



COUNTRY HEARTS

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HER BUNNY STUCK HIS FURRY head out from under the couch, but the loud bang on the door made him skitter back underneath. It also made Jemma jump enough that she dropped her phone. She stared at the wooden door as if she had X-ray vision.

Who'd come knocking when she didn't know anyone yet? Especially in this storm?

The loud rapping noise came again, and there was something odd about it. It sounded low and almost...metallic?

Jemma gripped her phone in case she needed to call the cops—who knew how long it would take them to get all the way out here?—and padded across the room. There wasn't a peephole because of course there wasn't.

She swung open the door, and a large horse snout darted inside.

She fell back on her bum, her mind struggling to make sense of the image in front of her as her tailbone throbbed from the impact. The falling sleet around the white horse served as a dreary background, and the creature whinnied, the sound even louder than the raging storm.

“I’m not sure what you want,” she said, because this had been a weird day and she might as well cap it off by talking to a horse.

The horse stomped a foot, the metallic cling of its shoes making her go *ah, that was why the knock sounded like that*. It didn’t magically tell her why there was a horse on her porch, though.

Just how backwoods was this town?

Jemma pushed to her feet and cautiously approached the horse.

The cold air was rushing in, making her wish for the blanket she’d left on the couch, but when the horse sniffed her hand, she couldn’t bring herself to pull away and slam the door in its face. He—or she—was beautiful. White, all except the black nose and gray speckles across its face. Sleek and muscular, with a long, snowy mane blowing in the wind.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jemma caught movement, and a dark figure materialized as whoever it was strode closer. More details stood out as he stepped into the pool of light the open door sent across the porch.

Male, tall, strong jaw, and cowboy hat.

Jemma reached up and smoothed a hand down her hair, sure it was messy from all the unpacking and furniture rearranging.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sliding a bridle on to the horse’s large head. “I tried to catch him, but he was off and running before I could get out the door.”

Their eyes met for a brief second, and an unfamiliar swirl went through Jemma’s gut.

Mr. Cowboy ran his hand down the horse’s neck as he secured a rope to the bridle with his other hand. “I’m assuming you’re the person who’s renting Mrs. Klein’s cottage.”

“That or I broke in before the horse could beat me to it,” she said.

Mr. Cowboy laughed, and the swirl in her gut grew stronger. He tugged the rope and pulled the horse a few feet back so its hooves were no longer breaching the line between the doorway and her living room floor. “I’m Wyatt Langford. I live just yonder.”

Yonder? People actually said yonder? “Jemma Monroe.”

Wyatt reached up and adjusted the tan cowboy hat on his head, seemingly unbothered by the sleet dripping onto his long coat. “Anyway, Mrs. Klein used to feed Casper carrots, and he’s not getting the message that she doesn’t live here anymore. Or that he’s *supposed* to stay in the barn, especially on cold nights.” Wyatt used his grip on the reins to twist the horse’s face toward his. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you’re trying to make sure I catch my death. Then who’d feed you, huh? Did you think about that?”

She smiled at the affectionate way he “scolded” his horse. It was a tactic she sometimes used in her classroom.

“Anyway, we’ll get out of your hair.”

A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky, followed closely by a rumble of thunder, and they both glanced toward the heavens as the horse clomped back a couple of anxious steps.