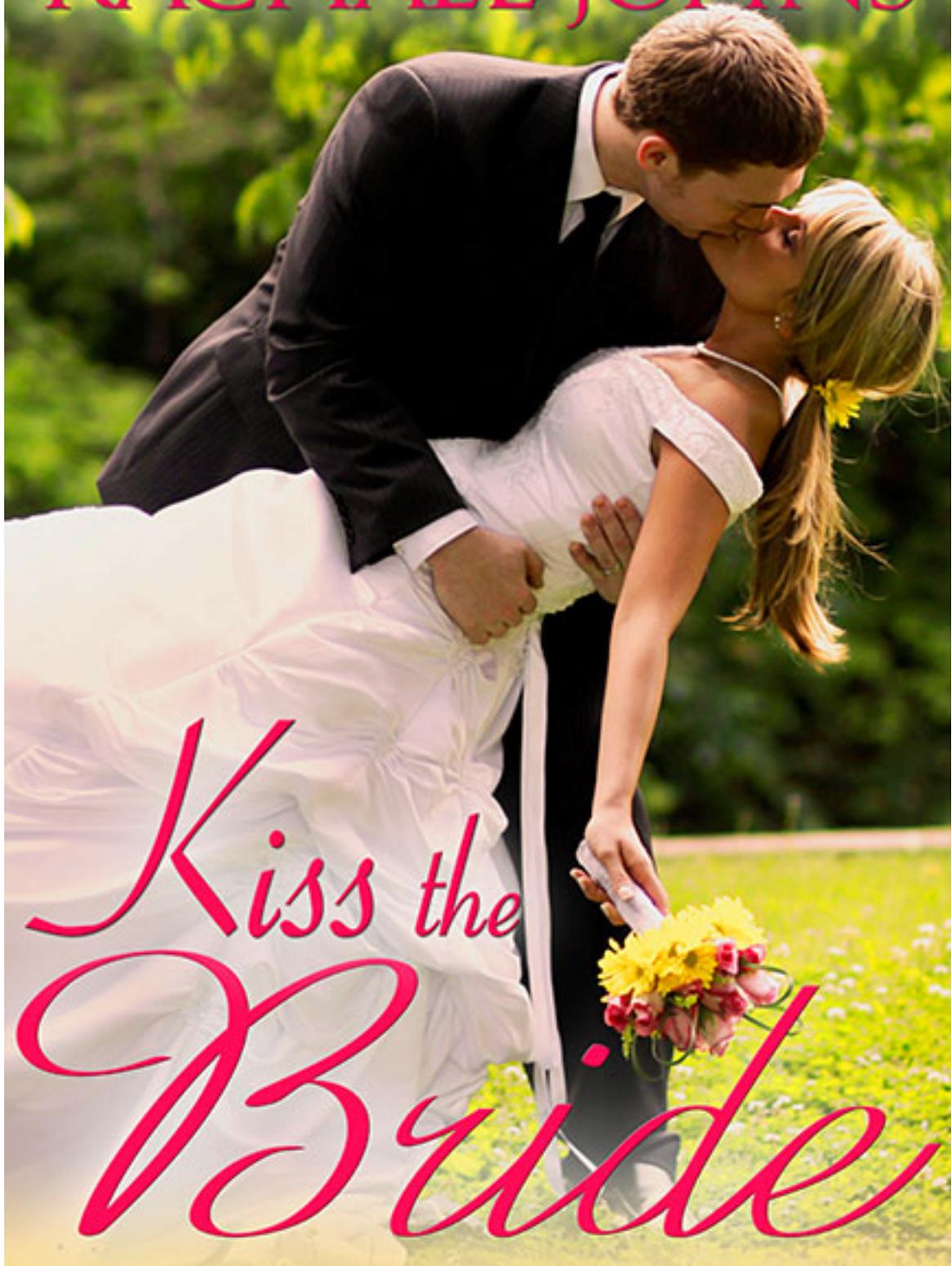


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Chapter One

“Absolutely not!” Magdalena Davis looked up from her laptop and shook her head at her fifteen-year-old daughter, Bella. For the last half an hour Bella had been trying to convince her to audition to sing for the upcoming celebrity wedding that was currently the talk of Marietta. NancyLynn Pruitt who’d been a few years below Mags at school had made it big in Hollywood on the popular TV drama *Sultry Suburbs* and for some crazy reason had chosen to bring her groom, also a celebrity, home for the wedding. She supposed she should be happy that said upcoming nuptials were overshadowing her own return to town, which had been almost fifteen years in the making.

“But Mom,” Bella whined as she flicked her long blonde hair over her shoulder, “You’re the best singer I know. You’d totally rock this.”

“You obviously don’t know many singers.”

Bella tried another angle. “Come on... it’s the least you can do after forcing me to come and live in this backwater town.”

Mags raised an eyebrow. “That’s emotional blackmail.”

Besides, if anything Bella was happier about coming to stay in Marietta than Mags was. Her daughter had already made a number of friends at the local high school and started horse-riding lessons, which she’d always wanted but never had the chance to do living in the city. Sure, Mags wanted to be near her sister Selah and Selah’s fiancé Levi and she’d always hoped one day to make peace with her parents, but everything about being back in Marietta was hard.

“Mother, are you listening to a word I say?”

Mags refocused to see Bella with her hands perched on her hips. Sometimes she seemed a lot older than she actually was. Maybe that was because she and Mags were nearer in age than

the average mom and daughter and, because of that, they'd always been close. Mags often had to remind herself she was a parent first, a friend second, but at other times, due to her own past, she was probably a tad over protective.

“Yes,” she lied.

“Yes? You'll do it. I knew you would.” Bella leapt up from her chair, punched the air and then ran around the table and kissed Mags on the cheek. She was halfway out the kitchen, screaming to Selah and Levi who were watching TV in the living room by the time Mags realized what had happened.

“I didn't say...” Mags called out but it was futile. Her voice was lost in the excited shrieks of her younger sister and daughter. She rolled her eyes. When it came to convincing her to do things she wasn't sure about, those two were as bad as each other.

How terrible could it be? Truth was, she didn't have a bad voice and she enjoyed belting out tunes, even if the only place she ever did it these days was in the shower. All she had to do was sing one song and then it would be over. Everyone would be focused on the star of the show anyway – Jake Kohl, the country music heartthrob who'd recently moved to Marietta and was auditioning female vocalists to sing with him at the big wedding – and Bella wouldn't be able to berate her for not trying. Then they could get on with their lives and Mags could focus on the real reason she'd come home. Her mother.

She sighed, thinking about the news Selah had given her in a phone call a month ago. That the mom she hadn't spoken to since before Bella was born had cancer and might never recover. A lump formed in her throat and Mags tried to swallow it as she heard footsteps coming toward her. The blame couldn't entirely be laid at her parents' feet – she'd refused to open up to them, refused to be honest about her situation, because she'd been too damn ashamed.

“You're really going to do this?” Selah asked, appearing in the doorway. Her chocolate brown hair was tied up in a high ponytail and although she was beautiful, Mags couldn't help but

notice the dull grey shadows beneath her eyes. Following the high of reuniting with the love of her life, the last month or so, with their mother's cancer, had taken its toll on Selah. As the older sister, Mags felt protective of Selah and wanted to do something to make her smile again.

Maybe an audition would give them all something fun to focus on.

"Yes," she said, smiling despite herself. "Looks like I am."

"This is a very bad idea, let's go home." Her whole body jittery, Mags turned away from the long line of women winding out of the town hall building and down the footpath, but Bella grabbed hold of her hand and yanked her back.

"No, Mom, it's a cool idea. You're going to be a star."

"I don't want to be a star," Mags hissed, not willing to explain to her daughter that she already had enough of a reputation in Marietta. The kind of reputation no one wanted. The kind of reputation you're tarnished with when you get pregnant at seventeen. Bella knew most of this story but Mags didn't think she understood how much importance small towns placed on such things. Wherever Mags went she felt like eyes were glued on her, tongues wagging in gossip – *there goes Pastor Davis's fallen daughter and her illegitimate child*. Ridiculous that anyone thought that way in this day and age, but small towns held onto traditional values longer than big cities and there were a lot of people in Marietta who still thought Magdalena Davis a Jezebel.

"Yes, you do. Come on." Bella tugged harder on her hand and Selah took hold of her other one. There was no escape.

"You're awesome at singing," Selah said, "How many times did you tell me when we were growing up that you dreamed of being the next Shania Twain?"

"I'm awesome at singing in the *shower*. I haven't sung in public since high school."

"Better late than never," Bella said, practically dancing along on the sidewalk.

"You're incorrigible, you know that." But Mags couldn't help but smile.

Bella grinned cheekily. “You’re the one that’s always telling me to chase my dreams, reach for the stars and all that crap.”

“Don’t say crap.”

“*You* just did.”

Teenagers, they were exasperating. Although Magdalena had to admit, she’d gotten pretty lucky with Bella so far. Despite having no dad to make her toe the line or read the riot act, she didn’t push the boundaries. Then again, she was only fifteen, maybe her time would come. Ignoring her daughter’s cheek, she tried a different tack.

“But look at the queue; we’ll be here all night, way past your bed time.”

Bella rolled her eyes – something she’d gotten very good at since hitting puberty. “Mom, it’s not a school night and I’m not a little kid anymore. Stop making excuses.”

“Oh...” She twisted a few locks of her hair, which she’d recently chopped short into a bob so she couldn’t be tempted to suck on it when she got nervous. Being back in Marietta made her very nervous. “I dunno.”

“Look, Mom, worst case scenario you make a total fool of yourself, but at least we’ll get a few moments up close and personal with Jake Kohl. Surely, that’s worth a bit of embarrassment?”

It was Magdalena’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Isn’t Jake a little old for you?” Granted, he was hot property and anyone who loved country music—which they both did—knew he was one of the best, but Bella hadn’t shown much interest in boys yet. *Thank God.*

Bella waved a hand in front of her face. “Of course, and he’s too young for you, but that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy looking. He’s so hot!”

Magdalena couldn’t help but laugh. Her girl was growing up. “Okay. I’ve got an idea then. Why don’t *you* audition?”

“Now, you’re just being silly. For one, I’m not old enough. Jake said the singer must be over eighteen and for two, I couldn’t sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* in tune if my life depended on it. But you... you have an amazing voice and I shouldn’t be the only one that gets to hear it.”

“Amen,” said Selah, laughing.

It was all right for them; they weren’t about to make a fool of themselves in front of half the town.

“Oh, look, the queue’s moving.” Bella bounced up and down as if the sidewalk beneath her feet were a trampoline, whereas Mags thought she might be sick. She pressed a hand against her stomach, thankful she hadn’t eaten much at dinner, and tried to relax as the crowd swept her forward.

Everyone was crazy. Pushing and shoving in their eagerness to get seats at the front of the hall, like crazed shoppers at the post-Christmas sale. Surely all these people weren’t planning on auditioning to sing with Jake at the wedding. If so, they’d be here all night and well into next week.

“Hi Selah, Hi Magdalena.” A couple of girls she recognized from high school waved from the other end of a row of plastic chairs as Mags, her sister, and daughter found seats a few rows from the front.

Mags waved back and then glanced around the crowd. The hall was almost full now and she spotted a fair few familiar faces. She and Bella had been in town a month, but she’d spent most of that hiding out at Selah and Levi’s ranch or sitting with her mother between chemotherapy sessions. Things were still strained between her and her parents – they hadn’t really talked about the issues that had divided them – but they’d welcomed Bella with open arms, told Mags they were sorry for being silent for so long, and that they loved her, and for that she was grateful. Magdalena could count on her hands the number of times she’d stepped out on Main Street and she’d only been into Grey’s once for a drink with her best-friend, Lisa Renee, who now owned Married in Marietta. Despite the cocktails and Lisa’s cajoling, she hadn’t been able to relax.

It was stupid to feel so self-conscious, it wasn’t like she’d been the only single teenage mom in the state of Montana, but she kept a secret close to her chest and small town folks hated that. They felt

hard done by if they didn't know everybody else's business. Selah and Lisa had admitted that every now and then people still grilled them about her, trying to trick them into giving away the identity of Bella's father, but they couldn't say because she'd never even told them. Hell, Bella didn't even know the truth. Up until now, Mags had managed to gloss over the issue whenever it came up – telling Bella her dad was dead – but the time would come when she had to come clean.

“It's starting.” Bella grabbed Mags' hand, awakening her from her reverie as a hush fell over the crowd around them. The stage lit up with bright lights and then Jane from the Marietta Chamber of Commerce walked into the center over to the microphone.

“Good evening, everyone.” Jane, who according to Selah had recently married Sam McCullough, beamed out at the excited crowd. “Thank you all for coming tonight, it's just fabulous to see such a great turn out. I know we're all counting down to the biggest wedding Marietta has seen in years and are so grateful that Nancy has chosen our little town to marry her beau, handsome Jared Lovell. Not only are they marrying here but Nancy and Jared want to feature as many locals and local businesses in their big day, which is why I know you're all here.”

Cheers and applause erupted in the audience.

Jane's smile grew even wider and she leaned in closer to the mic. “Which brings me to the reason we're all here specifically. Our own country music star, Jake Kohl, is going to sing a couple of special songs at the wedding but he needs a female co-singer for the lovely romantic duets and, in the name of keeping it in Marietta, Jake is going to choose one of you. So, without further ado, let's bring Jake out and get this show started!”

Mags stifled a giggle. Funny how Jane spoke as if Jake had been a Marietta local forever, whereas according to Selah who'd interviewed him when he came to sing at last year's rodeo, he'd only moved to town since then. As a rule, most people had to have been born here or lived in the region for at least a few decades before receiving such an honor. But there seemed to be exceptions – Jake had wealth, fame, and good looks on his side. Actually, good looks didn't even begin to cover what Jake had.

A hot flush swept through Magdalena as dark, curly-haired Jake appeared and waved at everyone. Even from here, she could see a shadow of very sexy stubble falling across his jawline, the curls of his slightly long hair dusting his collar. His playboy smile lit up the room, yet he seemed so down to earth in his faded denim jeans and red, checked shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing toned forearms tanned to perfection. She'd thought herself immune to hot guys but her body thought differently. It was easy to understand the hype about this one.

Flashes of cell cameras filled the air and a few people shrieked. She heard someone call out, "Marry me and let me have your babies, Jake," amongst other impudent things.

Ignoring the catcalls, Jake dipped his head to speak into the microphone and his voice was as delicious in person as it was recorded. "Hey, you guys. I'm stoked to be in Marietta and can't wait to celebrate Nancy and Jared's big day." He spoke as if he knew the happy couple and perhaps he did. Didn't all celebrities know each other? "I'm not going to waste time with small-talk as we have a huge number of auditions to get through tonight. When I call your name, you'll come up to the stage, hand your back-up CD to Piper and then head straight over to the microphone. We don't have time for mishaps or dithering about. After everyone has sung their song, I'll read out the short list of people I want back up on stage to sing a duet with me. You all with me?"

"Yes," shouted the crowd in unison. All except Magdalena. Her heart was beating faster than ever and she was anxiously looking around for the nearest escape route.

"A special thanks to Jane for helping organize these auditions and for Piper Tierney from Marietta High for helping with the backing music. She's also kindly agreed to play the piano for the duets." He clapped his hands and smiled over at Piper as the rest of the hall joined in. The look Piper gave him back made Mags wonder if something was going on between the two of them. She didn't know Piper that well as the other woman was quite a few years younger, but she'd taken singing lessons with Piper's mother and remembered Piper as being shy and self-conscious due to a long birthmark on the

side of her face. From this angle and due to the artificial stage lighting, Magdalena couldn't quite tell if the mark was still there or maybe Piper had had surgery.

"Right, that's the logistics out of the way. Let's get started. Good luck to you all," finished Jake, before glancing down at his piece of paper. "First up tonight is Alana Addis."

There were squeals in the row behind them and Mags forgot about Piper, turning slightly to see a redhead she didn't recognize who didn't look much older than Bella stand and make her way forward. As directed, she climbed the steps onto the stage, handed her music to Piper and then crossed into the center to stand in front of the microphone. The hall fell silent again as Alana stood staring out at her audience while she waited for the music to start. She had a massive grin on her face and had doused herself in glitter. Judging by appearances, she wasn't a fraction as nervous about this as Magdalena.

Alana sang one of Taylor Swift's older hits and it wasn't bad but Magdalena wouldn't have said it was fantastic either. Then the next victim was called onto the stage. Lucy Bennett skipped up with perhaps even more enthusiasm than Alana had and she looked young, too. Magdalena felt like a grandma compared to all the other women who were auditioning and sent a silent prayer skywards for an earthquake or something that might halt proceedings.

"They're doing alphabetical order, Mom," Bella whispered, reaching out to squeeze Mags' hand again. "You'll be up soon."

Magdalena gulped. Either God wasn't listening or He was in dire need of a good laugh.

Three more women auditioned – two average, one quite good – and then Jake called "Magdalena Davis" and she almost fell off her chair.

Jake Kohl couldn't believe life had come to this. Singing at weddings; next it would be bar mitzvahs and funerals. The fact that this was a celebrity wedding didn't make it any better – he didn't even *like* the bride and groom. Well, he supposed Nancy was okay. He'd met her at a few events over the years, but she'd rapidly dropped in his opinion the moment she'd announced her engagement to Jared "Love

‘em and love ‘em again ” Lovell. What *did* she see in him? It wasn’t like he was the only good-looking man in Hollywood and Nancy must have enough money in her bank account not to need someone to support her, so that only left love. He shook his head, totally perplexed at the thought.

Of course, when Nancy’s assistant had approached him to sing at the wedding, he’d known he couldn’t refuse. The people of Marietta were beside themselves with excitement over the upcoming nuptials and he, a recent-comer to town, hadn’t wanted to be a spoilsport. But he’d almost backed out when the assistant told him Nancy wanted a female to accompany him and that she didn’t want him to fly in another singer, but to choose someone from the town. What was that about? It was a ludicrous idea, especially when they had less than a month to rehearse together.

So far, the pickings had been pretty dismal. Plenty of enthusiasm but not much natural talent. He kept drifting off during the songs, dreaming of a cold beer and kicking back in front of the TV. There was still a long list of names to get through, and he only hoped a miracle would occur soon and someone would come on stage that could actually hold a tune.

He forced a smile at a Stephanie Crisp as she put the microphone back in its holder and walked off the stage. Sure, she looked the part in her tight sparkly top and short denim skirt but that was about all she had going for her. Then he glanced down at his list and called out to the crowd, “Magdalena Davis.”

He couldn’t help but hear a few hurried whispers in the audience as a tall, blonde woman rose in her seat and then headed up onto the stage. She had perfect posture to match her toned body, and she held her head high. As she walked, her wavy bob swished around her pale, but golden, face. As she got closer, he couldn’t help but stare. And when she crossed the stage, grabbed hold of the microphone and then turned to look at him with her sultry brown eyes, he thought he’d been sucker punched in the gut. He’d been around a lot of beautiful women in his time but no one had ever taken his breath away as she did. Not even Chloe.

Please God, he thought as he gave her an encouraging smile, *let this beauty be able to sing.*

His prayers were answered the moment she opened her mouth. She'd barely sung half a sentence of Shania Twain's *That Don't Impress Me Much*, and he knew she was the one. Where had she come from? Perhaps she was from out of town – Livingston or Bozeman - because in the few months he'd been in Marietta he'd seen nothing of her. And hers wasn't a face, or body, he'd easily forget. Or voice. Just... *wow*.

His mouth gaped open and he was hanging on her every word even though he must have heard this song a million times before. But not even Shania sang it like this. Magdalena's voice carried far out to the back of the hall as she wooed the audience. While the other contenders had chosen recent hits, she'd chosen one that half the girls here would be too young to remember, and she sang it with sass and confidence. Jake wished he were sitting in the front row instead of off to the side where he couldn't see her eyes properly. Couldn't see the expression on her face.

So, instead, he closed his eyes and let her voice wash over him. There was no chance of falling asleep with this woman at the microphone. As he listened, he started to wonder what *would* it take to impress her? How would it feel to be the one to keep her warm at night? She stirred things inside him he hadn't felt in far too long. Whether this was a good thing or not he wasn't sure, but he couldn't wait to get up on stage with her and sing. Because without a doubt, Magdalena Davis was the best, most talented singer of the bunch so far and, looks aside, he'd be a fool not to consider her.

As she finished and put the microphone back in its stand, the crowd in the hall gave her a standing ovation. A shocked look came over her face as if she'd only just realized she'd been singing for an audience. Her face flushed the most beautiful shade of pink and his applause was louder than anyone's.

And then, she turned and fled off the stage as if she were about to be sick.