



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



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Setting: Midland Empire State Fair & Rodeo; Billings, MT  
Circa: Late 1940s

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It was Fair Week in Billings, Montana. Thousands upon thousands of people had converged on the small town from all over the state, bringing the circus, vaudeville acts, bull riding, and motorcycle speed races. Maggie Vaughn, whose father helped organize the fair every year, loved the influx of vendors and performers. She thrived on the sweet smell of cotton candy and funnel cakes, and the nervous, excited energy of all of the attendees.

This year, the fairgrounds were bursting at the seams with fair-goers; the war was finally over and everyone wanted to get back to "normal." For so many Montanans, attending the fair was a tangible symbol that life was indeed moving on.

Maggie and her dearest friend Lorraine McGrath were headed to the motorcycle races. They were packed into the slow-moving crowd like sardines, shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, being jostled and bumped. A cowboy, who Maggie had spotted over at the bull riding arena a few moments earlier, had pushed his way through the throng of people to reach them. With a

confident, rather lopsided grin, the cowboy fell in beside Lorraine and tipped his cowboy hat to them both.

“How do, ladies?” he asked them.

“We do just fine.” Lorraine smiled at him in a way that showed off her dimples. She'd always known how to innocently flirt with men. But Maggie, being an unusually tall, somewhat gawky woman with bright red hair and freckles, was used to being overlooked by men. She couldn't flirt if her life depended on it.

“How do you do?” Lorraine asked the cowboy.

This cowboy wasn't the first man to notice Lorraine that day, and Maggie was sure he wouldn't be the last. Unlike her, Lorraine was everything men found attractive: petite, blond, with peaches-and-cream skin and an inviting smile.

Maggie glanced briefly at the cowboy; he was handsome enough in the face, but it was his eyes that really caught her attention. They were so shockingly blue and intense, they reminded her of the perfectly faceted sapphire earrings her father had given her last year for her birthday.

“I'm livin' the dream,” the cowboy answered Lorraine, still looking at her. “Now that I'm back stateside.”

“Oh!” Lorraine showed her dimples again. “Were you a soldier?”

“I was. Spent most of my time stationed in France.” The cowboy kept catching her eye. “But now I'm back to doin' what I love, rodeoin' and ranchin'.”

The minute the crowd began to disperse, and much to Maggie's surprise, the cowboy left Lorraine's side and was suddenly walking next to her.

“I'm Jed Brand,” he introduced himself.

“Maggie Vaughn,” she responded. “And this is my friend Lorraine.”

Jed acknowledged Lorraine, but then immediately turned his attention back to Maggie. “I've got to get back to the bulls. You're lookin' at first place, right here.”

Maggie liked the roughness in the cowboy's voice. He was a little bit shorter than her, but then again, there weren't that many men who weren't.

“When I win that prize money,” Jed continued, “I'd like to take you for a ride on that Ferris wheel over yonder.”

It took Maggie a second or two to realize that Jed Brand had fought his way through the crowd not to meet Lorraine, but to meet her. Had any man ever done that for her before?

Stunned, the only word she could get out of her typically talkative mouth was, "Alright."

Jed's smile widened with pleasure. He tipped his hat to her with a promise to find her later and then walked away from them with the bow-legged swagger of a man who'd spent his life in the saddle.

"Oh, my goodness, Maggie!" Lorraine squealed excitedly. "He's so handsome! And, he likes you!"

"Seems like it." Maggie watched the cowboy until he disappeared around a corner. "Isn't that the darndest thing?"