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The emcee tapped on the microphone. “Now here’s an interesting date for sure. A ten-day camping trip with a cowboy. Who wouldn’t want that? Help me welcome Darren Montgomery to our stage.”

Darren strode from the right-side wing wearing jeans, a plaid snap shirt, highly polished cowboy boots and a black hat. He lifted the hat as he entered and bowed to the audience, which drove the ladies into a giggling mania and sent Porchia’s heart racing. Just as every time she saw him, a familiar swirl of lust began to churn in her gut.

Then, before the bidding started, he blew a couple of kisses from the stage, one directly toward their table. Porchia pretended it was meant for all three women, but she would have sworn she felt his lips touch her cheek.

She settled in to watch the women claw each other to death for Darren, resigned that she and Darren were simply not meant to be more than the best of friends.

The opening bid came from Porchia’s right. Five hundred dollars. That made her sit upright. An opening bid of five hundred? For a camping trip? She, and many other women in the room, twisted in their seats trying to get a look at the bidder. Sarah Jane Mackey was waving her paddle and glaring around as though daring anyone else to buy her man, not that Darren was her man. Last year, she’d tried to trap Darren into marriage by stabbing needles into his condom stash. It hadn’t worked, but that hadn’t slowed her obsession.

Another girl stood and raised her paddle. “Seven-fifty.”

“Who’s that?” Delene whispered.

“I was going to ask you guys that same question.”

Tina leaned in. “New chick in town. Name’s Rose or Violet or some flower. I forget. She’s the new nursing director at the hospital. She was in the shop last week. Seems nice enough. Look.” Tina tilted her head toward Sarah Jane. “I think Sarah Jane is trying to kill her competition with a death stare.”

All three women turned and Porchia chuckled. Sarah Jane didn’t stand a candle to June Randolph, Porchia’s mother. Nobody had perfected a death stare like June Randolph. Porchia should know. She’d been on the receiving end more than once.

Tonight, Sarah Jane stood with her hands on her hips, her lips pulled tight across her teeth and glared at the new bidder. Then she raised her paddle again. “One thousand.”

Porchia turned toward the stage to watch Darren’s reaction. She knew him well enough to recognize he was not happy. A date with Sarah Jane had to rank high on his not-to-do list. A two-week vacation with the harpy would be nightmarish.

“Fifteen hundred,” the nurse countered.

“Two thousand.” Sarah Jane continued her threatening stance, which seemed to be working as the nurse pulled down her bidding paddle and sat.

Porchia saw Darren’s lips move as he said something to the emcee, who nodded. Then he caught Porchia’s gaze and gave her a wide-eyed help-me look.

“I have two thousand,” the emcee said. “Are there any other bids?”

Sarah Jane looked around, a triumphant smile on her face.

Porchia simply couldn’t let that haughty rich bitch win this date so cheaply, or at least cheap for Sarah Jane. The woman had too much money and wasn’t afraid to flaunt it. If Darren had to spend time with Sarah Jane, Porchia wanted to make sure the cost took a chunk out of Sarah Jane’s obscenely large allowance.

Porchia pushed to her feet. “Two thousand three hundred.”

Before Sarah Jane could react, the emcee said, “Two thousand three hundred going once, twice, sold. Congratulations. Go collect your date, cowboy.”

Porchia’s mouth dropped open. What had just happened?

Tina grabbed Porchia’s arm. “What are you doing?”

“Wow. That didn’t work out like I’d planned.” Porchia pushed to her feet and headed to the cashier before Darren could get to her. She’d explain to him later that she’d been trying to drive up the price.

She was digging for a credit card when Darren caught up with her.

“That surprised me,” he said with a warm smile.

“Me too.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” She pulled the credit card from her wallet.

“Wait. Before you pay, part of my offer for the date was if the winner didn’t want to go or couldn’t go for some reason, I would pay her bid and add a ten percent bonus. So, you’re off the hook. I’ll pay the bid. You don’t have to go away with me.”

Two thoughts occurred almost simultaneously.

First, hadn’t she just told herself that she needed to get away? That she needed some time to think? Camping trips didn’t require a lot of brain power. Eat, sleep and fish or whatever. A few days away could be just what she needed. Besides, she could always take her car and leave whenever she wanted.

Second, and this one really scared her, she wanted to spend ten days with Darren. She enjoyed his company. Relaxed and quick to laugh, he was easy to be with. She could just be herself. He accepted her no matter how she was dressed or what mood she was in.

Sure they flirted...a lot. But the flirty comments had been received with a laugh and then forgotten. That was the kind of friendship they had. So this was simply a friend helping a friend, no romantic entanglement.

She supposed camping could be fun, if dirt, bugs and sweat were on her list of fun things. They weren't, but she did owe him for stepping in with Slade this morning.

"Nope," she said and handed the card to the cashier. "I bought you, so you'll just have to put up with me."

His lips moved slowly up into a smile. "I don't think that'll be a problem at all.