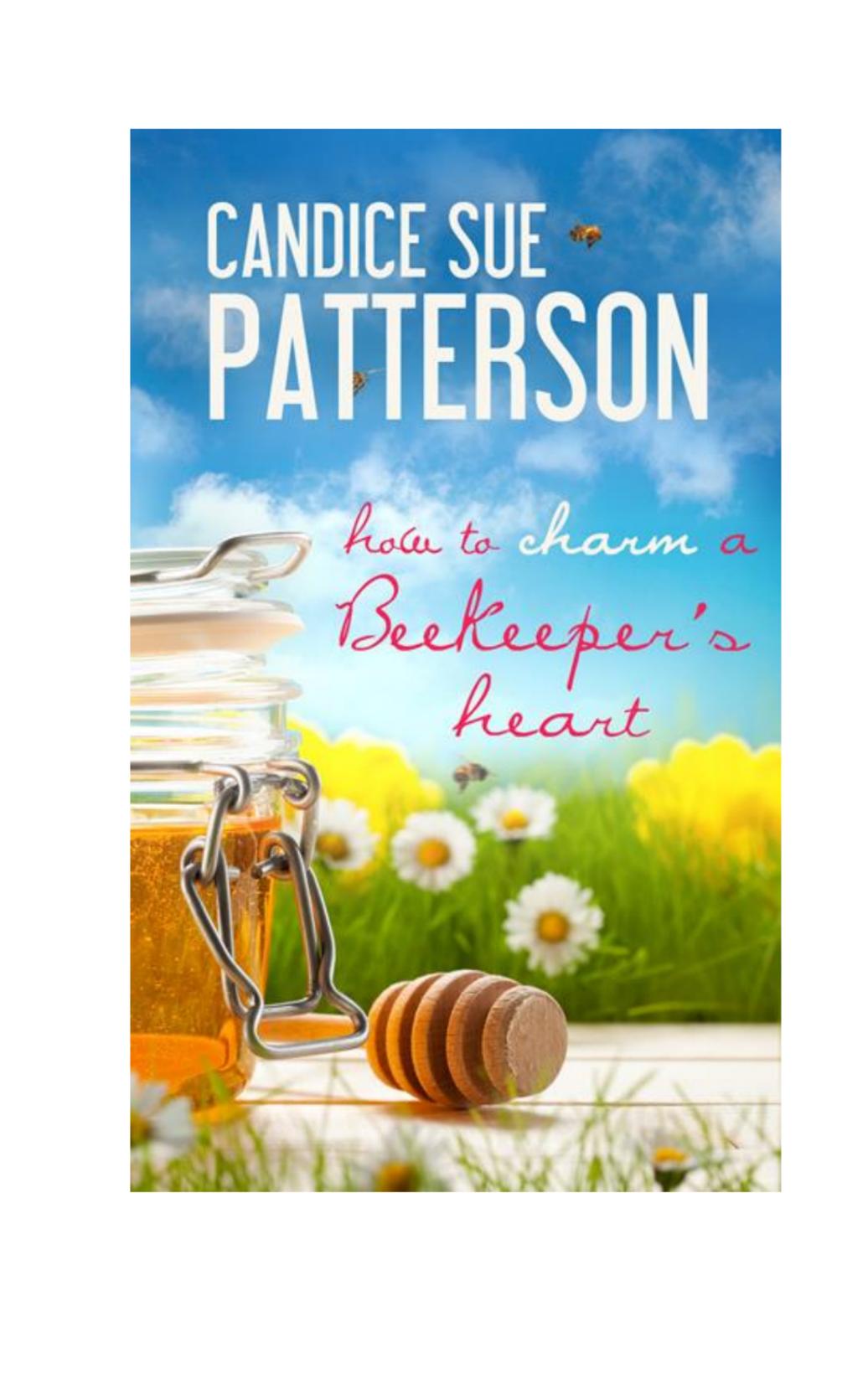


CANDICE SUE
PATTERSON

The background of the book cover is a vibrant scene. At the top, a clear blue sky with soft white clouds is dotted with several bees in flight. Below the sky, a field of bright yellow flowers and white daisies with yellow centers stretches across the middle ground. In the foreground, a glass jar filled with golden honey sits on a light-colored wooden surface. The jar has a silver metal clasp lid. Beside the jar lies a traditional wooden honey dipper, showing its characteristic ridged texture. The overall composition is bright and cheerful, evoking a sense of nature and the sweetness of honey.

*how to charm a
Beekeeper's
heart*

How to Charm a Beekeeper's Heart

Candice Sue Patterson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

How to Charm a Beekeeper's Heart

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Dedication

To my amazing siblings—Joe, Missy, Brock, and Aaron. Because I just can't say it enough: I love you.

Acknowledgments

Every book is a group effort; therefore, I'd like to thank the sisters of my heart--The Quid Pro Quills--Robin Patchen, Pegg Thomas, Kara Hunt, Jericha Kingston, and Marge Wiebe. Thank you ladies for your support, prayers, wisdom, and honesty.

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To my little men--Levi, Silas, and Hudson--you are wonderful boys, and I'm blessed beyond measure to hold the title "Mom."

Above all, I thank the Lord Jesus Christ for my salvation. He has blessed me beyond words and I'm grateful to Him for allowing my dream of writing to come to fruition. All honor and glory goes to Him.

And thank you, reader, for taking time from your busy life to spend it with my characters.

What People are Saying

Candice Sue Patterson delivers another sensational romance for readers of Christian Fiction. Awash with compassion, Patterson lets us walk in the boots of one without Christ, in the high heels of one trusting Christ, and in the hearts of both.

~Jericha Kingston, author

Candice Sue Patterson knows how to write. Period. This author's descriptive abilities are phenomenal, as is her insight into matters of the heart and emotions.

~Delia Latham, author

Sixteen ounces of honey requires approximately 1,152 bees to visit 4.5 million flowers.

1

This was one sick, twisted joke.

Huck Anderson stared through his reflection on the glass storefront, rubbing his temple where a headache pulsed. On display, an oak frame supported white satin that gleamed in the sunlight. A yellowing guest book was propped in the corner window next to a vase of fake flowers. The breeze kicked up, lashing the American flag behind him on the courthouse lawn, the fabric snapping in the air. Uncle Marty's grating laughter carried from somewhere on the wind. Good thing the old man was dead, or Huck just might kill him.

He ground the toe of his boot into the sidewalk. This hadn't been on his agenda for today. In fact, he'd rather fight a rabid moose with a cap gun. But according to the will, this was what Uncle Marty had left him, so he'd honor the man's wishes. Even if it stripped his dignity.

Huck ripped open the door, his neck and shoulder muscles threatening to snap like tightly coiled springs. His dusty boots met worn, purple carpet. A strong flowery stench made him sneeze—the smell of death. He curled his upper lip, searching the room for the owner or director, whatever they were called.

No one. Not a sound.

Catalogs stacked high sat to his right on a rough oak table. Sheer pink-and-white fabric hung over a full-length mirror opposite him. Looked like this place was in need of an undertaker too.

A beat-up cash register swallowed the glass counter to his left. Frilly business cards caught his attention, and he lifted the girlie stock paper.

Yesteryear Bridal Boutique, Pine Bay, Maine.

The scuffed walls were as naked as his pride. What in the name of Uncle Sam was he supposed to do with a bridal boutique?

So he'd gotten into some trouble when he was younger. Nothing he'd put Uncle Marty through was worth this. He wasn't a pink-shirt-wearing, sissy-voiced, *Say Yes to the Dress* kinda guy. He'd seen the commercials. He didn't have a feminine side.

High-pitched giggles echoed from the rear of the building. A stout redhead in a huge wedding dress marched from the narrow hallway into the room. A gaggle of women followed her to the mirror, going nuts over the ugly thing. They didn't even notice him standing there.

He continued reading the card. *Arianne Winters, Owner and Bridal Consultant.*

According to Uncle Marty's lawyer, the woman hadn't paid rent in almost a year. Now was the perfect time to turn this nightmare into something the town needed, like a sporting goods store or a bait and tackle shop.

A petting zoo. Anything but this.

Cameras clicked, and through the ruckus, he managed to pick out bits of conversation about blue garter belts, the flower girl's hair, and what lingerie the

bride planned to wear on the honeymoon. The word *romantic* had him eyeing the door. He needed to get out of here, could feel the testosterone leaching from his veins.

He stepped forward and held up the business card. "I'm looking for Arianne Winters."

"I'll be with you in a moment." A voice came from somewhere within the mass of women.

A petite blonde, kneeling on the floor, stood and faced the bride. "Take all the time you need. I'll be right back." She stepped toward Huck. "I'm Arianne. Can I help you?"

Her full, red lips parted in a smile. Huck surveyed his renegeing tenant. Blonde hair, curvy build, attractive in a classic way that drew him in.

"Are you Joelle Bellman's fiancé? She said you might be in today to get fitted for your tux."

He almost laughed. Him? A groom? Never.

"No, I'm Huck Anderson." He offered his hand along with the famous Anderson dimples.

She pressed her soft palm against his. Lightning flashed in her navy blue eyes, and her pretty smile faded to a pout.

"I need to speak with you, but if now isn't a good time, I can come back."

"You have no idea who I am, do you?"

He studied her heart-shaped face.

"Arianne..."

Those eyes. Something about her seemed familiar.

Seconds later, those red lips twisted in a smirk. "Of course. How could I expect the great Huck Anderson to remember me?" She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her cheeks turning pink. "We went to high school together. I was your English tutor. And

math and science...”

Arianne Thompson. Wow. Twelve years had taken her gangly build and filled in all the right places. A fistful of shame walloped him in the chest, making his skin hot. He rubbed the back of his neck. He’d never expected to see her again. If there was one thing in life he could rely on, it was karma.

“Is it all right to try on a veil?” the bride barked from the mirror.

Poor guy. Whoever he was.

Arianne craned her slender neck to see over her shoulder. “Of course. Let me know if you need any help.”

Now what? Old insecurities crept into his gut. Maybe she’d forgotten. Though judging from the pinched look on her pretty face, she remembered.

He did, now that she’d dredged up the memory.

So he was pond scum. That didn’t change facts. She couldn’t pay her rent, and he wanted no part in a bridal boutique. “I’m here about the building.”

“I don’t own the building.”

“I know. I do.”

Arianne blinked. For a minute, he thought she’d stopped breathing.

“Martin didn’t tell me he was selling.”

“He didn’t. He passed away last month. I’m his nephew. Left this building to me in his will.”

Huck removed the folded papers from his back pocket and offered them to her.

“Martin’s...gone?” Her creamy skin turned ashen and her eyes pooled with tears. She’d done this once before. He’d been the cause then too. With Arianne, he was always the bad guy. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “It appears you’ve had trouble paying rent.

Ten months.”

Thumbnail tapping her bottom lip, Arianne stared out the display window beside them, past the mannequin holding up a monstrosity of a dress. “He told me not to pay rent until business...picked up.”

“There’s no mention of that agreement in his will.” Huck pushed the papers along the countertop with his finger so she could read the contract terms.

Arianne wilted onto a nearby stool. She raised weighted eyelids and hit him with a pained look so raw and desperate, it twisted his gut. “What are you going to do?”

Honey bees are vulnerable creatures threatened by mites, chemical exposure, poor nutrition, and bad weather. Bees are also very strong creatures, adapting to their environment, capable of carrying pollen and nectar equal to their body weight.

—NOVA, *Bees: Tales from the Hive*, produced for PBS, January 4, 2000

2

Arianne clasped her trembling hands in her lap. Huck towered over her. He scratched his whiskered jaw. Intense brown eyes stared back at her with all the velvety smoothness of brushed leather. After all these years, he and that lazy southern drawl still turned her insides to mush.

The term “devil in disguise” fit him better than his worn jeans and the white T-shirt straining around his chest and arms.

Arianne steeled her spine. She wasn’t seventeen and naïve anymore. She had a daughter to support and didn’t like the way he’d strutted into her shop like he owned the place.

Even if he did.

Huck scrubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not sure what your circumstances are but—”

“We found the one!” Sara, the bride-to-be, waved a veil above her head as though it were an Olympic

medal. "I'll take it."

Finally, a sale. Too bad the good news couldn't obliterate Huck's unspoken words. Or Huck.

Arianne forced a smile. "Great. I'll draw up the papers while you change. Just leave the gown on the dressing room hook, and we'll set a date for alterations."

The women made their way down the narrow hall, staccato chatter echoing off the walls. Arianne pulled in a deep breath and stood on shaky legs, supporting her weight against the glass counter.

Huck would not get the best of her again. "You were saying?"

He pocketed his hands and shifted his weight to his other leg, one foot slightly askew. "The accountant provided me with the financial report for this building. Since you haven't paid rent in so long, I came prepared to evict you."

Her heart dropped to her toes. "But Martin and I had an agreement."

"Your agreement isn't in writing, and I can't afford to let you stay rent free."

Heat flooded her cheeks. If Huck evicted her, they'd be homeless. It wasn't her fault the economy had affected business and she was barely scraping by. Martin had understood that. Huck would too, if he wasn't the Tin Man.

"Mommy!" Emma burst through the front door. Tears stained her cheeks.

Arianne's heart lurched and she dashed around the counter. "What's wrong, baby?"

She knelt beside her daughter and thumbed the moisture from Emma's face.

Emma revealed a bloody, dirt-encrusted knee. "I

fell.”

Arianne glanced at the door. “Where’s Aunt Missy?”

Emma hiccupped. “Outside.”

“It’ll be all right.” Arianne wrapped Emma in a hug. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

She stood, noting Huck’s raised brows, as if he hadn’t considered children as part of this twisted scenario. And was that *remorse* in his eyes? Hard to tell since she’d never seen him have any before.

“Huck, this is my daughter, Emma.”

He nodded.

“Come on, baby.” She tugged Emma toward her office and the First Aid kit.

“I can’t, Mommy. It hurts.” Emma’s lips pooched to twice their normal size.

“All right. You keep Mr. Huck company. I’ll be right back.”

If she’d have thought Huck posed any real threat to her daughter, she wouldn’t have left them alone. The only perceived danger was that Huck would charm his way into Emma’s affections the way he had every other female on the eastern seaboard—and judging by the child’s dreamy eyes when Arianne returned with the First Aid kit thirty seconds later, the damage had been done.

He’d lifted Emma onto the counter. Both were smiling so wide their dimples sank into their cheeks, and Arianne suspected she was the cause for their humor. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” Had the answer not come so quickly—and in unison—Arianne might have believed them.

After cleaning and dressing the scrape with two flesh-colored Band-Aids, the reality of Huck’s visit and

Martin's passing returned. Arianne gazed into her daughter's navy blue eyes, which she'd passed down the gene pool, blinking away the moisture threatening to give her emotions away. She couldn't let her daughter down. All they had was each other and this store. She'd fight him if she had to.

Emma squirmed on the counter. "Can I have a juice box?"

"I'll get you one in a minute."

"I can get them myself, Mommy. I'm four."

"And independent." Arianne helped her daughter to the floor.

Good as new, Emma strode to the office.

Arianne closed the latch on the First Aid kit and faced Huck, her eyes still burning with unshed tears. "I'm sorry for your loss. Martin was a good man."

Huck swallowed. Hard. "Look, maybe...maybe we can work something out."

"We're ready." The singsong voice interrupted Huck as Sara approached the register, her family close behind.

Six purses plunked on the counter, one octave at a time.

"Now's obviously not a good time." Huck raked his fingers through his chestnut hair, spiking it into a hot mess. "Can we meet tomorrow?"

"I have alteration appointments all day."

"How 'bout Friday?"

"Friday's are swamped."

"Saturday?"

They could play this game all night, and she'd find an excuse for the next 365 days. "Saturday's fine. I close at three."

"See you then."

Emma peeked around the office door, wearing a conspiratorial smile. "Good-bye, Mr. Huck."

"See ya, kid." His gaze flickered to the women at the register, and his dimples made another appearance. "Ladies."

He nodded in expert cowboy fashion, causing Arianne to wonder what he'd look like in a leather hat and chaps. The image, as appealing as it was, made her want to find the nearest cliff and chuck herself straight into the ocean.

Huck moved toward the exit.

Arianne's sister rushed in, head down, thumbs moving over her phone, and crashed into his chest. The phone hit the floor. Missy bounced off him and gripped the doorframe.

Huck didn't flinch. He reached out to steady her. "Sorry." Then he picked up her phone, winked, and disappeared down the sidewalk.

Missy blinked, smoothed her shirt and hair. "You got Emma?" she asked, gaze still following Huck's movements down the street.

Arianne sighed and pulled out a sales slip. They'd discuss this later. "Yeah. Thanks."

And with that, Missy was gone.

"Who's the hunk?" Katherine, the bride's mother, wiggled her perfectly sculpted eyebrows.

"No one worth swooning over." Arianne rang up the dress.

"Ex?" Katherine's eyebrows arched.

Arianne's throat went dry. "No. An old..." What—*friend, first love*? "Acquaintance." She accepted Katherine's check and handed the paperwork to the future Mrs. Shaw.

The bride's grandmother slid her purse off the

counter and threaded her arm through the strap, a sharp whistle escaping through her false teeth. "If I were your age, I'd make sure he was more than an acquaintance. I'd catch that boy and—"

"Tell you what, Grandma." Mallory, the bride's sister and maid of honor, picked up her purse as well. "If you don't finish that sentence, I'll buy you some ice cream."

Grandma agreed and left the shop without another word.

What the woman didn't realize was that Huck Anderson couldn't be caught. He might resemble the noble hero in a classic western, but he was really the villain. And she'd been his victim.

Huck the acquaintance, she could keep at a safe distance. Huck the landlord, however, would be a whole different story.

~*~

Bees flew in and out of the fascia boards of Widow Haywood's peeling, orange, Cape Cod. She'd called Huck in a panic the night before, terrified her house was infested. Said their buzzing interfered with her hearing aid, and she could smell honey seeping through the walls.

The woman had been fifty-two cards short of a full deck before her husband was abducted by aliens. Bee infestations were a common problem, but there was no way they interfered with her hearing device.

Huck strapped his tool belt around his waist and climbed the extension ladder, slowly approaching the hidden hive. Bees smacked into his veiled helmet and buzzed around his arms.

He ignited the bee smoker and pumped it, sending a cool white cloud through the nozzle. With gloves in place, he sprayed the entrance to the hive with a few short puffs. Dazed bees scattered. The aged, brittle boards moaned as he detached them from the studs. Normally, bee droning relaxed him, but nothing in the past two days had erased Arianne's face from his mind.

Why couldn't his uncle have left him something practical, like his fifty-state spoon collection or antique lobster buoys? Huck would've gladly accepted the mint-condition Chevelle. He hadn't even known Uncle Marty owned real estate. Why leave the building to Huck?

A man owning a bridal shop was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. Well, he didn't own the business, but owning the building was bad enough. Uncle Marty knew how Huck felt about marriage. The whole thing was nothing but a bad excuse to spend money and eat cake.

Six stepdads proved his point.

He rolled his head from side to side to ease the tension in his neck. How bad was Arianne's financial position? Her last name had changed. Didn't she have a husband to support her? 'Course, there'd been no ring. Yeah, he'd noticed. Along with her hourglass curves and distrusting blue eyes, all of which he'd like to see a little closer.

And the kid. A tiny copy of her mother who'd looked at him with wonder, like he was a celebrity or something. The same way Arianne used to, until he'd blown it. Big time.

If only his new tenant had been a stranger. Anyone but Arianne. He couldn't evict her now.

There'd be tears involved. Maybe he could help her find a new location, or offer a good price if she'd buy the building.

With the swarm captive and secured in his truck bed, fascia boards back in place, he loaded the ladder, running through his options before his meeting with Arianne tomorrow. He cursed under his breath. If he hadn't witnessed his uncle's struggle with pneumonia, he'd swear the man had died on purpose.