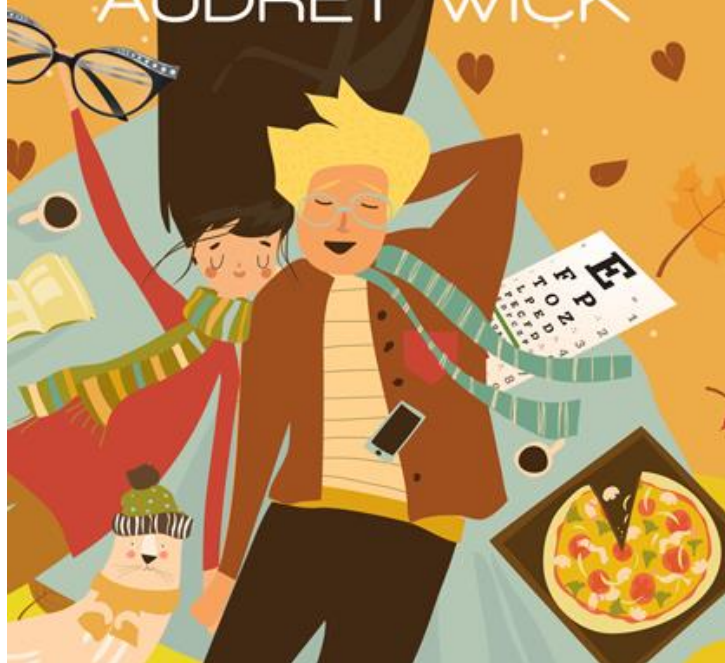


"A sweet romance to savor!"  
-author Beth Wiseman

# Seeing Us

AUDREY WICK



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## *Dedication*

To Yvette, a generous friend with a giving spirit.



## *What People are Saying*

### **Past Praise for Audrey Wick**

- Featured in the Family Fiction Summer Reading Guide
- Featured in Writer's Digest as a "Breaking In" profile
- Featured in Southern Writers Magazine as a "New Voice in Town" profile
- A Contemporarily Ever After Top Pick of the Week at Frolic

### **Past Praise for Island Charm**

"Who doesn't love a beach romance? Especially when it's delivered in a way that is both entertaining and well crafted. Wick has a way of creating characters who stay with you long after you read the last page. *Island Charm* is perfect for an arm-chair traveler longing for romance and a suntan without leaving the comfort of home." —Beth Wiseman, HarperCollins Christian Fiction bestselling author

"Wick creates an enchanting world of mellow island charm as a lovely backdrop for effortless, breezy romance." —Susan Sands, Tule Publishing author of the Alabama series

"Likeable characters in a charming setting make this story the perfect little escape. I could almost taste the key lime pie." —Beth Carpenter, Harlequin Heartwarming author of the Northern Lights series







# ONE

Hundreds of sets of eyes seemed to be staring at Danica Lara as she stepped into the waiting room of Spectacle Optique, Seguin's new eyewear apparel shop and optometry office. Rows upon rows of eyeglasses passed judgment from displays that surrounded the waiting room.

But she didn't want a shred of attention. Not any more than she had already received from her coworkers after mistaking the salt for sugar during her morning coffee routine. Or the jab from her best friend, Paige, when she'd sworn a quarter on the floor was her lost hinged hoop earring. Yet today, Danica felt like all eyes were on her anyway.

She hoped she wouldn't have to wait long for her appointment. She didn't know how much longer she could stand the staring.

Or her own vision.

She tugged nervously at her earlobe. The silver pair of drop lever-backs that dangled from them had not been not her first choice this morning, but at least she could find them both. Seeing clearly wasn't her strong suit as of late.

So at age thirty-two, she had made her first optometry appointment.

A too-perky receptionist greeted Danica as enthusiastically as if she were visiting her longtime hairstylist instead of an unfamiliar eye doctor. “We are so pleased to see you.”

Danica choked back a laugh at the irony of the greeting. She slid her identification and debit card toward the attendant.

“Dr. Urban will be with you in a moment. While you wait, feel free to look around.”

Danica signed her name on the digital check-in screen and wondered how many more puns the office staff had practiced. She wasn’t sure how much word play she could stand.

“He’s very proud of the new shop,” the receptionist said.

Simple ergonomic chairs and accent pieces in crisp white coloring spoke to their newness. Indeed, the environment was much more chic than Danica had expected. Not that she expected much. She just knew her vision hadn’t been the same in the past few months, and she’d bitten back her pride to schedule an appointment and find out why.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t see at all. She saw plenty of things perfectly: the clock on the wall that ticked by too slowly for eight-hour workdays, her wardrobe that could use an update, her singlehood status. It was just the little things she couldn’t see, like words on a printed page or her computer’s keyboard. She would have to adjust her distance in order to see straight, but even that practice wasn’t predictable anymore.

So here she was.

She chose to sit next to a tasteful end table that held a few magazines as well as the latest copy of the town's *Gazette*. Track lighting overhead softened the space between the gleaming wood floors, exposed brick walls, and high-beamed ceiling. Oblong mirrors in delicate frames interspersed between the displays of eyewear made the interior seem bigger than it was, which magnified how small Danica felt.

She tugged again at the lobe of her ear and tried to shake the feeling of being watched by those rows of frames. To distract herself, she dug into her large leather handbag for a package of almonds that were her go-to snack—and, today, the main entrée of her to-go lunch. Popping almonds with one hand, she reached for the newspaper with the other before snapping it open on her lap to pass the time.

Five minutes and one *Gazette* police report later, her name was called by a second employee whom Danica followed into the examination room hallway. The blonde, who looked to be several years younger than Danica, introduced herself as Iris. "Like the flower." She smiled, prim yet peculiar.

Danica nodded a greeting, thinking an eye comparison would have been much more apt.

"Right this way." Iris led her around a corner.

Danica followed her until she felt the blunt force of something completely immovable hit her forehead. Wincing in pain, she squeezed her eyes shut.

And then everything went black.

~\*~

Dr. Grady Urban was still learning how to schedule effectively. At times, an appointment went smooth as butter. Timing was exactly as expected, and he could stay on track client to client to minimize wait time. However, some clients demanded more hand-holding than others.

Poppy McDougal was one such client. She looked like she had walked off the set of a stereotypical southern chic-flick with mile-high hair and all manner of cosmetics applied thick as plaster. In spite of her waxy lipstick, her mouth smacked when she spoke her southern drawl, and whenever she leaned close to Grady, his nostrils filled with the sickening scent of musky perfume that smelled like it had expired—or been part of Mrs. McDougal’s beauty routine for the better part of the century.

“And if you look right here”—Poppy grabbed Grady’s hand—“you’ll see that this part of my eye is bigger than this part over here. Now tell me why that is.”

Grady had finished her routine examination, and he hadn’t noticed any abnormalities. “What part, exactly?”

“Right here,” she insisted, anchoring the skin beneath one eye with two fingers and pulling downward as if drawing open a window shade. “See?”

*I don’t.* But Grady forced his most thoughtful face as he pretended to consider. “From your transfer records, your vision hasn’t changed in the ten years

since your cataract was removed.”

“But, you see, honey, that’s the problem.” Poppy released her fingers as she sat back in the examination chair, the skin not as quick to slide back into place as the rest of her body. “That’s why I came to you. Because you’re new, and I think you might find something about me that my other doctor has missed.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, you’re fresh out of school and smart, and I can tell you take good care of people.” Grady had to smile at that since he was trying hard to balance patient demands with office responsibilities. Optometry school, shadowing other professionals, and a formal internship had taught him what he needed to know about the profession, but he still felt woefully unprepared by the business side of Spectacle Optique. He had picked a desirable location in the Texas hill country, just thirty miles east of San Antonio. Seguin had deep-rooted history, pecan-tree-lined streets, and a quaint downtown. But establishing himself was harder than choosing a pretty location.

Three months into this professional venture, every new day still felt like he was posing as the owner of someone else’s business. Although, the debt of his office’s start-up was confirmation that this reality was his own. He needed all the patients he could get.

And he was learning to handle them with patience, too.

“Thank you,” Grady offered.

Poppy winked at him, her lashes so full of thick mascara that they nearly stuck together in the same

manner as her lips. "You are such a good-looking doctor. Handsome as they come. And strapping like mahogany wood."

Grady nearly choked as he swallowed the bizarre compliment. Uncomfortable flattery from a woman old enough to be his grandmother wasn't exactly his idea of an ego stroke, but he was learning how to adjust to the personality types of people of all ages in Seguin.

Poppy tapped her ring finger as she shook her head. "How you're not married is a mystery to me. Maybe if you get out of this dark room once in a while, you'll find a good Texas woman who just might—"

A loud noise from the hallway stopped Poppy and caused Grady to whip his head in that direction. A cry of "Dr. Urban!" rang in the wake of desperation that continued outside the patient room. A shocking cacophony of voices and moans and apology accosted him when he opened the door to the scene.

"What happened?" he asked.

Iris was kneeling by a woman who writhed on the floor clutching her forehead. Contents of the patient's purse splayed across the floor.

"She bumped her head, Dr. Urban." Iris implored the woman to let her see as she kept her hands in place and twisted out of her view.

And even though he had a sense, he asked anyway. "What did you hit?"

"The wall!" Iris and the woman screamed in unison.

That wall. Grady's own head shared agony at the situation. He'd known that load-bearing brick column

was trouble from the minute the architect insisted it had to be kept in the renovation. Rounding the corner from the waiting room, he had worried it was too much in the way. But that's what he got with an old building. The quirks, he was told, added charm.

Now, looking at the woman who rolled to her side still clutching her head, he was ready to wrap that column in bubble wrap and have a firmer word with the architect. "I'm so sorry. What can I get you?"

The woman moaned as Grady bent to help her to her feet. At least his newest patient wasn't unconscious. "What do you need?" Grady offered the question to both.

"I think Danica is going to need an ice pack." Iris answered for the woman.

"Right," Grady said, completely out of his element. He dealt with eyes, not head trauma. "I'll get you something after I help you." He extended one hand and lifted under Danica's arm to raise her into a sitting position before addressing her in his gentlest voice. "How does that feel?"

She squinted at him through her one unshielded eye. "Peachy," she deadpanned.

At least she had a sense of humor.

"Iris, can you help her into the examination room? I'll get something cool for her head."

"Sure thing."

Grady made sure Danica was steady on her feet with Iris before they proceeded.

"Are we done here?" Poppy yelled through the din.

Samantha, the receptionist, appeared from around the corner. "Follow me, Mrs. McDougal. I'll get you all settled out here."

"Don't settle me like that one," she quipped, as if all three of them were directly responsible for the hit Danica took. "And what are these?" She froze in step to consider the spackling of tiny oblong objects that remained on the floor from Danica's spilled purse. "Did this woman lose her marbles or what?"

"We'll clean that up in a moment." Samantha urged Poppy on. "Just step right this way."

"I'll twist my ankle if I'm not careful."

"Take it easy." Samantha kicked a few of the objects out of the way. "They're just almonds."

Poppy's hand went to her chest. "I have a death allergy to peanuts, you know." Her face blanched. "And you didn't even ask me about that on any of the paperwork." She stepped through the mess with her nose high in the air.

"We're sorry about all of this, Mrs. McDougal. Let me offer you something complimentary to make up for the inconvenience."

Mrs. McDougal straightened and walked ahead. "Well, I could use a new notepad to use for my grocery list ..."

"Quite a *spectacle* I've caused, eh doc?" Danica's duplicitous question lightened the mood in spite of Grady's shock and professional embarrassment.

"I'll say."

"Have a seat here, Miss Lara." Iris gestured to a chair in an open exam room. "I want to check your



pulse. Then we'll attend to your head."

"Let me find a cold compress. Be right back." Grady jettied around the corner to the only spot where cold items were kept. The breakroom mini fridge held a few beverages and the employees' sack lunches. He hadn't even stocked the tiny freezer space with ice trays.

Grady swung open the refrigerator door, seeing only one thing that would work.

Bingo.

He raced back to the examination room where Iris was assessing their optometry-client-turned-head-injury patient. "Have you ever had a concussion?"

"You mean before today?" Danica rubbed the side of her forehead.

This was far worse than Grady thought. "Do you really think you have a concussion?" His own mind raced with anxiety and fear for his new patient. Then there were more far-reaching issues, like the potential for a lawsuit.

"I have no idea." Danica squeezed her eyes shut.

"I just want to know what I'm dealing with." Grady's words were as gentle as his care.

"A patient who lost her marbles. According to that one." Danica kept her eyes closed but nodded in the direction of the doorway, as if to give a final jab to Mrs. McDougal.

"That one," Iris conceded, her voice lowered as if she were sharing a secret, "might just make us lose ours, too."

Grady stepped closer to Danica.

She opened her eyes.

"Maybe something cool will help your head?" He guided Danica's hand in a tradeoff for what was in his as he cupped his hand around hers so she didn't slacken her grip until the object made contact with her forehead.

"Mercy," she winced before sucking in a breath. "That's cold."

"That," Grady insisted, "will help with the swelling."

Iris cut Grady a look.

If her widened eyes could talk, they would have asked, "Are you kidding me?"

"It's all we had," Grady mouth backed with a shrug.

"I don't even want to see myself." Danica squeezed her eyes shut tighter as Iris placed two fingers on her exposed wrist to check her pulse.

"Heart rate is right at one hundred," she assessed. "Probably a little high for you. Let's get you calm."

"I think," Danica started, her words labored, "I passed that mile marker at the last turn."

Grady smiled at her continued quips, although he could sense her lethargy. And that part worried him. It worried him as much as his own uncertainty about his ability to sustain a new business, replete with accidents, surprises, potential lawsuits, and all. "We'll take care of you," he tried to assure Danica as much for her sake as his own.

She removed the cold object from her head, opened her eyes, and held it at arm's length. Her face

contorted. "And so you're starting with this?"

He'd wondered how long it would take her to question his choice of a makeshift cold pack. And now he had his answer: less than two minutes.

"Is this a frozen yogurt pop?"

"It's really all we had." He forced a sheepish shrug. He could see the lawsuit details outlining right before his eyes. Patient hits head. Patient gets frostbite from a frozen yogurt pop. Patient sues Spectacle Optique for a million dollars.

"*Hmph.*" Danica turned over the pop.

"I think it's Greek yogurt. High in protein. And protein helps a body heal after trauma."

"Trauma?" Danica raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I assume that fall was traumatic for you." Even though he didn't want to give her any ideas, he wanted to acknowledge the accident just the same.

"This whole visit has been traumatic. Did you know I've never been to an optometrist before today?"

Grady hadn't gotten that far with her. "No. I didn't know that."

She tapped a finger atop the yogurt pop. "First visit. And I make a total fool of myself."

"Now, now," Iris soothed. "That's not true at all. We feel so bad about all this—"

"That your visit is going to be complimentary." Grady lunged at the offer to do something for her—anything at this point. "And we'll even throw in the yogurt." It was Iris's afternoon snack, but he'd worry about that later. His young assistant technician was much easier to please than a client who might just hit

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him with a negligence legal suit bigger than the state of Texas.

## TWO

Danica wished the questions would quit coming. "Miss Lara, are you dizzy? Faint? Nauseous?"

*Kind of hungry. For yogurt, actually.* But Danica knew that answer would make her sound irrational. "I'm fine. Really."

Now that the shock of the fall had worn off, embarrassment trumped her emotions. A small lump was forming at the corner of her forehead, though it was going to be annoying rather than anything truly traumatic. She'd blacked out as much from the fall itself as the impact, but that was short-lived. She had sustained worse injuries over the years, and she judged this was nothing a few more minutes of cold compression and a couple of over-the-counter pills couldn't fix.

"Do you have any ibuprofen?"

"We're not supposed to give oral medicine to patients." Iris spoke as if she were reading from a safety manual. "It's against regulation."

"But dispensing yogurt is fine?" Danica couldn't help prodding with her words, though Iris seemed to ignore them.

"Iris," Dr. Urban addressed his technician, "could you bring Miss Lara a bottle of water? There are some