



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



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

The annual Midland Empire State Fair had been good to Jed Brand. When he'd drawn the meanest, nastiest bull in the pen, Bush Hog, Jed hadn't been so sure he could hang on for one second, much less eight. As it turned out, he'd darn well hung on long enough to have the first place ride of the day.

"That surely is the pertiest buckle I've ever laid eyes on," Buck Barnes, Jed's friend since they were just kids, told him.

Jed felt like King of the Midland Fair wearing his trophy, a fancy silver belt buckle, bigger than any he'd ever owned. "I'm mighty proud to have it."

It was true that Ol' Bush Hog had exacted his pound of flesh from him; Jed was bruised up and plenty sore. But, now he was the proud owner of a flashy new buckle and he had a wad of prize money just burnin' a hole clean through his pocket.

"I know we were plannin' on headin' back to Helena once we were done with the bulls..." Jed's eyes were busy scouring the crowd. "But, I promised a pretty lady I'd take her for a ride on the Ferris wheel if I won."

Buck was sauntering beside him, his hands stuffed in the front pockets of his faded blue chinos. "I ain't too worried about it; nothin' but work waitin' on me when I get back home."

"I hear that." Jed gave a quick nod to his friend.

Jed believed in two things: fate and luck. He had made it back to the states, alive and with all his limbs. He knew too many young men who'd made the trip back home in a body bag. That right there was positive proof that he was lucky.

But, when he'd spotted Maggie Vaughn, a tall woman with red hair and a face full of cinnamon-colored freckles, right after he finished his prize-winning ride on Bush Hog, now that was fate.

"There she is." Jed finally caught sight of the woman he'd been searching for. "There's Maggie."

The woman who had captured his attention was standing near the stage where Ernest Tubb was performing Walking the Floor Over You. Jed had never wanted to chase after a woman, but he had chased after Maggie without even thinking twice. Up close, she was even more striking than he'd imagined she would be. And, ever since that brief introduction, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her; even while they were presenting him with the trophy buckle and the prize money, he'd had gettin' back to Maggie on his mind.

"Hey, now," Buck exclaimed. "Who's the blond?"

"Maggie's friend."

Buck's brown eyes had widened with infatuation; unlike Jed, Buck seemed to fall in love as often as he changed shirts. "She gotta name?"

Jed was distracted with Maggie and wished Buck would be quiet. There were a ton of people still standing between them and he didn't want to risk losing sight of her.

"Lucy?" Jed tried to remember the friend's name. "No. I don't know. It starts with an 'L'. That's all I can tell you."

Buck was busy tucking the tails of his shirt into the waistband of his pants. “Do I got any dirt left on my face?”

His buddy had managed to ride his bull for seven seconds and some change before he had been catapulted over the bull’s head and face-planted in the dirt.

“Nah,” Jed said offhandedly.

“I think I’m ready for romance,” Buck said out loud, to himself as much to Jed.

Jed didn’t respond; his focus was on getting Maggie’s attention. He cupped his hands over his mouth when he was close enough for her to hear him. “Maggie Vaughn!”

The object of his infatuation turned her head and he was, once again, bowled over by Maggie’s striking, angular features and those wide-set moss-green eyes.

“Hi, Jed.” She gifted him with the smallest of smiles when he finally reached her side. “Did you win first place?”

“You bet I did.” Jed puffed up his chest like a proud peacock showing off for his lady. “Now... how’s ‘bout that Ferris wheel ride?”