

EXCERPT:

THE THING ABOUT LOVE

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If a barn could be magical, this one was definitely enchanting.

I was in a daze as I looked around. The rafters. The tables. The river. They all seemed to sparkle with a light I wanted to capture.

"Isn't that right, sweetie?" The voice was deep and husky, but I was in my own world imagining what I could do with a place like this and not paying any attention.

An elbow nudged me, and it wasn't until then that I realized I was *sweetie*.

Sweetie?

Seriously, the man with the DR before his name couldn't find something a little sexier in his vocabulary to call me? *Sugarcakes. Honeypie. Cookie, even.*

"What's that Chocolate Cake?" I smiled big and wide when I said it. Obviously, he was giving this little show all he had, so I figured I might as well, too.

Ignoring my taunt, Jake draped an arm around my chair just as Shania Twain's "Any Man of Mine" came bellowing through the speakers.

When his fingertips brushed my shoulder, I wasn't listening to the beat of the music though because butterflies took flight in my belly, and lower. I had to remind myself that this was part of the show, but still, I found myself having to squeeze my thighs together to sooth the ache his touch had ignited.

"I was just telling George how much you love to dance. Especially square dance," he said.

I had been reaching for my water, and I practically spilled it when he said that. *Was he out of his ever-loving mind?* I didn't know a thing about country dancing other than the fact that the word *do-si-do* had something to do with it.

I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "Yes, *big boy*, I do like to dance, but you know I prefer to watch you line dance because you're so great at it. Besides, don't forget, I did hurt my ankle not that long ago."

His grin was beyond wicked. "You can be a klutz sometimes, but I seem to recall you assuring me your ankle was absolutely fine, and after I checked it out, I did concur with your self-diagnosis."

Ethel tapped George on the shoulder, and when he looked at her, she whispered something in his ear.

"Did you say you wanted to dance, Jules?" George asked me over the music.

Before I could say no, George was on his feet and standing beside me with his hand extended. "Would you do me the honor of having this dance with me?"

Like I could say no now.

He really was so sweet. Dr. Kiss, on the other hand, well he was the devil reincarnated. "I'd be delighted," I said and glared at Jake as I stood.

"Have fun, Sweetie," Jake grinned.

I bent to whisper in his ear. "While I'm gone, do you think you could come up with something to call me that doesn't make you sound like you might be George's age."

He narrowed that blue-eyed stare at me.

Satisfied with that, I pivoted around and didn't look back.

The bridesmaids, in their short, peach dresses and cowboy boots, were having a blast stomping their feet and clapping their hands all while shaking their behinds and pressing their thumbs into their sides.

How on earth were George and I going to dance to this?

Thank God just when we reached the center of the dance floor, the music changed, and Tim McGraw's voice came overhead. As Tim sang about how no one ever made him feel the way she did, George and I stepped into position.

He took my hands and started to move, ballroom style. This type of dancing I knew how to do. "So," he said, "When are you and Jake planning on getting hitched?"

Up until now, I had been able to twist what I said so it didn't sound like a blatant lie, but this question was pretty straightforward. "We haven't decided yet."

Which was true. In fact, we hadn't decided a lot. Like as a starting point, if we were friends or enemies.

"I noticed you ain't wearing a ring. He not gotten you one yet?"

"That's complicated," I answered.

And it was. He hadn't gotten me one and he never would because he didn't even like me, and after tonight, I was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to stand me.

"Well, he's a good man. Give him some time. He'll come around."

Yes, he'd come around all right. Come around to telling me I was fired, which reminded me of Finn.

Where had he gotten his information?

I leaned back. "Is Labor Day weekend available for a wedding?"

George started to laugh. "You'll give the man a heart attack if you make him move that fast."

"Oh, I know, but just in case, is it?"

"As a matter of fact, it might be. A lad called here today inquiring about it though, and I told him to come up and see the place before I reserved it for him. Since he ain't shown, I reckon it could be yours."

"Good to know." I winked.

He raised a curious brow.

I shrugged. "Just in case."

Yes, just in case I decided to come clean. And just in case I could figure out how this place was suitable for Rory. But even as I thought it, I knew it wasn't.

I nearly missed a step when I caught a glimpse of Jake leaning against the wall, watching us.

He threw me off, and I had to order myself to tune back into George for the remainder of the dance. My lack of focus had to cease right now because the bottom line was that at the moment I couldn't allow myself to be thrown off course.

When the music ended, I stepped back and curtsied.

"Thanks for indulging me." George gave my hand a squeeze. "You and the Doc are really quite a couple."

"Thank you," I told him, but I knew I should have been correcting him instead. I hated the lie, but I couldn't undo it now, nor could I stop what he was doing. George had signaled Jake over, and he had started to move.

All tall, dark, and handsome, he strutted my way with a cat that ate the canary grin on his face. I wanted to wipe it away—with my lips.

No, I didn't mean that.

"It's your turn," George told him.

"Oh, but he only likes to line dance," I said.

George laughed like it was a joke and strode toward his Ethel, who had started clearing the buffet table.

"May I?" Jake asked, all debonair-like.

"I don't know, may you?"

He shook his head. "Just give me your hands, will you? I'd hate to ruin George and Ethel's night by admitting this was all a ruse."

"Grrr... You are so frustrating," I said offering my hands.

He laced his fingers in mine and drew me close. "Did you just growl?"

With a frown, I placed my hands on his shoulders. "I did no such thing."

His hands fit my waist like they were made for me. "Yes, you did. And smile, they're looking at us."

Forcing myself to keep the corners of my mouth tilted upwards was very difficult because I could barely breathe when he slid his thigh between mine.

The crowd surged around us, and just like that, I forgot this wasn't real. We were aligned thigh-to-thigh, belly-to-belly. If I turned my head, our mouths would be close enough to kiss.

Silly thought.

We moved together, and when my hands slid from his shoulder to cup the back of his neck, the edges of his soft brown hair tickled my knuckles. The heat of his skin was almost too much, as was the feel of his body so close to mine.

When his fingers splayed against my back and lingered there, I could have sworn the music thumped in the pit of my stomach, my wrists, and especially between my thighs

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He moved closer to me. "I believe it's called dancing."

"Are you still acting? Because if you are, George and Ethel are no longer watching us." I whispered this in his ear.

"Does it matter?" he answered back, and when he did his breath caressed my ear.

"Do you want it to?"

He pulled back to look into my eyes, his smile less bemused and his gaze bright. "Do you always answer a question with a question?"

"Only when... I'm talking to you." My hesitation sounded coy, but I hadn't meant it to. Scared of something, but no idea what of, I said, "This place isn't that bad. It just needs some more sparkle."

"Sparkle?"

"Yes, like crystal chandeliers hanging from the beams."

He chuckled. "I don't think crystal chandeliers are George and Ethel's style."

"No," I said. "We should probably go. You were right to begin with, this place isn't appropriate for your sister's wedding."

All of a sudden, the music ended, and before I could say another word, I was being pushed into a very grabby crowd of women.

Oh, no! The bouquet toss.

I had to get out of here. I bent down and crawled around, through, and practically under, a number of jumping cowboy boots.

"One."

"Two."

“Three.”

Rushing out of the side of the crowd, I stood up, and I could hardly believe it when the bouquet landed at my feet.

Without thinking, I picked it up to throw it back into the crowd, but it was too late.

“Oh Jules, you caught it.” It was Ethel, and she was escorting me to the front of the room.

When I saw George leading Jake there as well, I wanted to end this charade.

It was too much to handle.

Having him so close was too much to handle.

He was too much to handle.

George and Ethel pushed us both together, and all of the girls started chanting, “Seal the deal. Seal the deal.”

“What are they talking about?” Jake muttered.

“Kiss her, Doc,” George clarified for me, and before either of us could step away from each other, George and Ethel were once again pushing us together.

I landed against Jake’s hard chest. My mouth flew open in surprise, and a small sigh escaped. My lips were so close to his. Tantalizingly close. I wanted to close the distance so very much.

He was breathing heavy, and I could see the muscle twitch at his temple, witness how tight his jaw was. Everything about him screamed he was holding himself back.

We were both losing that battle though.

Whether out of obligation, pressure, or need, his mouth came crashing down over mine, in the hardest, heated, and most demanding way.

Oh, God, I wanted this.

Wanted him.

Especially when his tongue pushed inward, hot and sensual. It glided over mine as he licked at the roof of my mouth and swirled around my tongue in the most erotic dance.

His lips were so soft.

His mouth so hot.

His possession unlike any I’d ever experienced.

I could hear the catcalls, but ignored them all because he wasn’t simply kissing me, he wasn’t just sealing the deal, he was devouring me.

In that moment, any other man I’d ever kissed faded away.

No one had ever kissed me this way.