



JOANNA SIMS ROMANCE

PRESENTS



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

Billings, Montana native Maggie Vaughn hadn't really expected the cowboy to keep his promise to take her on a Ferris wheel ride if he won first place in the bull-riding contest. And yet, as promised, and much to her surprise, Jed Brand had found her at the Ernest Tubb show. While the famous country singer belted out the final stanzas of his massive hit "Walking the Floor Over You," Maggie was walking beside Jed toward the Ferris wheel.

"I got back to you as fast I could manage," Jed told her. "I was mighty worried I wouldn't be able to find you again."

Maggie, who had been told all her life that she was outspoken to a fault, found herself tongue-tied when she was next to Jed. Being an unusually tall, lanky, freckle-faced redhead hadn't made

her popular with the young men in her town. In fact, she'd never even been asked out on a date. She'd accepted long ago that her life was going to be about books and pursuing a higher education; the label of spinster was a mantle she had shouldered years ago. The sudden appearance of this cowboy suitor with the lopsided grin, intense blue eyes, and infectious smile was unnerving.

"I'm glad you did," she responded with a shy smile of her own.

Jed walked beside, proud as a rooster, with the bow-legged swagger of a man who had started young in the saddle. When he smiled back at her, she noticed that he had the smallest chip on one of his front teeth. That little chip, that little imperfection, endeared Jed to her in a way that nothing else had.

"Two tickets for a ride on that Ferris wheel." Jed pulled some of his cash winnings out of his pocket and exchanged the money for their tickets.

The cowboy held up the tickets for her to see. "You ready?"

"I've been ready all day." She chose honesty; playing coy wasn't a skill she had cultivated.

Her honest response garnered a broad smile from Jed that reached his clear, sapphire-blue eyes; he looked at her with such interest, such intensity, that Maggie felt a flush creep up her neck. Embarrassed by the naked appreciation in the cowboy's gaze, Maggie looked away and caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd.

"Amanda!" She called out to the young woman visiting her family from South Africa.

"Maggie!" Amanda greeted her with a smile and a hug. "I'm having the best time!"

Amanda was a classically pretty woman, with silky, chocolate-brown eyes, a slender face, full lips, and the prettiest porcelain complexion Maggie had ever seen. Amanda's father, a cattle rancher from Vaalwater, a small town in the Limpopo area of South Africa, had brought his daughter to the other side of the world to acquire a White Park bull for his herd. When she first arrived, Amanda hadn't been so sure about Montana, but now, by the glowing expression on her face, it seemed she had experienced a change of heart.

"I'm so glad." Maggie gave one of Amanda's hands a quick squeeze before she introduced the woman with the light, Afrikaner accent to Jed.

Jed tipped his hat and was about to make a comment, when another cowboy walked up beside Amanda carrying a soda pop.

“Howdy, Jed.” The young man handed the bottle of soda to Amanda, who blushed as she looked up at the cowboy.

Jed greeted the young man enthusiastically, clasping his hand and hugging him. “When did you get here, Ben?”

The cowboy named Ben, as it turned out, was Jed’s younger brother. And, from the looks of things, Ben and Amanda were sweet on each other. They chatted for a few minutes longer before they all parted ways, with Jed resting his hand ever so briefly on the small of Maggie's back as he guided them through the crowd. Maggie couldn’t believe how excited she felt as she sat down on one of the Ferris wheel benches next to Jed Brand.

As the Ferris wheel began to move, and she felt the breeze blowing her hair around her face, Maggie said to Jed, “Thank you, Jed. I’m having a wonderful time.”

High above the crowds, Maggie once again spotted Amanda and Ben walking toward the main performance stage.

“I think your brother likes my friend Amanda,” she told Jed.

Jed nodded, but his eyes weren’t on the crowd—they were on her. “I like you.”

Once again, Jed had rendered her speechless with his unvarnished interest in her. What was it about this cowboy that made it impossible for her to formulate the simplest of sentences?

When their bench reached the top of the Ferris wheel for the second time, Jed asked her, “Do you have a sweetheart, Maggie?”

“No.” She shook her head with a laugh, “No.”

“Well, then,” Jed said in all seriousness, “I’d surely like to throw my hat in the ring for that job.”