voice rough with desire. “I’ve

never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

When I lower her to the bed, she reaches up and traces my face with gentle fingers, like she’s memorizing every detail. The tenderness in the gesture makes me want her even more.

“This feels like more than just tonight,” she whispers.

“It is more than just tonight.” I kiss her palm, then her wrist, working my way down her arm with deliberate slowness. “This feels like the beginning of everything.”

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REBECCA

Every nerve ending in my body feels electrified as Amos lowers me to the bed. My body is vibrating with lust and desire for this man who walked into my life and changed it before I could blink.

“You’re trembling,” he murmurs against my collarbone, his voice rough with desire.

“Good trembling.” My hands fist in his hair as his mouth finds the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “Amos, I need—”

“I know, Spice Girl. I’ve got you.”

He takes my nipple into his mouth, lightly scraping his teeth against my breasts, and the sensation shoots straight through my core like liquid fire. My back arches off the mattress, and I cry out. Shivers race across my skin as he lavishes attention on my body.

“You are so perfect,” he whispers as he moves his mouth over my body.

When his fingers hook in the waistband of my panties, I lift my hips to help him slide them away, the lace whispering against my thighs.

The cool air against my heated, wet center makes me shiver, but his warm palms spanning my thighs ground me, his thumbs stroking circles that make my muscles quiver with anticipation.

“Look at me, Rebecca.”

I open eyes I didn't realize I'd closed to find him watching my face with an intensity that steals my breath. There's something in his expression beyond desire—something deeper and more overwhelming that makes my chest tight with an emotion I'm not ready to name.

“You're beautiful. So damn beautiful it hurts to look at you.”

His touch is everything I've fantasized about and more.

Gentle but sure, patient but hungry, like he has all the time in the world to explore every inch of my body.

When his fingers find me wet and ready, sliding through my slickness with maddening slowness, I arch into the contact with a moan that echoes off the hotel room walls.

“Is this what you want?” His thumb finds my clit, circling it with an aching slowness that drives me wild and has me bucking against his hand. “Tell me what you need, beautiful. I like the feeling of you bucking against me.”

“Yes. God, yes. More.”

When his mouth replaces his fingers, the sensation is so intense that I see stars. His tongue works magic against me, alternating between gentle licks and firm pressure that has me climbing toward something overwhelming and inevitable.

“Come for me, beautiful. Show me what pleasures you the most and makes you come.”

His words, combined with that perfect pressure, send me over the edge. The climax crashes through me in waves that leave me gasping and shaking, my fingers digging into his shoulders as pleasure rolls through my entire body in endless pulses.

Amos kisses me through the aftershocks, soft and sweet, while I float back to awareness, tasting myself on his lips. “I could watch you do that all night.”

He reaches for his wallet, fumbling for protection with shaking hands. We’re really doing this. This beautiful, complicated man is about to make love to me, and every cell in my body is screaming yes.

“Are you sure?” he asks, poised above me with concern tempering the heat in his eyes.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

When he enters me, slow and careful and perfect, the sensation steals the breath from my lungs.

The stretch and fullness are overwhelming—not just the physical connection, though feeling him deep inside me sends sparks through every nerve ending—but the emotional intensity of being this connected to someone who sees me in a way no one ever has.

“Rebecca.” My name sounds like a prayer on his lips as he stills, letting me adjust to the feel of him filling me completely. “God, you feel amazing. So tight, so perfect.”

The initial burn gives way to something deeper, more intense. He moves slowly at first, each thrust sending shockwaves through my system. The drag of him against my sensitive walls, the way he hits that perfect spot inside me with every powerful stroke, is better than I could have imagined.

“More,” I whisper against his neck, my hands on his back, pulling him closer to my body. “Please, Amos.”

He responds by shifting the angle, lifting my hips slightly so he can thrust deeper, hitting something inside me that makes stars explode behind my closed eyelids. The rhythm he sets is perfect—slow enough to savor every sensation, intense enough to drive me toward another peak.

I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, and the sound he makes—somewhere between a groan and my name—sends heat flooding through me. This feels right in a way that defies logic.

Every thrust builds the pressure inside me higher. The way his body moves against mine, skin slick with sweat, muscles flexing with each controlled movement, is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever experienced.

“I can’t—” The words dissolve into incoherent sound as he picks up the pace, each thrust sending me higher toward something that feels like it might shatter me completely. “Amos, I’m going to—”

“With me,” he rasps, his control visibly fraying as his movements become more urgent. “Come with me, beautiful.”

The second climax hits even harder than the first, pulling him over the edge with me. His body goes rigid above me as he finds his release, my name falling from his lips in a rough groan. We collapse together, breathing hard and trembling, his weight settling over me like the most perfect blanket.

“That was...” I trail off because words feel inadequate for the bright, powerful waves of pleasure breaking in me.

“Yeah.” He rolls to his side, pulling me against his chest, our bodies still riding out the lingering tremors of pleasure. “It was.”

As our heartbeats slow and reality seeps back in, I realize something fundamental has shifted. This wasn’t just sex—it was an emotional connection so deep that it’s changed something essential about who I am.

I don’t understand how I can feel this connected to someone I’ve known for three days. But lying here in his arms, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my skin, I know with absolute certainty that what we just shared was real.

I’m falling for this cowboy.

“Tell me about this.” Amos’s fingers trace the turquoise necklace I’m still wearing—the only thing I haven’t taken off.

“It was my grandmother’s.” I capture his hand and press it flat against my heart.

When I pull back, his expression has grown serious. “Rebecca, I need you to know that what happened between us wasn’t just about tonight.”

“I know.” The admission comes easily, honestly. “Even if it started as fake, having you in my corner felt real. Being with you feels natural and easy, like we’ve known each other for a lot longer than a few days.”

“It was real for me too.” His thumb strokes across my cheekbone with reverent tenderness. “Maybe it started as me helping you, but somewhere along the way, it became the most real thing in my life.”

The confession sends warmth spiraling through my chest. This cowboy with his easy charm and surprising vulnerability has taken up permanent residence in my heart.

“You said your relationship with your mother is complicated.”

“She worked double shifts to give me opportunities my father never had. She wanted me to have a stable life, not one where I was on the road half the year and risking my life at every rodeo.” His hand finds mine, intertwining our fingers and raising my hand to his mouth to kiss each of my knuckles.

“Instead, I chose the same path that broke her heart when my father didn’t come home after a rodeo gone wrong. ”

“She’s scared of losing you.” I press a soft kiss to his chest, tasting salt and something essentially him. “Maybe this season could be different. Maybe you could find a way to bridge that gap.”

“Maybe.” He strokes my hair. “Being with you makes me want to try. Makes me want to be the kind of man that you deserve.”

Outside the window, the sounds of the fair reach us. But here in this bed, skin to skin and heart to heart, the rest of the world feels distant.

“What are you thinking about?” Amos asks, his fingers tracing patterns on my bare shoulder.

“How this doesn’t feel fake at all.” I shift to look at him directly. “How it feels like the most real thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Good.” He cups my face, thumbs stroking across my cheekbones. “Because I’m falling for you, Rebecca Cooper. Hard and fast and completely.”

The words send my heart soaring even as they terrify me. “That’s crazy. We’ve known each other for three days.”

“Some things don’t need time to be real.” His voice carries absolute conviction. “What I feel for you is more powerful than anything I’ve experienced. All I know is that I’d be a damn fool to let you go, and I have no intention of being a damn fool.”

The easy way we talk about feelings should terrify me. Three days ago, this man was a stranger. Now he’s confessing he’s falling for me, and instead of running, I want to fall with him.

Lying here in his arms, feeling more content and connected than I have in years, it doesn’t feel rushed. It feels inevitable. Like every choice I’ve made has been leading me to this moment, this man, this overwhelming sense of rightness.

As his mouth finds mine in a kiss that is filled with promises, my last thought is that I’m in love with Amos Cross.

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AMOS

I'll go grab us some coffee and pastries from the breakfast buffet. Take your time."

Morning light streams through the windows, catching the gold highlights in Rebecca's tousled hair. I've never woken up feeling this content with life, that everything is right in my life, and the woman at my side is the one I want to spend a lifetime with.

"Sounds perfect. I could get used to this." She stretches sensuously under the sheets, her eyes sleepy as she smiles up at me.

I press a tender kiss to her forehead before heading for the door. "Be right back, Spice Queen."

The elevator ride down feels like floating. Every muscle in my body carries the pleasant ache of last night's passion, but it's more than that. For the first time in my life, I know what it is to feel like I belong somewhere. I've found my home in Rebecca.

The breakfast area bustles with families preparing for the final day's events. I select a variety of options for Rebecca—a chocolate croissant, some fresh fruit, a blueberry muffin—and balance a tray of coffee as I make my way back to the elevators.

The circuit doesn't have to mean constant travel anymore. Maybe I could base myself closer to Rebecca's family, compete regionally, build something stable enough to deserve the kind of love she offers so freely. I could find work on a ranch.

I'm imagining Sunday dinners with Rebecca's family as I step off the elevator onto her floor, when I round the corner of the hallway and nearly collide with a woman.

"Apologies, ma'am," I say, nodding at her as I keep walking.

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you."

The blonde woman moves in front of me, blocking my path, her smile predatory and confident.

She's wearing a low-cut blouse that reveals the lace edge of her bra, and her body language screams availability.

I recognize the type immediately—the kind of woman who follows the circuit looking for cowboys, hoping to catch one permanently and step into the spotlight at his side.

"I'm sorry, but I'm with someone." I step to the side, but she moves to block me again.

"That chubby girl I saw you with at the square dance? Please." Her laugh is sharp and dismissive. "It's cute you gave her a good time, but we both know she's not your type. I know what cowboys like you really want."

The dismissive cruelty in her voice makes my jaw clench.

The way she describes Rebecca, like her curves and substance somehow make her less worthy, ignites a furious protectiveness in me.

I've met dozens of women like this over the years, but never has a woman infuriated me so completely as the one standing in front of me.

“You don’t know anything about what I want. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” I say pointedly

“Don’t be in such a hurry.” When I try to step around her again, she reaches out and presses her hand against my chest, cornering me with my back against the wall. “I promise I can show you a better time than she can.”

I sigh in frustration. My hands are full, so I can’t physically extricate myself from her. If only this woman knew that she had zero chance with me, maybe she’d stop trying so hard. Hell, she should go find Wyatt if all she wants is to fuck a cowboy.

“Remove your hand from my chest. Now.”

But she steps closer with the persistence of someone used to getting what she wants, pressing her hand more tightly against my chest, her fingers gripping the fabric of my shirt. The coffee tray wavers in my other hand as I try to maintain balance.

“Just think about it. One night with someone who knows how to please a man like—”

“I said stop it.”

Just as I’m working to pry her fingers loose without dropping the coffee, I catch movement in my peripheral vision.

Rebecca’s hotel room door opens down the hall, and our eyes meet across the distance.

My heart sinks like a stone when I watch her expression change from confusion to sadness to anger, in the space of a few seconds.

When she steps back into her room and then slams the door, it’s clear how hurt she is.

“Shit.” I drop the pastry bag and forcibly remove the woman’s hand from my chest.
“Get away from me.”

“But—”

“Now!” I snap, bending over to pick up the pastries and rush to Rebecca’s door, my heart hammering against my ribs. After last night, she has to know that what she saw wasn’t something I wanted. Right? Please don’t let her think that I played her. I’m not that man anymore.

“Rebecca! Let me explain, please! It’s not what you think!”

Silence from inside the room.

“Rebecca, please. She grabbed me. I didn’t invite that attention at all – she’s not the woman I want. You’re the only woman for me, Spice Queen.”

“Go away.” Her voice comes through the door, clear and tight with pain, and the sound cuts through me like a blade.

I lean my forehead against the door, desperate to fix this. “Darlin’, please let me explain what happened.”

More silence. I can picture her on the other side, assuming the worst about me and my intentions. After everything we shared last night, everything we confessed to each other, I’m terrified I’m about to lose her, and not for anything I did.

“I’ll leave the coffee and pastries here. When you’re ready to listen, I’ll be waiting.”

I set the tray by her door and walk away, every step feeling like a mistake. But pushing harder will only make things worse. I know enough about women to know

Rebecca needs some space, and then we can talk.

If she'll let me talk to her.

Three excruciating hours later, I spot Rebecca loading equipment into her car in the hotel parking lot. The sight of her preparing to leave sends panic shooting through my chest. If she drives away now, whatever we have dies with this misunderstanding.

"Rebecca, wait. Please let me explain what you saw."

She doesn't look up from loading her grandfather's cast-iron pot into the trunk. "You don't owe me any explanations. Thank you for helping me. I'll figure out something to tell Polly Williamson."

The abrupt dismissal hits harder than any anger would have. She's shutting down.

"Do you really think I'd treat you like that? Roll out from your bed, after having the best night of my life, and entertain the advances of a woman while I was on my way back to you?"

"What else could it be?" Now she does look at me, and the careful blankness in her expression is worse than tears. "You're a rodeo star who could have any woman he wants. I'm just the girl who helped you pass some time at a county fair."

The words are like physical blows. That she could think so little of herself, of what we shared, proves how badly I've screwed this up.

"Let me help you with that." I reach for the heavy equipment case she's struggling with, and after a moment's hesitation, she lets me take it.

We work in tense silence, loading her car with the cooking gear.

“Can we sit for a minute? Please. Just let me tell you what happened.”

She studies my face for a long moment, and I hold my breath, hoping she’ll see something worth hearing out.

“Five minutes.”

We settle on a bench underneath some oak trees near the fairgrounds, far enough from the crowds to have privacy. The morning heat is already building, but the shade provides some measure of relief.

“That woman cornered me in the hallway. I was coming back to you with coffee when she blocked my path and wouldn’t let me pass. I was trying to get away from her when you saw us.”

Rebecca’s expression doesn’t change, but I press on.

“She said things about you that made me furious. Called you names, acted like you weren’t good enough for me. When the truth is, I’m not good enough for you.”

“How do I know this isn’t just part of the performance?”

The question cuts deep because I understand her doubt. My reputation precedes me—charming cowboy who moves through towns and women with equal ease. Why should she believe I’m any different now?

I gently take her hands in mind, my heart flip-flopping when she doesn’t resist. When I feel her shudder as I trace circles on her palm with my fingertip, I know I have a chance.

“Because I’m sitting under a tree in a parking lot, begging you not to leave. If I were

performing, don't you think I'd be flattering you instead of being terrified you're going to leave me?"

Rebecca's blue eyes soften as they meet mine, and I can see her doubt dissolving.

"I want to meet your family. Sunday dinners, family reunions, all of it. I want to be part of what you have. Will you let me show you how much I care for you?" My voice chokes and I dip my head, terrified of seeing the look in her eyes if she says no.

"Amos," she says softly, her hand reaching up to stroke my jaw. "I do want to give this a shot. You're not the only one who's been taken by surprise these last few days."

"I'm scared of being another stop on your tour."

"I'm scared of not being worth the kind of love your family gives freely."

She lets me take her hands in mine as we sit in silence and stare out at the cars starting to fill the parking lot.

"What if we're scared together?"

Rebecca's question echoes what I said last night, and this time, she's the one offering the solution.

"I called my mother this morning," I tell her. "Left a message saying things are going to be different after this season. That I met a woman I want to build a family with."

"What did she say?"

"Haven't heard back yet. But Rebecca, I mean every word. I want everything with

you, and I'm willing to do anything to prove that to you."

"Not immediately, but I want to meet your mother. Help you rebuild that relationship."

The ease with which she offers to help heal the most broken part of my life leaves me speechless. This woman, who has every reason to doubt me, still sees something worth loving in me.

She studies my face with those intelligent eyes that see too much. "This is terrifying."

"The best things usually are."

After a long moment, she nods. "Okay. We'll try this. For real this time."

My body shakes as relief floods through me so intensely that I have to close my eyes. When I open them, Rebecca is watching me with a soft and hopeful look in her eyes.

"There's one condition."

"Anything."

"No more rodeo groupies. I know they're part of your world, but I can't handle wondering if you're going to be tempted every time some woman throws herself at you. I trust you, but I don't trust them."

"There are no other women." I take her hands again, needing touch her as I state the most important truth.

"There's only you, Rebecca. You're the only one I see, the only one I want."

Everything else is just noise. There is nothing any of those women could say or do that would make me falter for even a second.

I swear on everything—you have nothing to worry about. ”

The conviction in my voice must reach her because more of the tension leaves her shoulders.

“The awards ceremony is this afternoon. Win or lose, I want to be there with you. As your real boyfriend this time, not your fake one.”

“Even if I don’t win?”

“Even if you don’t win. Though for the record, your grandfather’s recipe is going to destroy the competition,” I smile at her, and her blue eyes glisten.

This time her smile is genuine, bright enough to chase away the last shadows of our misunderstanding.

“Come on.” I stand and offer her my hand. “Let’s go win you a championship.”

As we walk toward the fairgrounds hand in hand, I realize something fundamental has shifted. What started as a fake has become the most real thing in my life. And for the first time in a long time, I’m not afraid of the future.

I’m excited to build it with the woman walking beside me.

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REBECCA

First place in the People's Choice competition... Rebecca Cooper!"

The crowd erupts as Polly Williamson announces my name from the main stage, but the roar seems distant, muffled by the pounding of blood in my ears. My legs shake as I make my way up the steps, Amos' proud smile from the front row giving me strength.

"And first place in our Juried Competition for Bean-Based Chili...Rebecca Cooper!"

This time, the cheers nearly knock me over.

Both competitions. I've won both competitions.

The trophies feel impossibly heavy in my hands as I stare out at the crowd, thinking of Grandpa, wishing he could see this moment.

Tears of happiness and pride fill my eyes, and love for Amos overwhelms me when I look at him, seeing the same intensity reflected in his gaze.

"Congratulations!" Polly beams as she hands me a second trophy and an oversized check.

I can barely process her words through the euphoria flooding my system.

Everything I dreamed of is happening all at once.

Some of the people here have been participating in chili competitions for decades...

and I won. My mind is in overdrive as I process this, that newbie me and my grandpa's recipe swept the competition. I can't wait to tell my family!

I'm making my way back to Amos when a man in a crisp suit and a silver bolero tie approaches me, business card already extended.

Behind him stand two other representatives from companies I recognize from the fair's sponsor list. "Ms. Cooper, I'm Oscar Greenfield from Smithtown Distribution.

I'm very impressed with you and your chili.

Smithtown would love to discuss putting your recipe into commercial production. "

"You want to produce my grandfather's recipe?" The words come out breathless, disbelieving.

"We believe there's a significant market for genuine, family-based products. Your story, combined with the incredible flavor profile, is a perfect fit for us. Take my card and give me a call when you're home and settled. I look forward to talking with you."

Two other men approach me, and by the time I leave the ceremony with Amos, I have three separate offers to take Grandpa's chili to grocery stores across the country. The magazine feature will provide the credibility, but these contracts will make it a reality.

Amos stays at my side, his hand resting on the small of my back with possessive warmth. His pride radiates from every gesture, every look he gives me.

"I'm so proud of you," he murmurs against my ear as photographers capture the

moment. “Your grandfather would be over the moon.”

“I can’t believe this is real.” I lean into his solid warmth, grounding myself in his presence while my world spins with possibility.

“It’s real. You did this, Rebecca. You and that incredible recipe and the passion you put into every stir.”

The business cards feel substantial in my palm as I study the representatives still waiting patiently for my attention. Each one represents a different path forward, a different way to honor Grandpa’s legacy while building something sustainable for my future.

“What do you think?” I ask Amos quietly.

“I think you should talk to all of them. See what they’re offering, what they understand about preserving your grandpa’s recipe and legacy.” His thumb traces small circles on my back. “But Rebecca, whatever you decide, I’ll support you completely.”

The certainty in his voice makes my chest tight with emotion. This morning, we were navigating misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and I thought it was over. Now he’s talking about our future like it’s a given, like whatever paths I choose, he’ll be walking them beside me.

As the crowd begins to disperse, I stand in the middle of the fairgrounds holding trophies that represent everything I’ve worked toward. But looking at Amos beside me, his hazel eyes warm with pride and promise, I realize the greatest victory isn’t the competition results.

It’s finding the man who loves me, will go out of his way to support me, and vow to

build a life together.

“Ready to celebrate?” Amos asks, his hand sliding down to capture mine.

“More than ready.”

As we walk back toward the hotel, trophies balanced in my free arm and business cards tucked safely in my pocket, I’m floating on cloud nine. Everything I wanted has fallen into place, but more than that, I have Amos at my side.

Amos kicks the hotel room door closed behind us and immediately pulls me into his arms with an urgency that quickens my pulse. His mouth finds mine in a kiss that takes my breath away.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” I grab his shirt and pull him closer. “This whole thing started with you helping me with that stuck cart.”

“Best cart malfunction of my life.”

When he lifts me off my feet and spins me around, I laugh against his lips, giddy with success and overwhelming love for this man who’s changed everything about my future. The hotel room spins around us, but I know I’m safe in his arms.

“I love hearing you laugh like that.” He sets me down on the bed gently, his hands framing my face with loving tenderness. “Like you’re absolutely fearless.”

“You make me feel fearless.”

The words are true in ways that surprise me. A week ago, I was terrified of trusting again after the Kinwood Foods betrayal. Now I’m planning a future with a cowboy, two trophies, and multiple offers for distribution contracts.

“Rebecca.” The way he says my name, soft and wondering, makes heat pool low in my belly. “What we talked about this morning, about this being real—”

“It’s real.” I reach up to trace the line of his jaw, feeling the slight roughness of stubble against my fingertips.

His eyes darken with something deeper than desire. “I want to show you how real this is for me. How much you mean to me.”

When his mouth captures mine, heat spirals through my veins like liquid fire. His lips move against mine with deliberate slowness, each sweep of his tongue sending tremors through my core. The taste of him—coffee and something essentially masculine—makes me dizzy with want.

My fingers fumble with his shirt buttons, the small plastic discs slipping against my trembling fingers. When the cotton finally gives way, warm skin meets my palms. His heartbeat thunders beneath my fingertips, rapid and strong.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs, rough palms gliding beneath my blouse. Heat blooms everywhere he touches, his fingertips tracing fire along my ribs.

Cool air kisses my skin as he slides my shirt over my head. His sharp intake of breath makes my nipples tighten, awareness crackling between us like electricity.

His lips burn a path down my throat, each kiss sending shockwaves through my entire being. When his teeth graze that sensitive spot where neck meets shoulder, my back arches off the bed, a gasp tearing from my throat.

Gentle pressure guides me backward until soft cotton cradles my spine. Afternoon sunlight streams across my skin, warming everywhere his gaze lingers.

“You’re staring,” he says, and that crooked smile makes my heart skip.

“Can’t help it. You’re gorgeous.”

His cheeks flush at the compliment. Calloused fingertips map every curve as he undresses me slowly. Each caress burns deeper than the last, branding me with sensation I’ll carry forever.

“Tell me what you want,” he breathes against my ear, voice rough with restraint.

“You. All of you. Forever.”

Truth spills out before fear can stop it. Instead of retreating, he frames my face in warm palms, his hazel eyes blazing with fierce tenderness.

“Forever sounds perfect to me.”

Amos quickly undresses, then positions his body over mine. He bumps his thick cock against my slick, aching core, and I arch into him. He thrusts his cock into me, making me gasp as he fills me perfectly. He watches my face like I’m everything beautiful in this world.

“God, Rebecca.” His voice breaks, muscles trembling with control as he rocks his hips against mine, shuddering every time he plunges into me. “You feel incredible. Like coming home.”

Slow, deep thrusts steal my breath. Each withdrawal makes me ache, each return sends lightning through my nerves. His mouth captures mine, swallowing my desperate sounds.

“I love you.” The words tear from my throat as pleasure builds. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” His mouth finds mine, and he kisses me deeply, his tongue filling my mouth and teasing mine.

Heat floods through me at his confession. I need more—more control, more connection. With gentle pressure against his chest, I coax him to his back. “I want to be on top.”

Straddling his hips sends him deeper inside me, the new angle making stars burst behind my closed eyes. His palms burn against my skin as I rock over his body, finding a rhythm that has us both gasping.

“Look at you,” he breathes, wonder rough in his voice. “You look absolutely glorious astride me.”

Power courses through my veins at the worship in his eyes. I roll my hips, and the strangled sound he makes sends liquid fire straight to my core. I already feel my orgasm building, and I pick up the pace of my hips.

“Buck me, cowboy,” I whisper, meeting his heated gaze with challenge and invitation.

His response is immediate. He places one hand on my hip and holds another out for me to use for balance.

I weave my fingers through his, pleasure and love surging through me.

He drives into me with an urgent rhythm as he thrusts his hips under me, bucking as I ride him, and I chase the pleasure for both of us.

“That’s it, Spice Queen. Show me what you got.”

The command, combined with the friction, the angle, the way he thrusts up hard and faster, nearly making me lose my balance, makes me cry out as my orgasm explodes.

Pleasure crashes through my body in waves that leave me crying his name, trembling against his chest as aftershocks pulse through my core.

He follows with a hoarse shout, his body going rigid beneath mine as his release claims him. We collapse together, hearts hammering, skin slick with satisfaction.

“That was—” Words fail as I trace circles on his chest, marveling at the solid warmth beneath my palm.

“The beginning of forever.” Soft lips brush mine, tasting like contentment.

“So what happens now?” The question dances through my mind like champagne bubbles.

His voice rumbles against my ear. “I want to meet your family for Sunday dinner. I want to help you build your business. I want to wake up beside you every morning for the rest of my life.”

“Think we can handle each other’s real spice?”

“Bring it on, Spice Queen.” His grin is pure male satisfaction. “I’m ready for whatever heat you’re serving.”

I see my future as I look at this man who chose me over everything else. Not the fantasy I might have imagined, but something better: a real partnership with someone who sees my dreams as worth fighting for.

I love this man so much.

Thank you so much for reading “Buck Me, Cowboy” !

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I slide the signed contract across the mahogany conference table, my heart soaring as I watch Oscar Greenfield from Smithtown Distribution countersign the final page. The licensing deal is everything I dreamed of—Grandpa’s chili recipe will be in stores from here to Dallas, but it’s still exactly his recipe. No compromises, no cheap substitutes, no corporate trying to change the recipe. Just authentic Cooper family chili, made the right way.

“Congratulations, Ms. Cooper,” Oscar says, standing to shake my hand. “We’re honored to be working with you.”