



COUNTRY HEARTS

CINDI MADSEN

OCCASIONALLY, JEMMA CAME HOME FROM a date feeling like she'd put her best self forward and hadn't made a fool of herself.

As Wyatt walked her to her car, she realized she'd kind of made a fool of herself but had still put her best self forward. Because it was her true self. Better yet, Wyatt hadn't seemed embarrassed to be with her, not even when she'd ended up with whip cream on her nose.

He had this way of teasing her that made it easy to laugh at herself. He didn't make her feel like she was too chatty, either. He let her talk and talk. He always listened intently, and when he talked, she also hung on every word.

The guy was unexpected in so many ways.

"Guessing this is you," Wyatt said. "Call it my incredible powers of deduction, considering I already know what your car looks like and it's the only one left in the parking lot."

It was pretty crazy how the school had gone from bursting to ghost town in the matter of an hour. Then again, she'd

seen elementary kids charge out of school at record speeds, the formerly bustling halls empty within minutes.

Jemma turned to smile at her gentleman escort.

Hours of spending time together, and yet she didn't feel ready to say goodbye. Whether in a crowd, at the diner, or just the two of them, she always enjoyed her time with Wyatt. Her heart pitter-pattered, hope tapping its way into the mix.

It'd been such a good date. *Er, hangout thing.* Since it *wasn't* a date, she shouldn't go analyzing it like one. Not that it stopped her from thinking it'd been the best date she'd ever been on.

Or hangout thing, so to speak.

"Well, good night," she said. "When Camilla brought up the ballgame, I uncharacteristically said yes without taking a second to overanalyze or make myself nervous about it, and I'm so glad I did."

"Me too." His grin spread across his face and lit her up inside, like a hundred sparklers that started glowing and fizzing at once.

Then he leaned closer, his arm winding around her—he was going in for a goodbye hug!

Jemma threw her arms around his waist, embracing him tightly. She'd wanted to hug him all night. He was solid and warm and smelled amazing and...

Not hugging her back.

His hand was on the handle of her car door, just the one arm stretched out. Her sluggish brain put it together a few seconds too late. He'd reached around her to open the door.

Heat crawled up her neck and settled into her cheeks as they burned with the embarrassment of a thousand suns. "Oh. I... Wow, thanks so much for opening my door. Obviously, I super appreciate it. Goodbye!"

“Jemma.”

She waved, acting like she didn't hear him. The way he'd said her name had been in this letting-down-easy way she couldn't stand to hear right now, not with mortification taking over.

She snapped her seat belt into place and quickly started her car. She gave another wave without looking directly at him—but enough at him that she didn't run him over and complete her humiliation.

What had she been thinking? Calling it a date in her head and launching herself at him while he was being a gentleman? She'd try to claim it was simply a friendly gesture on her end, but she was sure her squeaky voice and red face would give her away.

The way her heart *thunked, thunked, splatted*, definitely did.