

A July Bride
A Year of Weddings Novella

BETH WISEMAN

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A July Bride

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Interior design: James A. Phinney



To Daddy





Acknowledgments



I'm honored to be included among the fabulous authors who all contributed to this collection—*A Year of Weddings*. Who doesn't love a wedding? And this was such a fun story to write.

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It's an honor to dedicate this book to one of the finest men I've ever known, my father. A romantic at heart who was married to my mother for fifty-four years. Rest in peace, Daddy. I miss you every single day.





Prologue



Alyssa Pennington grasped the crescent bouquet of orchids with both hands, careful to hold the flowers slightly below her waist the way the florist had suggested. Her father looped his arm in hers, and when he whispered, “I love you, Daughter,” she brushed away a happy tear. She was sure Dad had never looked more handsome in his black tuxedo, crisp white shirt, and the red rose boutonniere Alyssa had pinned to his lapel an hour ago. His dark hair, graying at the temples, was freshly cut, and the familiar aroma of his Old Spice aftershave calmed her jittery excitement. A little.

Until recently, her father had been the number-one man in her life. But he’d happily stepped into second place when Brendan Myers proposed nine months ago. And now, on this July afternoon in La Grange, Texas, she would profess her love for Brendan in front of their families and friends.

The scene was playing out as she’d imagined it for years, exactly as planned. All the attendants were in place, arrayed





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across the front of the church Alyssa had grown up in. Her friend Sherry stood beaming in the matron-of-honor dress they'd let out—twice—to accommodate her pregnancy. Little Raelyn and Joshua had performed their duties as flower girl and ring bearer perfectly. And there was Brendan in a white tuxedo with tails, his brown hair bronzed a tawny gold from his work at Lenny Wick's ranch. Even at a distance, those deep brown eyes seemed to see inside her soul. Pastor Dean stood beside him, holding his Bible with both hands. Soon Alyssa Pennington would be Mrs. Brendan Myers.

Mrs. St. Claire started the bridal march, and everyone stood. Dad tried to ease them forward, but Alyssa froze, unable to force one foot in front of the other. Unfazed, he reached down, gently pulled one of her hands free, and squeezed it. Three squeezes, and she released the breath she was holding. Still looking forward, she squeezed back three times. They had started doing that in church, this church, when she was a little girl. The tradition had stuck, and they both knew three squeezes meant "I love you."

"It's normal to be nervous," he whispered as he took her arm again and they stepped forward. He kept them at a slow, steady pace down the aisle, each pew decorated with white baby's breath, greenery, and white bows. It was her moment. The moment every young woman dreams about.

She passed Glenda Hightower on her left. Glenda got credit for Alyssa's hair on this special day. She had managed to take Alyssa's unruly dark curls and tame them into a beautiful updo beneath her veil. Alyssa smiled at her friend, then noticed Bob Shanks to her right. Bob had been her first boyfriend when she was in the seventh grade. Now he was happily



married to Amy, and Raelyn and Joshua were their four-year-old twins. Alyssa glanced at the people she loved on each side of the aisle—around two hundred—but she couldn't keep her eyes from drifting back to her soon-to-be husband. The most handsome and wonderful man on the planet.

But as she drew close to him, something twisted in her heart, a heaviness she would remember for the rest of her life. Pastor Dean asked, "Who gives this woman to this man?" As planned, her father said, "Her mother and I." But that part was a blur, like jumbled voices echoing in a tunnel of her brain that wasn't tuned in.

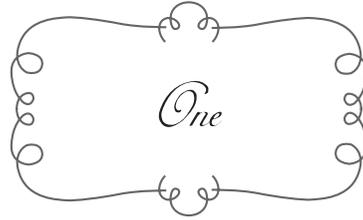
All she saw at that moment was the sweat pouring down both sides of Brendan's face and the tears welling in his eyes as he whispered how sorry he was. *For what?*

A long, brittle silence loomed between them like a heavy mist, and Alyssa couldn't breathe.

"I can't do this," he finally said.

And he bolted out of the church.





Alyssa lifted her wedding dress onto the counter and handed the hanger to Loretta Klatt, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

"Hon, are you sure 'bout this? You love this dress. You've been eyeing it for years, and it fits you like a dream. Sure you don't want to keep it, just in case?" Loretta draped the dress over one arm and sighed as she glanced up at the wall. Hundreds of photos hung there, all brides that Loretta had dressed and sent down the aisle in the forty years she'd owned the shop. Alyssa had assumed her own bridal photo would be hanging there by now.

"No, thank you." She nodded to make it definite. "It's been two months. I'm not getting married. Not to Brendan anyway. Maybe never." She pulled her eyes from Loretta's and hung her head for a few moments before she looked back up to see Loretta hanging Alyssa's beautiful dress on a rack behind her. She blinked a few times, resolved that there



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would be no more tears. She took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Thank you, Loretta. For taking the dress back."

Loretta stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jeans, her plain white button-up shirt straining against a full bosom. For someone who made a living dressing people in wedding attire, Loretta was not exactly a walking advertisement for her business. Her long gray hair hung to her waist, and her short cropped bangs were cut high above gray eyebrows.

"I'm just so sorry about what happened. I've seen my share of couples, believe you me, and I really thought you and Brendan were the real thing. If ever a man was crazy about a girl . . ." Loretta shook her head and frowned, bringing together a road map of wrinkles.

Alyssa wasn't sure how much more pity she could swim in. She was drowning in it. Forcing a smile—again—she said, "Evidently not." She gave a quick wave before she walked out of the shop. As the bell on the door clinked against the glass, she was reminded how many times she'd been in and out of Loretta's store for fittings, to choose bridesmaid dresses, or just to chat with Loretta about her wedding.

Her wedding to Brendan Myers. The only man she'd ever loved. But now hated.



Brendan counted out the last of three hundred dollars to Rudy Schmutz.

Rudy shook his head. "I'll take your money, but I can't promise it'll do any good." He stuffed the bills into one back pocket and pulled a can of chewing tobacco from the other.



He put a pinch between his cheek and gum. "She ain't gonna get back with you, fella. You humiliated that girl in front of the whole town."

"I'm not giving up. Ever." Brendan looked up at the blue sky above, imagining the banner trailing behind Randy's crop duster and the look of surprise and wonder on Alyssa's face. "Now remember what I said. You gotta fly over Monument Hill at two o'clock next Saturday. That's when they start the reenactment. Alyssa will be there for sure. Her dad makes sure the family goes to that stuff."

Rudy shrugged his broad, bony shoulders. "Whatever you say." He spit out a brown stream, then raised his bushy brown eyebrows. The guy was about fifty, but he looked more like eighty to Brendan. His face was weathered, he walked with a limp—supposedly from falling off a bull—and he was always scowling. But he was the only guy with a Pawnee crop duster who was willing to take the job at a price Brendan could semiafford.

Brendan had gotten back the deposit he'd put down on a small house for him and Alyssa, but he'd given it to his parents on top of the rent he already paid them. At the time, that had seemed like the right thing to do, especially since his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. But based on the amount of booze in the house, he didn't think the extra money was going toward his mother's health care. He'd already started putting money away for another deposit. Rentals in small towns didn't come along often, but he wanted to be ready when one did. He really needed his own place. Another reason he shouldn't be spending money on stuff like banners.

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Not that that would stop him.

"I have to get back to work before Lenny gets back from the Lions Club meeting." His rancher boss was a great guy, but Lenny expected a full day's work for a fair wage, and Brendan had always given Lenny a hundred percent. It wasn't just a matter of being a good employee. Brendan loved the work, especially tending to the horses.

Rudy chuckled as he limped back to his truck. "Shoulda just married the girl when you had the chance."

Brendan pushed back the rim of his Stetson, a Christmas gift from Alyssa. "I know that, Rudy. And I aim to get her back before it's too late."



Alyssa found Sherry at the back of the café in the booth where they always sat. Her blond hair was braided into pigtails, which only made her chubby cheeks look even rounder. She waved and then stood awkwardly to greet Alyssa with a hug.

"Are you okay?" Sherry eased herself back against the bench seat and folded her hands across her enlarged belly. "That couldn't have been easy, returning the dress." Sherry still had another few weeks until her due date, but Alyssa's lifelong friend looked like she was about to pop any minute.

"It went pretty much like I expected. Loretta tried to talk me out of it, but she took the dress back in the end. That dream is over. Every wedding gift has been returned, every last wedding detail undone. That was the last item on the list. Time to move on." Alyssa slid into the seat and put her purse beside her. "What about you? You look miserable."

She picked up one of the paper menus that was already on the table. Not that she needed it. She always ordered the same thing—a tuna melt with a side of fruit.

Sherry sighed. “All that stuff they say about glowing during pregnancy . . . well, it’s not true. The first four months, I threw up. And the last four, I’ve spent unable to see my toes and with a waddle that would make any penguin proud.”

Alyssa grinned. She knew lunch with her former matron of honor would be the perfect thing to do after returning her wedding dress. “Well, you don’t have much longer. Another few weeks and we’ll be holding Monroe Junior.”

“You do realize how much I love my husband, don’t you? Why else would I let that man name our firstborn Monroe?” She shook her head. “I’m afraid li’l Monroe Modenstein is going to be teased his entire life.”

“I doubt it. He’ll probably be a big boy like his daddy. No one will pick on him.” Everyone in town loved Sherry’s husband. He was six foot seven and a tad heavy, a size that had served him well on the football field all through high school. He was a big old teddy bear, though, and he adored Sherry, who barely reached five foot tall.

“I’ll have a double cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake.” Sherry spied off her order to the waitress. From the time she’d found out she was pregnant, Sherry had taken that as the go-ahead to indulge in all the dietary luxuries she’d never allowed herself before. “Oh, and one of those brownie parfaits.”

Alyssa slapped her menu closed. “I’ll have the same.”

Sherry’s eyes widened. “You’re not pregnant *too*, are

you?” She giggled. Alyssa’s best friend knew good and well that Alyssa and Brendan had never done the act.

“It’s time for some changes.” Alyssa sat taller. “I’ll start slow with a new lunch selection.”

“So tell me,” Sherry said as she shifted her weight in the seat. “What has Brendan done lately to win you back?”

Alyssa slouched into her seat. “Can’t we talk about baby clothes or diaper choices . . . or anything besides Brendan?”

Sherry quickly covered her mouth, then burped. “Good grief. I’ve got more gas than a flatulent linebacker.”

Alyssa laughed. “Or we can talk about your gastric issues.”

“Ugh. Not a good topic. So are you going to tell me or not? You know I live to hear about Brendan’s shenanigans.”

Sometimes Alyssa wished she could leave La Grange, even if it was just for a while. She feared she would always be the girl who got dumped at the altar, and Brendan was only keeping the embarrassing story alive by trying to woo her back. “He’s making a fool of himself,” she finally said. “My dad went and talked to him last week and told him to quit sending things to the house.”

Sherry smiled. “I think it’s romantic, all those flowers he keeps sending.”

“Last week he sent me a kitten with a note that said, ‘You make my heart purr.’ Can you imagine?”

Sherry laughed out loud. “He’s so goofy.”

Alyssa sighed. It was one of the things she’d loved about Brendan. “Well, he needs to stop, and that’s what Dad went to tell him. To leave me alone.” She paused. “What kills me is that he doesn’t have the money to spend on things like that. Especially now that his mom is sick.”

"Aw, poor guy. He's made it clear how much he regrets what he did. Can't you find it in your heart to forgive him and give it another shot?"

Alyssa shook her head. "I've forgiven him already. But I just can't trust him." She drew in a big gulp of air, then let it out slowly. "I just want to get on with my life, and he's making that impossible."

"Well, I think you're making a mistake. Monroe said that all the boys were ribbing him at the bachelor party, joking about the end of the good life and all that." She lifted one eyebrow. "Not my Monroe, of course, but the others. And you know how those boys get when they're together sometimes. Brendan was probably already nervous to be stepping up to the plate, but I'm sure those guys were partly responsible for running him off the field. And then there's Brendan's family situation."

Alyssa was well aware of Brendan's dysfunctional family. The whole town was. She and Sherry were quiet as the waitress set their food down. Then Alyssa said, "None of that is reason enough for leaving the woman you love at the altar. I don't care how bad the guys were trash talking about marriage. And I know how afraid Brendan was of turning out like his parents. We'd talked about that."

"I just think you're hurting yourself by not giving him another chance." Sherry took a giant bite of her burger and hadn't quite finished chewing when she added, "He's never gonna give up."

"Well, he's going to have to."

Alyssa was finally able to veer the conversation in another direction, and Sherry spent the latter part of their lunch

talking about her upcoming labor and delivery. "Monroe knows I have a high tolerance for pain. I don't expect I'll be needing all those drugs they offer up."

"Maybe have them on standby. You know, just in case." Alyssa dabbed at her mouth with the napkin as she recalled Sherry's trip to the dentist last year. Alyssa had taken her to get a tooth extracted, and she wasn't so sure about Sherry's high tolerance for pain.

Alyssa let the last of the brownie parfait settle against her palate, savoring it, before they split the bill.

When they got outside, Alyssa hugged her friend. "I knew you would cheer me up, Sherry. Thanks for meeting me for lunch."

Sherry chuckled. "That's what I do, you know. I *eat*. All the time." She gave a quick wave and started walking toward the bank where she worked. Alyssa took off in the other direction, and she was almost to her car when someone called out her name. She turned around, brought a hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun, and peered at the gorgeous man approaching her from down the block.

"Hey, Dalton," she said. "If you're looking for my brother, he's with Dad at the fairgrounds."

Dalton sauntered up to her. Her brother's friend was possibly the best-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on, and Alyssa had spent her first seventeen years on earth adoring him from afar. Until Brendan. Even now, the man could make her pulse quicken. He'd always been way out of her league, though. In high school he'd dated every cheerleader

until he'd finally latched on to Pamela Herring. Gorgeous Pamela Herring. They'd even kept dating when Pam went away to school in Houston.

But gorgeous Pamela, apparently, had dumped Dalton sometime in the spring—and by text message. Alyssa remembered thinking that was really cold. And who would dump Dalton Landreth in the first place?

"I wasn't looking for Alex." Dalton smiled. "But I'm glad I ran into you. I was going to call you."

"Oh?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me next Saturday."

"Uh, I . . . uh . . ." Despite everything with Brendan, it felt like a betrayal to even consider a date with another man.

"Just dinner." Dalton took a step closer. "We can see how it goes. I know we're both coming out of something, but . . ." He shrugged. "I'd really like to take you out."

Alyssa wanted to say yes. And that was confusing. Shouldn't she still be mourning the demise of her relationship with Brendan? But then she remembered. "Oh, I can't. The whole family promised my dad we'd go to Monument Hill next Saturday for Texas Heroes Day. You know, they're having the battle reenactment, and I think the county judge will be there, and the high school band, and . . ." She paused. "It goes on all weekend, but I think we're leaving the house around one on Saturday. It usually runs into the early evening. Anyway, I can't miss it."

"Well, maybe we could go there together and get dinner afterward."

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Hmm. Here they were, both single for the first time since junior high. She thought for a few moments. *Why not?*

“Yes. I’d like that,” she said. Maybe Dalton Landreth was exactly what she needed to put Brendan out of her mind. Maybe even for good.



Two



Dalton walked along the sidewalk of the town square toward the bank. Twice he'd turned back to sneak another look at Alyssa before she got into her car. Finally, a real date with her. So many times he'd had dinner with Alex, Alyssa, and their parents, and in the past few years it had been torture to watch Alyssa leave to go meet Brendan Myers later in the evening.

Everyone had been devastated the day Brendan left Alyssa at the altar. Everyone but Dalton. And he planned to give it everything he had to win her over.

He glanced at his watch and realized he only had ten minutes before the bank closed. He picked up his pace and hurried into the building, glad to see that Sherry was working today. He placed his paycheck and deposit slip on the counter and wondered if Sherry knew about the dab of ketchup on her chin. He smiled as he touched his own chin. "You've got, uh . . ."

She quickly swiped at the ketchup with her hand. "Well, that's what I get for inhaling my food." She logged Dalton's deposit and handed him the receipt. "I don't usually take a lunch on Saturdays since we close at one, but this small person inside of me was hungry." She pointed to her tummy and smiled. "So I grabbed a quick bite with Alyssa."

"How's she doing?" Dalton knew Sherry was Alyssa's best friend. "Do you think she's over Brendan yet?"

Sherry was quiet as she finished the transaction, then said, "She'll never be over Brendan. I don't care what she says." She shook her head as she handed him a receipt. "And Brendan is certainly going to extremes to try to win her back."

Dalton had already heard about Brendan's tactics to win Alyssa back. He was a good guy, but he'd had his chance. "Well, I'm going to hope you're wrong about her never being over the guy, because I'm taking her to Monument Hill next Saturday and then to dinner afterwards."

Sherry's eyes widened. "Really? She didn't mention that at lunch."

"I just asked. And she said yes."

"Huh. I didn't know you had an interest in Alyssa."

Dalton smiled. "I've always had an interest in Alyssa. The timing just hasn't ever been right."

Sherry grunted. "I'm not sure the timing is good right now either." She smiled. "Sorry to tell you that, Dalton, but I don't want you to get your hopes up where Alyssa is concerned."

"It's just one date. No big deal." He tried to sound casual, even though his hopes were definitely up. It was unforgivable what Brendan had done to Alyssa, and Dalton wanted to help

her get over it. He grinned at Sherry. "Aren't you due like any day now?"

Sherry scrunched her face into a scowl. "Dalton Landreth, I know I'm huge, but that is not something a lady wants to hear. I have a few more weeks."

"I—I didn't mean anything by it. I think you look very pretty. Glowing." Everyone loved Sherry, and Dalton didn't think there was a happier couple than her and Monroe.

She rolled her eyes and huffed. "If I hear that word one more time—glowing—I might puke. And Lord knows I've done enough of that throughout this pregnancy." She put her hands on the counter and leaned forward—as much as she could with her rounded belly. "Pregnant women don't glow. We vomit and waddle. And in case Monroe hasn't mentioned it, we get a wee bit mean at times too."

"Now, Sherry. I can't imagine you being mean."

"Oh, don't give me that. You've known me all my life." She waved a hand. "Now go. Prosper. Have a great weekend—or whatever. I need to start getting this place shut down so I can go home and go to bed." She rolled her eyes again. "That's also what pregnant women do. When we're not eating, we sleep."

Dalton chuckled before he left the bank, a little bounce in his step. He couldn't wait until next Saturday. He glanced behind him as he walked out the main entrance and saw Sherry on the phone. Dalton figured she was calling Alyssa to get the scoop. By next Saturday everyone in town would know Dalton was taking Alyssa out.



Alyssa put the rolls on the table, then sat down when her mother did. Her brother Alex said the blessing, then her father started talking about the reenactment the following Saturday.

"I heard that two of the local radio stations will be covering it—and Fox News might even be there." Dad scooped a generous helping of greens onto his plate. Mom shook her head. "I still don't understand the allure of these reenactments. All you grown men getting dressed up and pretending to shoot each other." She grinned. "Returning to your childhoods perhaps? Like playing cowboys and Indians?"

"There won't be any Indians, Corrine. It's a tribute to the men who died during the Dawson Massacre and the Mier Expedition in 1842." Dad turned to Alyssa. "You're coming, right?"

Alyssa nodded as she swallowed a bite of roast. "And I have a date."

All eyes shot in her direction.

"With who?" Alex halted his fork midway to his mouth.

"Dalton Landreth."

Her mother actually clapped her hands together. "Oh, that's wonderful."

Alyssa's father gave a nod of approval also, but Alex just stared at her. "I don't think that's a good idea. For either one of you."

"Well, it's not your choice to make," Alyssa told her brother. "And he's your friend. Why isn't it a good idea?"

"Uh, well, I don't think it takes a brain surgeon to figure that out. You're suffering from a broken heart over Brendan, and I don't think Dalton's over Pam yet." He pointed his fork at Alyssa. "Someone's gonna get hurt."

"Alex, it's just one date. I think everyone should be glad that I'm trying to move on. It doesn't mean that Dalton and I will be anything more than friends."

"Yeah, whatever." Alex shook his head as he stabbed at a piece of meat.

"Yeah, whatever," Alyssa mumbled under her breath.

"That's enough. You're both too old for that kind of bickering." Mom smiled at Alyssa. "Family supports family, no matter what. And if you want to go out with Dalton, do it."

Dad pushed back his chair. "Apparently that talk I had with Brendan last week didn't do a lick of good—more flowers arrived for you this morning." He pointed to the living room. "I put them with the others. Looks like a funeral parlor in there."

The mention of Brendan's name still brought a lump to Alyssa's throat. "Maybe he'll give up once he hears I'm going out with Dalton."

Sherry had called her the minute Dalton left the bank this morning, singing Dalton's praises as if Alyssa didn't already know how great he was. She wondered if Brendan would be at Monument Hill next Saturday. Maybe it would do him good to see her out with someone else.

Especially someone like Dalton.



Brendan ate his dinner on a paper plate on the front porch. He could still hear the yelling inside, but over the years he'd learned to tune it out. One drunk in the house would be bad enough, but when both of them were drinking, it just

wasn't safe to be around them. Both Brendan's older brothers had taken off at seventeen, and one of them hadn't made a very good go of it. Last he heard, Danny was doing time in a Houston jail. Craig was married and living in Eagle Lake, less than an hour's drive away. But he'd pretty much washed his hands of Mom and Dad. Brendan didn't blame him.

He jumped when the screen door opened but was relieved when his mother emerged. His father could be nasty when he drank.

"Why're you sitting out here?" Mom sagged into the other rocking chair on the front porch of their old house.

Brendan shrugged.

"Your dad had a bad day at work today, so he's in a mood." Mom kicked the rocker into action.

"You shouldn't be drinking. That's what the doctor said."

"Cancer doesn't grow 'cause you drink a couple of beers. Don't make a big thing out of it. I just need a little help to deal with your father." She leaned her head back against the high-back rocker and closed her eyes. She had bags beneath her eyes, and she was really pale. And Brendan knew good and well that she'd had more than two beers.

"Mom, it's not about making the cancer grow. It's about keeping you healthy enough to fight this stuff."

"Hmm." She rocked a little more. "I'll think about it."

"I hope so." He finished the last bite of his chicken and set his plate on the small table in between the rocking chairs. "You should go to bed now, Mom. You look tired."

She stopped the rocker but didn't get up. "You having any luck winning Alyssa back?"

"No." Brendan figured Alyssa's parents were glad their

daughter wasn't marrying into this family—though they'd always been really good to Brendan, assuring him that he was no reflection of his parents, that he'd be able to carve his own path in this world. Brendan couldn't think of a better family to marry into. And he knew he'd never love another woman the way he loved Alyssa. But he'd blown it.

"Maybe it's just as well you didn't marry that girl. We're from different sides of the tracks, so to speak. And her people always seemed a bit uppity if you ask me. They aren't like us."

Thank goodness! "They're not uppity, and it didn't matter to them which side of the tracks anyone was on." He paused, thinking this conversation was pointless. "I love Alyssa. And I would've worked hard to take care of her. It would've worked out."

"We'll never know now, will we?"

Brendan bit back an angry response. The Lord was surely testing him these days. Mom and Dad usually managed to keep it together on Sunday mornings, and ironically they'd made sure that Brendan and his brothers went to church regularly. But the things that went on behind closed doors at his house would shock most people in La Grange. Folks around here just thought they knew everything about the Myers family. Even Alyssa didn't know the half of it. His parents were basically living the same way both sets of grandparents had lived. It was a pattern Brendan was determined to break.

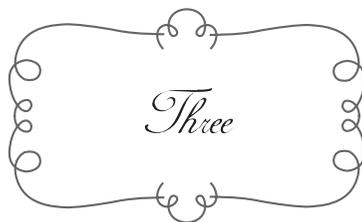
"Love ain't always enough," his mother finally whispered. She sighed, opened her eyes, and pushed herself up from the chair. She gazed down at Brendan, and Brendan knew what was coming. First his parents would fight, then the crying

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would start. Mom covered her face with her hands as her shoulders shook. "I'm sorry we ain't been better parents."

Brendan slowly got up, put his arm around his mother, and edged her toward the door. "I know, Mom. Let's get you to bed."

They tiptoed across the living room where Brendan's father was snoring on the couch, and they both jumped when he sat up. But after eyeing them both and scowling, he finally lay back down. Neither Brendan nor his mother moved until his father started to snore again.



Alyssa snapped a few pictures of her father in his battle attire while her mother gathered gallon jugs of sweet tea, her contribution to the event.

"Alex, put these in the back of the truck, will you? Then we need to get on the road." Mom turned to Alyssa. "Is Dalton picking you up?"

Alyssa took one more picture, then nodded. "He should be here any minute." Mom smiled her approval. She loved Brendan and had been like a second mother to him. But if another suitor was on the horizon, Mom was glad it was Dalton.

Alyssa wasn't sure about her father, though. Dad had formed a strong bond with Brendan when Brendan worked for him at the feed mill, before he and Alyssa had even started dating. Dad had admired him for his hard work and dedication to the business, and he'd been crushed when Brendan walked out—not to mention angry at him for hurting his daughter.

Dad had sold the mill a few years back, about the time Mom retired from teaching elementary school. Both her parents were enjoying their early retirement, though Dad spent a fair amount of time as the auctioneer for cattle sales and various fundraisers.

"I'm taking my own truck." Alex hefted a box filled with four gallon jugs and headed for the door.

Mom nodded, then turned to Alyssa. "Have fun today. I'm glad you're giving Dalton a chance. He's a great guy."

Alyssa smiled, but she was tempted to voice her mother's unspoken words: *a great guy with a great family*. Alyssa's parents had never complained about paying for the entire wedding. But Alyssa was sure Brendan's background still bothered Mom a little.

It was ten minutes after they all left when Dalton drove up in his red Silverado. He'd only had the truck a few months, a birthday gift from his parents for his twenty-first birthday. Dalton had grown up completely different from Brendan, but both men were hard workers. Dalton went to the community college half days but also put in long hours at the lumberyard in town. And he'd been fortunate to find a small farmhouse to rent about six miles out of town.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said as he walked up to the front porch. "You ready?"

"Yep." Alyssa had taken special care on her hair today and had it pinned up in a clip with tiny ringlets dangling on each side. She had on a new pink blouse and her best jeans. Brendan never took her anywhere without telling her how beautiful she looked. But Dalton just opened the door of the truck so she could get in without saying anything. It was

a first date, though, and it would be silly for her to expect Dalton to treat her the way Brendan had the past two years.

The parking lot at Monument Hill was almost full, and Dalton had to drive around until he found a spot on the far side of the lot.

They walked toward the festivities in the open area near the monument that gave the historic site its name. Alyssa was sure that God couldn't have blessed them with a prettier day. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, the high temperature for the day was seventy, and a gentle breeze swirled through the live oak trees. Like a postcard, she thought as she glanced around. She wasn't much of a history buff, but the site was one of her favorite places to visit. On most days it was quiet, with only a few tourists, and there were beautiful walking trails along the Colorado River atop the sandstone bluff. One of the trails led to the remains of the historic Kreische Brewery. Heinrich Kreische's house was still on the property as well.

She could see her father in the distance chatting with other like-minded reenactors, and several of the townsfolk had set up booths relevant to the 1840s. Some had artifacts on display, and others were selling jams, jellies, homemade noodles, and cookbooks. Alyssa recognized the aromas wafting through the air, and she was sure that somewhere on the grounds you could find sausage on a stick, funnel cakes, turkey legs, and cotton candy. She saw many people she knew as she scanned the crowd, but there was only one person she was looking for. She hoped Brendan was here, and she hoped it stung like a hornet for him to see her with Dalton.

"Well, don't you two make a handsome couple." Sherry waddled up to Alyssa and Dalton. "Love your shirt, Alyssa.

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Pink has always been your best color.” Then she turned to Dalton and eyed him up and down. “And that navy blue shirt of yours and tight jeans almost make you worthy of Alyssa’s company.”

“Really, Sherry? Did you really just say that?” After all these years, Alyssa was surprised that Sherry could still shock her.

Dalton chuckled as he pushed back the rim of his cowboy hat. “I know that I’ll have to earn your approval, Ms. Sherry.” He winked at Sherry, then glanced at Alyssa, his magnetic blue eyes locking with hers. “And I will,” he added.

Alyssa pulled her eyes from his, feeling a blush creep into her cheeks. Dalton turned back to Sherry and asked her where Monroe was. As her friends fell into a conversation about food, Alyssa studied Dalton for a few moments. He was much taller than Brendan and, unlike Brendan, had perfectly white, straight teeth. Brendan’s not-quite-perfect teeth had always lent him a boyish look. It was something Alyssa had always loved—Brendan’s smile.

Alyssa’s date had a beautifully proportioned body with broad shoulders, and he carried himself with a confidence Alyssa assumed came with such good looks. Dalton’s hair was dark, his complexion olive, and with that black Resistol hat he could have been a cowboy model for a truck commercial. Alyssa had wanted to get Brendan a hat like that for Christmas last year. But her budget had only allowed for a Stetson, not the four hundred dollar number Dalton was sporting. Brendan had loved her gift, though. Alyssa could still recall the look on his face when he opened the box with the Stetson.

"Are you even hearing what I'm saying?" Sherry leaned in close, and Alyssa realized that she'd zoned out of the conversation with thoughts of Brendan.

"Sorry. What?" Alyssa felt her face reddening again and she looked over at Dalton, who was looking down at his boots. Gorgeous Tony Lama ostrich boots that cost a fortune. Alyssa remembered her brother drooling over them when Dalton was at their house for dinner a few months ago.

Sherry shook her head. "Never mind. I see Monroe heading my way with my funnel cake. And I'm going to meet him halfway, then dive into that thing with a vengeance." She pointed at Alyssa and Dalton and winked again. "You kids have fun." She turned and headed toward her husband.

Dalton smiled as he scratched his cheek. They both watched Sherry picking up the pace as she got closer to Monroe. "Do you think she knows that once the baby comes, she's not going to look like the same Sherry as before she got pregnant?"

Alyssa laughed. "I know. I keep thinking the same thing. She's always been so tiny, but she's really ballooned during her pregnancy. She's not going to like all that leftover baby fat."

Dalton's eyes were still on Sherry and Monroe. "I don't think Monroe would care. Those two have something really special."

Alyssa watched Monroe hold the funnel cake while Sherry took a bite. "I couldn't agree more. And I think they will be great parents too." Her eyes involuntarily began searching the area again.

"He's over there." Dalton pointed to his left. Sure enough, there stood Brendan talking with a group of other men. And once again, Alyssa felt herself blushing.

"I wasn't looking for Brendan." She shrugged. "If that's what you were thinking."

"Yeah, you were." Dalton turned to face her. "And that's okay, Alyssa. It really is." He shifted his weight, but kept his eyes on hers. "Listen, I know you're not over Brendan. And I'm willing to play this however you want to."

Alyssa opened her mouth to tell him he was wrong, that she was over Brendan, but she bit her lip, not wanting to be guilty of another lie.

Dalton gently latched onto her shoulders. "I like you, Alyssa. I want to get to know you better. I know two months isn't long enough for you to be over Brendan—believe me, I know. All I'm asking for is a shot." He spoke to her softly and added a smile. "But for today, you tell me how you want to handle our being together, and I'll go along with whatever you want."

"I—I'm not out with you just to make Brendan jealous." It was true, but if her being with Dalton hurt Brendan to the core, then so be it. No sooner had she had the thought than her chest tightened, and another round of mixed emotions swallowed her up. *I don't ever want to hurt Brendan. Even though he destroyed me.*

"I know that's not the only reason you're out with me." Dalton dropped his hands to his sides, then hooked his thumbs in his back pockets. "But I'm thinking you might still want to get in a few digs with Brendan." He reached for her hand, and started walking in the direction of the circle of men where Brendan stood.

"No, let's don't go over there." Alyssa dug her feet into the grassy area, rooting them beneath her.

"That's fine." Dalton still had hold of her hand, but he stopped when she did. "We can leave if you want to."

Alyssa shook her head. "No. My dad would be really disappointed."

Dalton squeezed her hand. "Okay. Just know that you can talk to me. I don't want either one of us to have to pretend to be someone we're not. It's okay to be nervous about seeing your ex out in public, especially when you're on a date."

Alyssa's pulse slowed down a bit. "Thank you. Does it show? That I'm a little nervous?"

Dalton squeezed her hand again. "You wouldn't be normal if you weren't. I remember when Pam brought this other guy home with her for the weekend. It ate me up, even though I didn't want to get back together with her."

She squeezed his hand back and recalled what Alex had told her about Dalton and Pam's breakup. They hadn't been split up for much longer than she and Brendan. "Thank you," she said again as she took a deep breath. But her heart rate sped up again when she locked eyes with Brendan and he started walking toward her and Dalton.

The closer he got, the faster he walked. Until he was right in front of them.