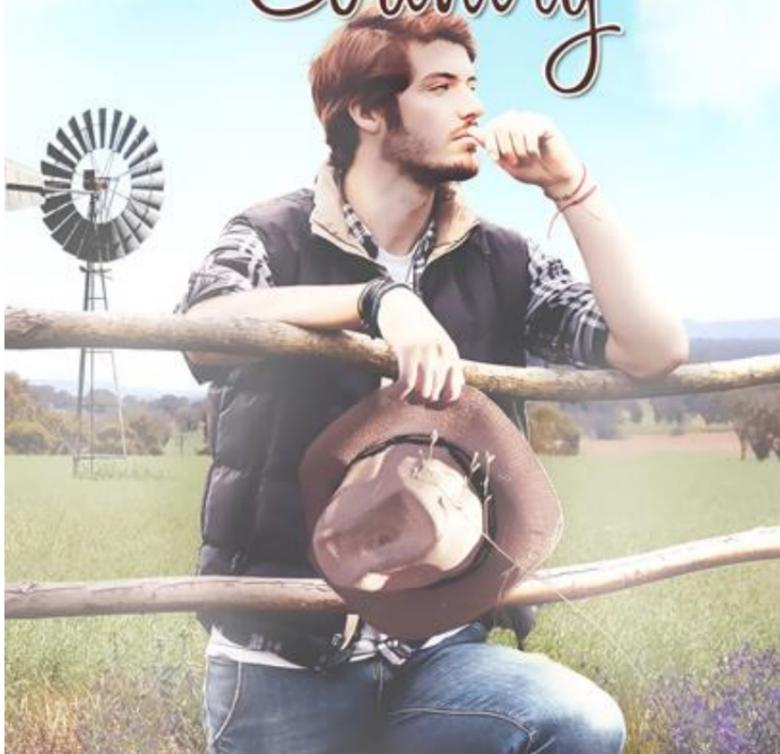


• LOREE PEERY •

HE'S LOVED HER FOREVER,
SO WHY IS HE WRITING
HER LOVE NOTES
FOR HIS BEST FRIEND?

Courting Country



Courting Country

LoRee Peery

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Courting Country
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Dedication

To my friend Barbara Kennedy, who lived nearby for only a short time, but remains ever close in my heart. Thank you for the laughs, tears, prayers, and terrific nature photos from your corner of the world.

What People are Saying

Agape love is love in action, and Peery's heroine embodies the very definition of Agape love. I found this compassionate character to have depth, as well as charm, as she supplies warm clothes and encouragement to the downtrodden of Lincoln's inner city homeless. ~ Avid reader and writer Yvonne Weers on *Christmas 'Couragement*

1

"In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." ~ Proverbs 16:9

Taggart closed his ideas document and picked up a pen. In between freelance jobs as a ghostwriter, and only two articles pending with magazines, he needed to find someone to interview. He ran a pen through the fingers of his right hand baton fashion, and then transferred it to his left. Not quite as adept with his less dominant hand, the pen hit the floor.

A new email ping stopped him from reaching for the dropped utensil. He'd received approval for his profile on the Country Courting dating site. He clicked on the link, checked out the options on screen, and then sat back to consider his next move. He'd always viewed those blind connections as risky.

Relationship. Companionship. Friendship. All those "ships" made him curl his lip. How about those who found themselves in a situationship?

Much like the one his friend, Kylie, got into when she'd signed up on the site. Nine years a widow, she was ready to jump into the dating pool again. The duds she'd encountered included one who had turned into a real problem. It had taken some doing to get the guy to understand that he was to never darken Kylie's

door again.

Taggart had casually mentioned that he cared for her, but had been rebuffed, just as casually. Kylie wasn't interested in him except as a friend. They spent a lot of time together, sometimes meeting for coffee or lunch, the occasional outing when they wanted a partner. He'd driven her to the optometrist when her eyes were to be dilated. She'd driven him to the dentist when he'd had a root canal, and he'd worried about what would be used to numb him.

Kylie had no qualms about calling him to repair something, and he had no inhibitions asking her to accompany him on an outing. But while his heart grew with love, she experienced no spark at all. He turned his mind away from those thoughts and back to the article already taking shape.

What percentage of people, men or women, took the chance on meeting someone blind and then ended up victims? Any manner of abusers, control freaks, or predators could be lurking as liars behind smiling profile pictures, even fake profile pictures. The position they'd place themselves in presented a different manner of putting one's life on the line.

Editors recognized Taggart Bauman as the author of articles written about people who chanced physical danger on the job or for an adrenalin rush. Kylie's experiences with online dating made a possible topic for an article. He'd floated the idea to one of his sources and now, it'd been picked up.

Scrolling through the profile pictures, Kylie's lovely face appeared in a shot he'd snapped. He gazed into the image of periwinkle eyes that touched him soul deep.

His phone rang. He leaned for the pen with one

hand and reached for his cell with the other. The number wasn't in his contact list, but he answered anyway.

"Hey, Tag, ole buddy. Got your number off the alumni list. Decided not to wait for our twentieth reunion to connect."

Twentieth? Oh, high school. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. "Who's this?"

"Wenz. Eldon. South Dakota rancher now."

"Hey, man. Good to hear from you. Has it been twenty years?"

"No, half that. I attended our tenth, you were there, but surrounded by other people. Never got a chance to say hi. Then I left Lincoln and ended up taking over my stepfather's ranch here in South Dakota. I haven't been back to Nebraska since. I've followed you. You've written mighty fine words over the years."

"Thanks, man. Nice to connect with someone from the old gang. Wait till I tell Kylie."

"She's the very reason I'm calling. I've got a wild idea, and I need your wordsmithing help."

2

Kylie turned off the water. She missed the bright orange-red poppies that had bloomed in late spring and spread across the whole east side of the bungalow she'd purchased near Woods Park. Currently, the yellow flowers of her black-eyed Susan vine blended in with the cottage-style brick and complemented other manicured homes on the block. She waved at a neighbor girl down the street then turned to coil the hose. Inside, she hurriedly washed her hands and rushed to turn on her laptop. She hadn't had a word from Eldon Wenz in two weeks.

She'd been attracted to the romantic idea of a cowboy. The mystery added to the romance of Eldon, who seemed so different from the boy she'd known in school. He'd been average, rather shy, and never much for dating. Did his current silence mean her dreams of an invitation to visit his ranch had gone awry? Her browser homepage filled the screen. What a crazy life she'd acquired over the early summer months. She'd lived each day for a message from a man who'd added a new spark to her life. A man who'd suddenly quit communicating.

If connections with Eldon stopped for good did she have it in her to find someone else on the singles site, chance meeting up with a stranger?

There was no way of knowing if he'd be decent or cruel like the last man she'd fallen for. Thank God she caught on to his controlling nature before she dove into anything deeper.

Oh, how dear Taggart had cautioned her. She smiled. He was such a good, loyal guy. The best friend a woman could ever hope for. What would she do without him? He'd seen the love of her life plunge fifteen stories to his death. Ever since, Taggart had been available when she needed him. He'd been there when she'd dumped the control freak. Following that event, her tears had mixed with anger at herself for being duped.

Yet here she was again, anxious to hear from Eldon, whom she'd reconnected with online. She counted on her experience of having known him as a teenager. He couldn't have changed that much.

Taggart had advised her to take things slow. She wished he'd fall in love. He once said he loved her, but it was right after Brandt died. She was certain Taggart was uplifting her so she'd not sink into the depression of grief. He loved her like a sister, just as she loved him like a brother.

Maybe she should follow in his steps. Try her hand at writing. She'd come up with a sob-story novel. That idea made her snort. She'd had more than her share of grief, enough experience and heartbreak for more than one tale. How many women lost husbands when they were both so young?

She picked up a pen and doodled.

Widowed at Twenty-nine, Now What?

A Tale of a Romance that Wasn't.

Duped into Another Broken Heart.

High Hopes Down the Tube.

She wanted a man who loved her enough to share her life with, would care for her in turn, and grow old with. It was supposed to be Brandt, but he was gone. So far, none of the guys she dated lived up to him. Should she lower her expectations, or keep chancing hard-earned life lessons? She logged onto her email. Entries flowed into the inbox. No new message from Eldon.

She reached for the phone to call Taggart and stopped. There was no need to drive him crazy with more of *how-could-he-drop-me-out-of-thin-air* or *what's-wrong-with-me* rantings.

Instead, she scrolled for news on social media accounts. Eldon hadn't reached out anywhere. Her stomach turned. Was she wrong to think she deserved a man who'd pay attention to her, someone who wanted to spend time with a woman who enjoyed his company?

Momma's refrain played in her mind. *All a woman needs is a good man to take care of her.*

In Kylie's opinion, that was too one-sided. She and Brandt had taken care of each other. His death had crushed her for a long while. But when she came out of the fog of grief, she realized she wanted another man to take care of. And who would take care of her. Brandt's legacy of love gave her the courage to try again.

Getting in touch with Eldon appealed to her. The idea of him as a cowboy, the modern-day rancher, added to the romance. Maybe she'd infused too much of their carefree high school days onto the persona he presented now. She could hardly believe it when they seemed like a good match. They agreed they had something going because they'd liked each other in the

past.

Unlike Taggart, Rachel, her daughter, encouraged her to seek companionship. Rachel had adored Brandt. But she'd moved out in early summer, shortly after high school graduation. At times, Kylie had wished for more than one child, but she supposed God knew what He was doing. And since He took Brandt, she didn't give the Lord the time of day.

Shaking off Taggart, Rachel, and God, she logged on to Country Courting and typed Eldon's name. At least his profile was still there. Time to quit kicking herself and move on. Why not see if anyone new caught her eye? *Get out of your rut. Be a big girl.* Stop bugging Taggart with her sob stories of a romance that remained in her imagination.

She breezed through pictures of single men, and reared back. Wow did that guy look like Taggart. She clicked to enlarge the picture. *What in the world?* Why hadn't he told her? He'd never shown interest in a dating site. Or romance either, for that matter.

Her tummy reacted as though she'd never before seen Taggart's kind smile, the attractive lines around his nice lips. Faint crow's feet accented his deep blue eyes, and that rich russet hair that begged for a comb made her fingers itch.

Hold it. Lips and eyes. His profile drew her in. She took note of it all with a shift to her midsection. She must be nuts to notice such things about her best friend. As if she'd seriously consider him as someone of interest. Stunned by her reaction, she sat straight, and then twisted the diamond encrusted band on her right hand. At the sight of Taggart onscreen, she'd reacted as an interested woman, even a stalking stranger, rather than his friend.

She leaned forward and continued to scroll through what he'd posted as his profile, returned to glance at his picture between reading facts she already knew about him. "OK. This is all right. Taggart's a great person. He deserves the love of a good woman."

Taggart had been her husband's best friend, and now hers. He'd helped her through the worst times of her life. Had she kept him from meeting other women because he'd given her so much of his time? He had every right to enter the dating game. Only, why now, since he'd waited so long?

She ignored the tummy trill as she stared at his picture. Two minutes clicked by, according to the laptop time. She shut down everything and rose from the couch, grabbed what she needed to clean the bathroom, and counted on the activity to wipe out how much the idea of Taggart dating made her frown.

The phone rang an hour later.

Taggart's photo appeared on screen. She answered with a smile. "So dear friend, you've been holding out on me. I see you've joined the world of online availability. After I've told you all my tales of woe, that's a pretty brave move."

His familiar warm chuckle broadened her grin. "And why are you checking out new profiles? Have you given up on the rancher?"

"I thought Eldon was different." She lost her smile. "I'll give him a few more days."

"Unless he's changed over to the dark side of that last dude you met with, Eldon isn't looking for a woman he can exhibit narcissistic control over."

"Ouch. I didn't need that reminder." She attempted to tuck a shank of hair that barely skimmed the tip of her ear. "I haven't given up on him exactly."

His information is still listed. I believe Eldon is alive and kicking. He has a life. Acres of ranch land. Cows to take care of. Anything could have happened to occupy his time."

Taggart sighed. "You're grasping at making excuses for him, but he had no business not letting you know where you stood with him."

"I had high hopes. I even believed he was my last chance for romance, my connection with someone I already know, and my third-time's-the-charm guy."

"Don't give up. He may surprise you yet."

"I'm done talking about Eldon for the moment." She jiggled from one foot to the other. "Seriously, all the time I've known you, I thought you were a confirmed, single man."

"That's just it." His tone grew serious. "I've listened to the excitement in your voice, and your stories about the interesting men you've met. Somewhere along the line, I realized I've lost the romantic side of me. I mean, it's been so long. I don't think I know what to do first when it comes to dating."

"You've taken the first step, and sure surprised me by going on Country Courting. Remember when I asked why you hadn't checked out Christian dating sites?"

"People can change their minds. I like the country, just not wild about the steel guitar in country music. Besides, maybe I'll find someone to introduce me to the arts or expand my horizons. Show me different ways to spend my time."

Kylie closed her eyes and pictured his dear, honest face. "In all sincerity, if you need a date for a play or any other sophisticated event, come to Lincoln. I'd be happy to go with you. Just ask me. I haven't dressed

up for a long time. Is there a concert or specific occasion you have in mind?"

"I set up the singles site profile on a whim. Your enthusiasm over reconnecting with Eldon motivated me. After all, we're supposed to exercise brain cells as we age."

"That's a new one. We of maturing age date as an excuse to exercise our brain cells." She laughed. "Glad my influence is good for something."

"Don't make a big deal out of it, as though I plan to exploit someone by writing about them."

"Why not?" It was so much fun to give him a bad time. "You might meet an adventurous woman, someone who lives dangerously, whose story you can set down for the inspiration of others."

"I have thought of that. After all, I do make my living by meeting heroes and heroines, and then I write about them."

"You do a good job, Taggart. Just the idea of a cowboy makes me think of heroes. Do you believe heroes have something in their DNA that makes them that way?"

"I've never thought of it as genetic. To me, a hero is chosen by God to be heroic."

She overlooked the holy reference. "Like a cowboy."

"Speaking of which, are you ready to put your rancher in the past and move on?"

"Nope. I confess, I've missed hearing from Eldon. We sure didn't exploit one another for personal gain. I like the way he addresses me as 'lovely lady' in his emails. He's helped me forget my lonely existence."

"Thanks a whole bunch. You're making it sound as though I haven't been around. Sweet Kylie, I've told

you a hundred and one times. You can call on me any time, day or night. You have no excuse to be lonely. I've always tried to support you. If you want more friends, check out that Bible study I suggested. Large churches have singles groups. Although I'm the only single in our small group here. I'm used to it, but it gets old."

She wandered through the great room and remembered how as a teen she wound the telephone cord around her wrist while she talked to a boy. Taggart was far from the boy she once knew. "You're a charmer; I'll give you that. You've also known me so long that I don't have to tell you how I feel about the company of happy couples when I'm not half of a twosome."

"Sometimes I think you are your own worst enemy." He paused while she sputtered. "All jokes aside, you won't find your place in life until you're content where God places you."

"You circle around and refer to God or the Lord every time we talk. I haven't been able to count on Him. You know why." She didn't want to go through life alone, as half a couple. She refused a future of loneliness. Let Taggart rely on God. She hadn't been able to.

"Count on me. I'll always be around for you." Taggart's voice immediately calmed her. "I'll not let you down. We've been through too much for that to happen."

"I know. You've been there for me. I appreciate your friendship. We've chatted long enough. I'm ready for a warm bath and this puzzle that frustrates and dares me in turn." That sounded too suggestive, even if they were best friends. But he overlooked it. Taggart

would never make a come-on suggestion.

“Sounds like you could use some company. Want me to drive down this weekend?”

“I’d love to see you, but Wayne is too far.” She might change her mind if Eldon remained quiet. She ended the call, spied where the jigsaw puzzle piece fit.

Too bad Taggart didn’t have a special woman in his life to share cozy evenings. What if he did find a companion to replace time spent with her? They were together so much, it would be a new scenario, without him as a sounding board. Had Mom been wrong about needing a man? Maybe a lifetime love didn’t equal happiness.

3

Talk about a mess. Taggart dug his fingers into his temples. Why had he agreed to such a scheme? He'd allowed good ole buddy Eldon Wenz to coerce him into using his supposed gift of words to influence Kylie into falling for the other guy. *Look on the bright side; it's one way to pour out your feelings.*

Short and sweet at first, Taggart typed, putting out words for Eldon to use as his own, including a quote to make Eldon seem more polished as a reader of literature. Taggart played with different phrases. He'd make the missives longer and get to mushy stuff as they progressed.

Wait. Should he pray? Um. Was this wrong? No. Not if it was for Kylie's happiness.

He proceeded to argue with himself.

A quote came out of nowhere. William Wordsworth said, "Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart." Those words coming out of nowhere must mean it was a good idea to use quotes. Taggart proceeded.

To: Kylie

From: Eldon

Subject: Reconnecting

Please hear me out. I know messaging on our phones is

the ease of today, but I like the idea of emails. To me, they're more like writing love letters.

I've missed you, and I hope you aren't too upset about my absence. Ranch business must go on, you know. Then in the dead of night, thoughts of you keep me awake. I hope you're still interested in me, and that you haven't passed me over for some other country boy. Here's a quote for you. Corny, but at least it means something to me: "In winter's chill or summer's heat...Farmers and Ranchers work so the world can eat" —Unknown.

Taggart only wanted the best for Kylie. She deserved someone to love. A man who loved her in return. She'd ignored his own declaration of love. He chuffed a mirthless laugh and stared at the screen, fingers poised in position over the keyboard.

He'd ask Eldon to forward her messages, so he'd know how to answer Kylie. He hesitated yet again. This whole thing was so weird, him sending words written from his heart as a go-between. He stilled his fingers. In a matter of minutes, he'd created a triangle, a situationship.

All for Kylie's benefit, with Eldon as a potential love interest. The idea of Kylie's future with another man, even if Eldon was an old friend, sickened Taggart. He'd loved her since high school. And later, lived with the sin of coveting his best friend's wife.

He cracked his neck from side to side and finished.

In quiet moments I think of you. You're important to me. Write back soon, my lovely lady. Oh, and look for a new email address from me.

*Love,
Eldon*

Courting Country

Pitiful. At least he was expressing himself.
Even if Kylie had no idea the words belonged to
Taggart.