

Stewart McKeegan slammed on the brakes of his pickup. Tires spat up loose gravel then screeched as they skidded across the pavement. Panting, he white-knuckled the steering wheel as his heart hammered against his ribs. A lump formed in his throat. Where had she come from? She couldn't have been there a second ago. He would have noticed her. With a deep breath, he sought to quiet his fast-beating heart.

I almost hit her!

As he began to exit the truck to assist the woman, she slapped the top of his vehicle, glared at him, and continued walking across the street.

Stewart stared after her. Such a commendable display of class.

Shaking his head, he sat back down and closed the truck door. Still shaken, he drove on with a bit more care and parked in front of his original intended destination, a timeworn coffee shop, The Morning Glory Café. Like many other places in town, it had been around since before he could recall. He enjoyed his mornings there drinking coffee and reading the paper. A real newspaper. By turning the pages, he could listen to the distinct rustling noise that only a newspaper could create. He could feel the smooth, ink-laden sheets of paper beneath his fingers.

Maybe coffee wasn't needed today. The almost-accident made him feel more than alert.

Pushing open the door, the bell's familiar *thunk* greeted him. It never did ring, it just *thunked*. The scent of coffee and cinnamon rolls struck his nostrils, and he inhaled deeply in appreciation. That was the aroma he enjoyed most.

"Hey! Good morning, Stewart!" Ruby Lou called out from behind the counter. She'd been a fixture in town for a very long time. He had no idea of her age, but she never seemed to slow down.

He nodded to her. "Morning, Ruby Lou. How's business?"

"Same as always." She grinned. "I'll bring your coffee and roll right over."

The table he customarily used was deserted. He smiled. Some things just never changed. Sitting down, he unfurled the newspaper he had carried in under his arm and commenced paying no attention to the other customers.

As the coffee and cinnamon roll were set before him, he briefly shifted his attention from the paper to thank Ruby Lou.

"It's you!" exclaimed the waitress delivering his order, her voice dripping venom. "Just because you drive a pickup truck doesn't mean you own the roads. You could kill a person with the way you drive. Were you so preoccupied with texting that you missed seeing me?"

Drawing a slow deep breath, Stewart placed his paper on the table and met the stranger's angry gaze. "Nice to meet you, too. I never text and drive. In fact, I hardly text. I like to hear a person's voice when I want to have a conversation with someone. No mistaken conclusions to be drawn."

He gave a shrug to the beautiful spitfire. “And I’m sorry for the close call. In general, people commonly check both ways before they cross the street.”

She narrowed her eyes until they were mere slits. So, he hadn’t made any friends today.

“I’m Stewart. It’s nice to meet you, and again I apologize.” This time, he offered her a warm smile.

She answered him with a slight nod. “I’m Aurora. I just started working here. I’d best get back before Ruby Lou decides I’m not right for the job after all.”

Instead of picking up his paper, he watched her walk away. Now, why would Ruby Lou think the new waitress wouldn’t be suitable?

Entitled. One word to describe that man, Stewart. Arrogant was another word. To think she’d have to refill his coffee in a few minutes.

A sharp pain pierced her jaw from clenching her teeth. She needed to smile, needed to keep her job. Lately, it had been hard to smile effortlessly. A girl had to eat and pay rent and put gas in her car and... She sighed. All she wanted was to hide away. Here in Tyrone, it had looked like it might be easier to do that. The town was small and old.

Had she made a mistake? Would she stick out like a sore thumb in a place so small? She curled her lips into a smile as she cleared the counter of plates and coffee cups. This town was about as far as her tank of gas would allow. Lately, times had been incredibly dark, too dark.

“Aurora? Kindly grab the pot and top up all the customers’ cups.”

Did parents really give their children names like Ruby Lou? Maybe way out here in the middle of Nowhere, Montana, they did.

The sound of her high-heeled shoes echoed on the wooden floor. New shoes were in order if she didn’t want to end up with chronic sore feet. Maybe if her tips were good? Her earnings were low yesterday, and today’s outlook wasn’t any brighter. What did regular people consider a good amount?

Today, a reasonable sum might be adequate to purchase a good pair of sneakers.

She smiled and nodded while filling one cup after another. Turning, she had just started back toward the kitchen when she felt the warmth of someone watching her.

Gritting her teeth, she turned, and sure enough, she’d forgotten Stewart. Approaching his table with a smile, she quickened her pace, fearing he would complain to Ruby Lou.

“Thought I forgot you? Here you go.” She filled his coffee. His lack of a smile in response was noticeable.

“Really, I didn’t forget you. I’ve never waitressed before yesterday. Look at the shoes I have. I doubt other waitresses wear high heels.” She anxiously awaited his response, feeling unnerved by her own rambling.

“You seem to have the hang of it, Aurora. Why did you wear heels today if you worked yesterday?”

“I only have high heels. I didn’t pack very well. I was unsure of where my journey would lead me. Ruby is signaling to me. Talk to you soon?”

Not waiting for a reply, she hurried toward Ruby Lou. Had she done something wrong? Waitressing was harder than it had seemed at first glance. She had spent a significant amount of time in restaurants without ever thinking about the server.

“Ruby Lou, what else would you like me to do?” Was there enough eagerness in her voice?

“It’s best not to waste Mr. McKeegan’s time. He comes here for peace and quiet. I generally don’t chit chat with him.”

“You mean Stewart? He’s a nice enough man. He almost hit me with his truck when I was taking my break, so we got off to a bad start.” She sighed. “I’ll let him read his newspaper in peace.”

Ruby Lou smiled. “I do believe you’ll work out just fine.” She turned and walked into the kitchen.

Behind the counter, Aurora hurriedly made another pot of coffee.

“Would you like anything else?” she asked the three unkept men eating at the counter. “I’ll have fresh coffee for you in a minute.”

“Did you help make the pies this morning?” The cowboy in the middle asked. His name was Rick, she remembered.

“I did help to take them out of the oven. All the credit goes to Ruby Lou. She is a wonder.”

“She ain’t as pretty as you,” the man on Rick’s right commented.

“I think she’s very lovely. You can tell by her bright face she has a good heart. Excuse me, I need to take care of a customer at the register.”

“Let the high and mighty McKeegan wait,” Rick suggested. “We’re having a nice conversation.”

Glancing at Stewart, she expected to see a big frown. Instead, he approached her. He gave a nod to the cowboys.

“You don’t want her getting in trouble with Ruby Lou. It’s her second day,” Stewart said.

“No. We don’t want to be on Ruby Lou’s bad list,” Rick said with a chuckle. “She holds a grudge.”

“I’ll be right there, Stewart,” Aurora said.

“Fill their coffees first.” Stewart shrugged. “I can wait.”

The three cowboys looked surprised.

After she finished the refills, she immediately headed to the register. “How was everything?”

“As good as ever.” He graced her with a wide smile. “I enjoyed meeting you. Daily Provisions is the store to go for sneakers. They sell groceries and some clothing.”

Wordlessly, she handed him his change.

“I hope to see you next time I come in, and you can tell Ruby Lou I said that.” Turning, he walked out of the door, causing the bell to *thunk*.

