

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

MERRY EVER AFTER

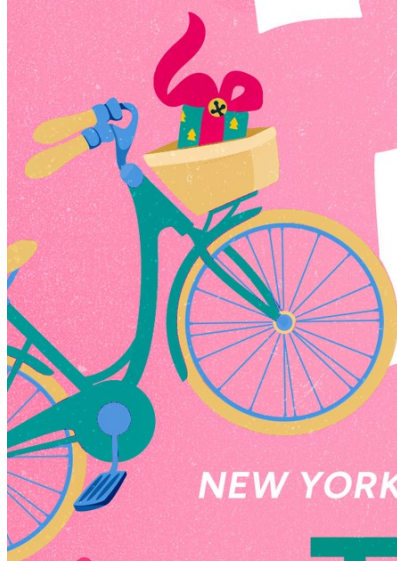
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662528736 (digital)

Cover design by Hang Le

Cover image: © GoodStudio, © kosmofish, © Miloje, © Veranika Dzik,

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Chapter One

E

The farmer is back.

I can hear him fumbling and cursing in the dressing room of my shop. The dirty shoelaces of his muddy work boots peek out from beneath the red velvet curtain, making me sigh. I'll have to break out the Swiffer mop as soon as he leaves. But the mess he's making isn't my main concern. I only want to know if he found anything that fits.

Abruptly, the farmer straightens, the back of his head becoming visible over the top of the curtain. Our eyes meet briefly in the mirror, which is outlined in blinking white Christmas lights, and embarrassment streaks through my chest at having been caught watching him. My gaze zips back down to the tuxedo-dress design I'm sketching, and I continue to shade beneath the collar.

There's a pause between the endless stream of holiday music emanating from the old stereo before "Last Christmas" by Wham! takes over for Elvis. The songs seem so out of place because it isn't even cold outside, the way it would be back in Chicago by now. Surely it can't be December 22? Yet the streetlamps just beyond the windows are decorated with big tinsel bells, and come evening, the big fir tree in the town square will light up with multicolored vintage bulbs. Christmas in Texas just hits different, I guess.

When I hear a disappointed grunt from inside the dressing room, my shoulders slump. Not a single winner in that entire pile of secondhand

jeans he carried in there with him ten minutes ago?

Moments later, when that weathered hand yanks back the curtain and the farmer emerges with a scowl, I'm reminded why he can never find anything in the little corner thrift shop that fits. He's biblically huge. At *least* six feet six inches of brute force. Broad and stacked. Filthy from farmwork. Mean looking. A grizzly bear wouldn't cross his path.

And he's blushing to the tips of his ears.

As the farmer approaches the register, he carries a single pair of jeans in his hand, the rest of them left neatly stacked behind him in the dressing room. The sound of him clearing his throat is like a crack of thunder and causes me to drop my pencil, deepening the red flush that encompasses the sides of his bristled face.

Soulful brown eyes meet mine from way above. Like, I actually have to tip my head back to make eye contact, and when I do? There's a worrying little twitch just below my belly button, followed by a slow inundation of heat, beginning at the top of my spine and finishing with a singe of my nerve endings. All of them. What *was* that?

A moment's hesitation passes before he sets the jeans on the counter, nudging them forward. "These didn't fit, but I ripped the damn things trying to get them off." He dips his chin. "I'll be paying for them."

Guess that explains the blush. "That isn't necessary."

"Tell me how much, please."

They couldn't be more ancient. Frayed and faded and patched.

"Five."

He hides his skepticism and sets a twenty on the counter. "The rest is for the mess, ma'am. I do apologize."

Just like the last three times the farmer has attempted to find jeans that fit in the thrift shop where I work, in the seconds right before he leaves, he looks at me as if he wants to say something. Maybe ask my name. Maybe ask for my number.

Part of me wishes he would.

The rest of me hopes he doesn't, because I would have to decline.

The five-month-old baby sleeping in the tiny back office ensures I don't have time to date. I'm lucky they let me bring my son to work.

Lucky the elderly couple who owns the shop allows me an entire rack to display my upcycled designs and keep the cash it generates. That they're lenient with me if something comes up with Sonny, like a pediatrician appointment or a cold. This isn't the kind of town that takes chances on a blow-in from the city—so yeah, I'm lucky.

Hoping for anything more would be selfish.

I'm not very smart about choosing men, anyway. The farmer could have a mean streak or mommy issues. A pet boa constrictor roaming freely about his house. Perhaps he chats about agriculture with a mannequin propped up in his kitchen. Who knows.

Bottom line, I wouldn't give him my number.

For some reason, though, when he fixes his stare on the ground, sighs, and turns to leave, I find myself blurting, "You know, I could *make* you some jeans. Custom."

His boots scrape to a stop, and he looks back at me through narrowed eyes. "That sounds like a fuss."

"It wouldn't be. I like making clothes." I make an absent gesture toward my very own rack of designs, and I immediately wish I hadn't. It comes off like a boast when I meant to be reassuring. Now I'm the one with red ears. "That is to say, I enjoy making new clothes out of old ones."

"Where did you come from?" he asks from left field, his voice so deep and resonant, it should be singing an old hymn from the back row of a church.

"What?"

He gives a brief, exasperated headshake, obviously directed at himself. "I know everyone in this town, but I don't know you. One day"—

he nods at the counter—"you were just standing there."

"Why don't you start by asking me my name?" I tease gently.

Careful, that came close to flirting.

And obviously, this man has not been the recipient of many flirtatious advances. He's looking at me like maybe he misheard me, though his giant chest is dipping and rising faster than before. "What is it? Please. If you don't mind me asking."

No mean streak in this guy, unless he hides it very well. "I'm Evie," I say, extending my hand across the counter for a shake. "Evie Crowe."

He studies my hand as he takes it in his astronomically larger one. A polar bear holding a candy cane. "Luke Ward."

I'm caught quite off guard by the sensation of work-roughened hands and the friction they create on my soft palms. What would they feel like taking tight hold of my butt, rocking me up and back? Lord, I've been lonely for so long, I'd settle for him scratching behind my ears. I'd probably thump my leg like a cocker spaniel.

"It's nice to formally meet you, Luke."

"Evie," he says, testing the word. Humming afterward. He's still holding my hand, but I don't think he realizes it. "Like I said, I don't want a fuss."

"Zero fuss, I swear. But I'd have to take your measurements."

"Oh. No." Finally, he releases my hand and begins walking backward toward the entrance, those ears fire-engine red again. "No, I don't think so."

"It's very straightforward. I'd only need a minute."

"Maybe if some bigger jeans come in, you could just set them aside for me."

“I don’t foresee that happening, Luke. You’re . . .” I flap a hand around to indicate him. “You’re one of a kind.”

“I’m always thinking the same thing about you.”

That gusting confession lands like a piano on a sidewalk, though the crash doesn’t make a sound. He’s not making a pass at me. I don’t think he meant to say it at all. For some strange reason, that makes his words all the more effective. Truthful. I’m shivering beneath my shirtdress, and

oh God, my eyes feel ever so slightly damp? Kindness hits me really hard these days, even if his words do go beyond simple benevolence.

I think he . . . likes me. That was his way of letting me know.

“Thank you,” I manage, not sure what to say or do next.

My son takes that indecision out of my hands when he starts to cry from inside the Pack ’n Play where he’s sleeping in the rear office.

Luke’s eyes widen as if to ask *Is that yours?*

I lift my chin in confirmation.

His expression darkens, and he’s out the door before Sonny’s next wail.

“Apparently, drifter–single mothers aren’t his type,” I murmur to my son a minute later while cradling him in my arms, walking him back and forth in front of the register to calm him. “His loss, isn’t it, kid?”

I refuse to acknowledge how much Luke’s reaction has let me down.

Silly. So silly. I only learned his name ten minutes ago.

And I don't want to date. I *can't*. I don't know any babysitters, and couldn't afford one if I did. Still . . .

“You know what, Sonny? Screw the measurements. I'm going to make him the best pair of jeans in his life. He's not going to dismiss me so easily.”

Chapter Two

L

My mug of coffee pauses halfway to my mouth.

What in the hell?

It's *her*. Evie Crowe.

How did she find out where I live? As soon as I begin to wonder, I mentally scoff at myself. Finding out where the skyscraper-size farmer dwells wouldn't be difficult. Any number of town residents could have told her. Whatever method she used to get my address, she's coming up the pathway to my house now with a baby strapped to her chest and a brown bag dangling from a couple of her fingers. Let me tell you, it's a sight. Something's got her a little mad this morning, but not mad enough to step on the chickens in her path. No, even through the window, I can hear her apologizing to them as she closes the distance to my door, and that makes me feel some kind of way.

Not sure what the feeling is *called* yet.

Only that she's the only one who seems to give it to me.

A married woman. Of course I told a *married woman* she's one of a kind. I'm surprised her husband hasn't shown up with a shotgun yet to put a bullet in me. I wouldn't even blame him. If she was my wife, I'd put the fear of God into anyone who showed her interest. Especially out loud, like I did.

What's she carrying in that bag?

I can hardly focus long enough to make an educated guess, because I'm distracted by the dark-auburn swing of her hair, how the morning light sets it on fire. She has a beautiful stubborn nose and an Irish chin. A wide mouth. I'm not going to marvel over her body now that I know she's taken, but if I was . . .

Ah, Jesus, she's got nice sturdy hips.

A lot of men don't notice that type of thing, but a man my size does.

She would handle me well.

And the fact that she already has a man should make me ashamed that I fucked my fist in bed this morning to thoughts of her bent over the counter of her shop, moaning while I gave it to her good and proper from behind, one hand gripping her hip, the other tangled in her hair.

Yesterday, in my fantasies, I had her in the dressing room. I've had her all over town since the first day I saw her.

This infatuation needs to stop, but it only appears to be picking up steam. Case in point, my heart driving up into my throat now that she's knocking briskly on my front door.

As much as I want to see her hazel eyes up close, I hesitate to answer, on account of still being embarrassed. First, I ripped a pair of jeans, thanks to my freakishly large frame. Second, I hit on a married woman.

Excuse me for wanting to remain hidden in the shadows.

“I saw you standing in the window.”

“Goddamn it,” I mutter, setting down my mug of coffee. Inhaling, exhaling, and crossing to the front door. Opening it to find the most beautiful woman to ever grace this property—hell, the planet—staring up at me, a touch defiant in itty-bitty jean shorts, a Santa Claus T-shirt, and red cowboy boots. Her sleeping baby has a little patch of red on the crown of its head, and I experience a sudden welling of envy toward whoever gets to call these two his family. Maybe it’s the holidays that have me wishing for . . . more out of this simple life of mine. Craving someone to celebrate Christmas Eve with tomorrow night. But deep down, I know it’s

not December at all. It’s this woman who’s got me pondering things I shouldn’t. “Good morning, Evie.”

“Good morning, Luke.” She holds out the bag. “Your jeans.”

A bus crashes into my chest. “What?”

“Go try them on, please. If they need adjustments, I’ll bring them back to the store.”

I can’t think of a single thing to say. This woman not only designed jeans big enough for my too-big body, but she also walked here to deliver them with a baby in tow.

It's . . . amazing. Touching. Surprising.

It's unacceptable, is what it is.

"I told you not to fuss," I try to growl, but I sound winded instead. I *am*. She's knocked the breath out of me. As the oldest of four siblings, I'm the one who goes out of my way to make sure everyone has what they need. I've never had anyone do the same for me. The gesture makes me feel unsettled, like I don't deserve such a gift.

"Why do you have such a fixation on fussing?"

"I don't like it."

"That much is clear."

"I haven't done anything for *you*—" I cut myself off, feeling extremely foolish. "I'm sorry, let me get some money."

"I don't want it." She still has that temper up. Why? Did her husband piss her off? Because I'd be more than happy to go sort him out . . . "You trying them on and having them fit will be payment enough. We'll call it an early Christmas present."

A discomfiting thought occurs to me. "You don't want me to come back to the store anymore. Is that it?" I hold up the bag. "That's why you did this."

Her hazel eyes soften slightly. "What? No." The temper reengages. "I just wanted to show you what I'm capable of. A single mother made those jeans, okay? The fact that I made them in between feedings and naps and work and bath time is what makes me one of a kind. Not my tits. Got it?"

Single mother.

She's a single mother.

And I'm . . . an unbelievable idiot.

I made an incorrect assumption based on my own upbringing and preconceived notions about what a family consists of . . . and damn, guilt is worming its way through my gut. But what I don't understand is her implication that I somehow think she's less impressive—or simply *less*—

because she's unmarried with a child. "Why don't you explain why you're pissed off at me so we can straighten it out?"

"You dismissed me when you heard Sonny crying. I saw it. And I shouldn't even care. We don't *know* each other. I guess . . ." She adjusted the sling around her shoulders, and I check the urge to help carry the weight. To . . . hold the baby. *Do something.* "Maybe you didn't mean it, but I've gotten that look a lot in the last five months and just had to do something about it. For me."

"I didn't dismiss you, Evie. When I heard the baby crying, I assumed you were married." She's not. *She's not married.* What the hell am I going to do about that? "I'd just got finished telling you . . . well, what I said.

And I walked away because that's the right thing to do when someone is attached."

She loses her head of steam while absorbing that. "Oh."

I raise an eyebrow.

She raises one back.

I put mine down.

Hell. This woman has me tied up in all kinds of fucking knots this morning. The first time I saw her, I decided she was out of my league. The second time, I confirmed it: Yup. Way out. I haven't changed my mind, either. She's young and sexy and *good God*, she's full of fire and spirit.

Talent. She loves that baby, too. I can see it in the way she cradles his head like she's trying to protect him from the world. She's nurturing on top of everything else.

A man could fall in love and stay there with this one. Stay there forever.

Something about her on my doorstep feels right. Like she was meant to show up sooner or later. What if there is a chance she could feel the same? Sure, I'm a farmer constantly covered in dirt; I have zero romance or wooing skills to speak of; and I'm a lumbering, assumption-making giant to boot. But maybe it's true what they say and there *is* someone for everybody.

I don't know. But I'll regret it for a long time if I don't try.

"If you come in, I'll try on the jeans." I replay that back and quickly clarify, my neck going hot. "I'll try them on in another room, that is."

It's kind of comical the way she leans to one side to peer into my home, as if searching for torture devices, and I wonder what she thinks of my eight-foot undecorated Christmas tree that I propped up in the corner of the living room. I cut it down and brought it home myself, just for the smell of fresh pine, but I wouldn't know where the hell to start buying shiny things to hang on it.

“Entering a stranger’s home is frowned upon where I come from, but it would be nice to sit down for a minute,” she says. “I realized about halfway here that these boots are more style than substance.”

My pulse stutters. “You got a blister?”

She nods, though it’s grudging—and I’m already mentally riffling through my first aid kit. I don’t bother bandaging my own cuts and scrapes, so I have no idea what’s in there. Cobwebs, probably. “If you’re not comfortable coming in, I’ll bring a chair outside.”

A little more softening on her end.

Damn. Maybe I’m not so useless with women after all?

Or maybe it’s just this one I’ve got a knack for. I hope so.

“No,” she says slowly. “I’ll come in.”

I swallow my relief and step aside, trying not to stare at the sight of a beautiful redhead entering my house. Ordering myself to pay attention, I scrape a chair out from beneath the table. I only have two, and they’re

massive. I had to make them myself out in the barn, on account of my size. She doesn’t comment on the extra-large dimensions, but she does seem slightly amused that her feet don’t touch the floor.

The baby is starting to squirm in the sling around her chest. She rocks subtly side to side, cooing to him while I locate the first aid kit in one of the kitchen cabinets. During one of my many glances at her over my shoulder, I notice her wince and straighten her spine.

“Carrying the baby all this way must have been hell on your back.”

Finally, I locate the first aid kit, then set it on the counter so I can check the contents. “Do you want to lie him down on my bed?”

A small hesitation. “Maybe just for a minute or two.”

I indicate the back hallway with a nod. “It’s just through there.”

She mutters something about having lost her survival skills, but she does toe off the red boots, stand up, and carry the child to the rear of the house. As soon as she gives me her back, I see the twin red splotches of blood seeping through her socks. And I reckon that tells me a lot about this woman: she’ll bleed to make a point.

She returns a moment later, looking like her load has been lightened, and sits down once again, her gaze heating my back while I gather the supplies I need. What does she think when she looks at me? Is it possible she admires my size? Or does she simply want to gawk, like everyone else?

“You said you don’t enter strangers’ homes where you come from.

Where’s that?”

“Chicago.”

A moving mental image of her in the distant city dances in my head.

She’s walking through a maze of people in a crosswalk while horns blare and sirens whine. I don’t like it very much. “How did you end up here?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”