

# AS THE *Crow Flies*

LOVE IN  
CHARLOTTE OAKS



*A Sweet Romantic Comedy*  
JESS MASTORAKOS

# **as the crow flies**

A Sweet Romantic Comedy

**jess mastorakos**



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# contents

[Sign up for Jess's Sweet Romance Squad](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Riley](#)
2. [Aubree](#)
3. [Aubree](#)
4. [Riley](#)
5. [Aubree](#)
6. [Aubree](#)
7. [Riley](#)
8. [Riley](#)
9. [Aubree](#)
10. [Aubree](#)
11. [Aubree](#)
12. [Riley](#)
13. [Riley](#)
14. [Riley](#)
15. [Aubree](#)
16. [Aubree](#)
17. [Riley](#)
18. [Riley](#)
19. [Riley](#)
20. [Aubree](#)
21. [Aubree](#)
22. [Riley](#)
23. [Riley](#)
24. [Aubree](#)
25. [Riley](#)
26. [Aubree](#)
27. [Riley](#)

[Also by Jess Mastorakos](#)

[About the Author](#)

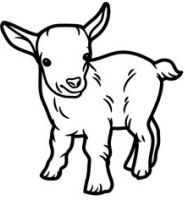
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# prologue

*Six years ago.*

“Whoa, what’s goin’ on over there?” A warm, Southern drawl broke through the tornado of rage and disappointment whipping through my mind, but I didn’t lift my head to look for the source.

The last thing I needed was for someone to try to talk to me while I sat here feeling like a big-city villain had flipped a switch, turning my peaceful existence into a demolition site.

“You don’t have time to care, Riley. Let’s go.”

I stilled. *Riley?*

As in, Riley Conrad, the guy who was about to take the stage I was currently crying under like a total loser?

The guy who just won a CMA for being a super hot, up-and-coming country music star?

No. Doubtful. Because even if it was the guy who was about to take the stage who happened to see me crying beneath it, I highly doubted he’d care enough to ask what was going on.

Heavy footsteps thundered on the metal staircase at my back and then onto the platform above me. Guess that answered that question. Strange. Also ... *wow*, Riley Conrad’s voice was just as swoony—even when laced with concern—as it was while coming through my speakers in his songs.

And *yes*, I managed to notice that despite the demolition-of-my-life thing.

I heard a hesitant shuffle of boots on gravel. I still didn't lift my head from where it was resting on my knees, but I instantly went on alert.

"Hey," Riley said. His very-recognizable voice sounded close like he'd dropped into a crouch before me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I replied without lifting my head.

I blinked into the murky darkness between my chest and my thighs, staring at the pattern of my cammies and wondering if he'd accept my lie as the truth and leave.

"Well, shoot. Now, I think I've got a little dilemma on my hands."

I didn't speak. I was still afraid to look up—unwilling to come face-to-face with a literal magazine-cover heartthrob while sporting puffy eyes and probably visible snot from my crying jag.

"You see, I'm supposed to be on stage," he went on, not seeming to care about my silence, "but I think they're gonna have to wait a minute because I can't just find a pretty lady cryin' under my stage and sing my heart out like she isn't down here holdin' it hostage."

My mouth dropped open, but I *still* didn't lift my head.

Instead, I sniffed, which was less rude than scoffing, despite the fact that I'd done it internally. "Pretty lady? You can't even see my face."

"Maybe not right now, but that doesn't mean I haven't before."

He sounded so at ease. So unbothered by the fact that he was having a conversation with the top of a woman's head while crouched in the dirt. He was supposed to be on that dang stage right after my country singer sister finished her set.

Riley was next in the lineup of stars who'd flown out to entertain the crowd of service members who'd gathered for

this mid-deployment Fourth of July show, and yet... instead, he was here?

With me?

Laney's voice still blared through the speakers, though. Since I knew all of her songs like the back of my hand and had read her set list, I guessed he was still two songs away from taking his turn.

But then Riley's words finally sunk in, and my head snapped up. "Wait, what do you mean? You've seen me before?"

"Hey, there she is." His words were loud enough for me to hear over the music and the crowd, but when our eyes met, and he dropped his voice, it floated silkily over my cheeks like a caress.

The whole moment—the tenderness in his gaze, the concern layered there—was a stark contrast to our surroundings, and suddenly I was unable to speak.

And as I stared at Riley and he stared right back, I had the unmistakable—and totally irrational—notion that I knew him.

I didn't, obviously. But somehow, I felt like *my soul* did.

Yeah, that was cheesy as heck.

Sorry.

"I knew it was you," Riley said, snapping me out of my daze with a wink.

A heart-stoppingly adorable wink.

A this-is-why-you're-Riley-Conrad wink.

What was I so upset about a minute ago? I couldn't remember. In fact, I couldn't even remember my *name*, let alone the person who'd made me cry.

Shaking my head, I made a conscious decision to get it together.

So, he's famous. Big deal. My own big sister had just skyrocketed from being a girl from a small town in Tennessee

to a girl with a Platinum debut album, and I didn't get all breathless and speechless and *brainless* around her.

Then again, she wasn't a swoony-as-heck cowboy looking at me like he wanted to wipe my tears away with those million-dollar hands of his. You know, because of his skills on the guitar.

Did he have to insure those things? What would happen if someone caught one of his hands in a car door and he was never able to play again? Could he sue for damages?

I cleared my throat. "What do you mean? We've never met, and I don't know if you've noticed, but we're all wearin' cammies. Helps us blend in."

He let out a short laugh at my dumb joke, the sound of it hitting me right in the solar plexus. "Yeah... we've never met."

Why did those words feel like a lie? They weren't. We *hadn't* met.

And yet...

"But—" Before I knew what was happening, Riley reached out and tapped the bun at the back of my neck, blue eyes sparkling. "This right here is what gave you away."

"My bun? We all have buns, too."

"Sure. But yours is different."

I reached back and felt the braided bun, not understanding what made it so memorable.

He nodded toward the refreshment table that we'd set up before the show. "Saw you settin' up earlier. I'll admit, it wasn't your bun that first caught my eye. But I still noticed it."

"Noticed it."

"Yep."

"My... *bun*?"

He held up a finger. "Singular. Of the hair variety."

"Right. And you were... watchin' me set up?"

“Couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

*What is happening right now?*

I’d asked to be on the setup crew today because even though one of the performers was my sister and it was the Fourth of July, we were still on deployment. Special on-base events like these often only happened because we were the hired help, and it wasn’t like having a famous sister meant I had the day off.

Being on the crew had meant spending a little more time with her than I otherwise would have, but I definitely hadn’t expected to catch the eye of *Riley Conrad* in the process.

“What can I say? You drew me in,” he continued. “That’s why when I saw that bun over here attached to what looked like a woman in distress, I had to come and see what was what.”

“Rode in on your white horse, huh?” I asked, my heartbeat now louder than Laney’s pop-country song.

He laughed. “Nah, he’s black.”

I blinked. “You actually have a horse?”

Riley rocked back on his heels, looking slightly offended. “Darlin’, a man can’t wear these boots and this hat and sing about what I sing about and not have horses of his own.”

“I think plenty of country singers do.”

He shook his head. “Yeah, well, that ain’t right. So yes, I have a horse. More than one, in fact. But the black one’s my favorite.”

Laney’s final song of her set began, and my gaze flicked to the stage. Riley’s followed, and he hung his head.

Suddenly, I was looking at the top of his head—or his black cowboy hat—instead of the other way around, and I instantly missed his blue eyes on mine.

Though, the half-smile that peeked out at me from under the brim of his hat as he slowly lifted his head might’ve made the momentary loss worth it.

Was that a practiced move? Wearing a cowboy hat just so you could look down and then slowly back up, all smooth and sexy-like? Did they teach that in country hottie school?

If so, he'd aced that lesson.

"That's my cue to get up there," he said with a long sigh, "and I didn't have time to figure out what has you so upset. White horse or black, I hate that I'm outta time to save your day."

I managed a small smile. "A for effort, though."

"You gonna be okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Promise?" he prodded, dipping his chin.

"I promise." And dang it, despite everything that happened five minutes before Riley showed up, I chuckled.

"Good. Because now that I'm seein' that face of yours up close—and that smile—I gotta tell you that anyone who makes that smile turn into tears isn't worth a lick of your time. You hear me?"

I nodded again because what the heck could I possibly say? Was this even real life? Though, I'd seen the man in interviews. He probably spoke to all the girls this way.

"All right, then. You gonna get on outta your hidin' spot and enjoy the show? We're all here for *you*, ya know."

"Wouldn't miss it. And um, thanks."

"For what?"

I swallowed. *Oh, hmm, making me smile when I'd been wallowin' like a teenager?*

"For ... um, bein' nice. Takin' the time," I managed. "And also for comin' out for the show. It means a lot to have somethin' like this when we're all missin' home so much."

Riley's lips twitched. "I'm happy to do it. I admire what y'all do for our country, so I do what I can to get involved."

“Riley!” We looked up to find the mean man I must’ve heard him with before. He clamored halfway down the steps, face filled with rage as he gripped the metal railing over my head. “Get up here. *Now.*”

Riley winced, standing and holding out his hands. “I’m comin’.”

“Sorry,” I mouthed when he shot me one last smile before heading up the stairs.

I let my head fall to the tops of my knees again, sighing deeply as the sounds of his boots on metal reverberated through me.

“Hey,” Riley called.

I got up and turned around, relieved to see the other guy was already gone. “Yeah?”

“Keep that chin up, will ya? And make sure you watch the show. I got a couple of songs I’d like to sing to you. Maybe make that smile come back and save your day after all.”

It did come back. Right then, and way bigger than the last one I’d given him. “I will.”

He put a hand on his broad, flannel-covered chest, right over his heart. “Ooph, that thing packs a punch.”

“Get up there,” I said with a laugh, then laughed again when he closed his eyes and shook his head like the sound of it packed an even bigger punch than my smile had.

I watched him go until he disappeared, frozen in place until the thumps of his boots on the stage faded away.

No doubt about it, Riley Conrad was a *huge* flirt.

And he’d flirted with *me*.

In fact, he’d said he couldn’t go on stage and sing if he knew I was down here holding his *heart* hostage.

It was... unbelievable. I wasn’t that girl.

My younger sister, Dakota, was way more likely than I was to charm a man with her bubbly personality and her quick



wit.

And Laney? Her too. There was a man back in Charlotte Oaks whose heart was most definitely in my older sister's clutches, and even though they weren't even together anymore, he'd probably never get it back.

But that wasn't me.

I was the girl who got cheated on and then dumped while on deployment for being... not enough.

I wasn't sure what the *it* factor was that my sisters had and I didn't, but it had just cost me a relationship that I'd thought would someday turn into the kind of love our parents had.

Sure, it hadn't been there *yet*, but I'd wanted it to be. I'd thought it could be, eventually.

And that was what I'd been mourning when Riley had found me under that stage. It was more than the loss of a man. It was a loss of what could've been.

It was a loss of... hope.

But then, out of the blue, a day I'd thought would always be remembered for a much different reason would now be the day that Riley Conrad had stolen my heart.

"Aubree," Laney said, bounding down the stairs while mopping up her brow sweat with a white towel. Paisley, her manager, was hot on her heels. Er, boots. "What are you doin' down here? Did you see the show?"

I swiped at my face to make sure all traces of my earlier tears were gone. And they were, thanks to the man now crooning for the crowd. "Yeah, it was great."

"Thanks." Laney pulled me into a hug, then, when she stepped back, she squeezed my shoulders and studied my face. "Everythin' okay? You look funny."

"*You* look funny," I teased.

"Hush, it's all this stage makeup. I gotta get it off before my skin melts off with it. It's hotter than heck here."

I glanced up at the stage. "Sure is."

“But first, Paisley just told me about this plan she worked out with Riley’s manager, and I’m losin’ my mind a little,” Laney said, wrinkling her nose at her manager.

Paisley rolled her eyes. “Don’t. It’ll be good for both of you.”

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

“Paisley and Jim have this whole publicity stunt relationship planned out. They want us to pretend to date and go on tour and even write songs together. Hopefully even write a duet that earns us a Grammy.”

Paisley gripped my sister’s hand. “He’s a great guy, Lane. You’ll do stuff for the media, make everyone think you’re in love, and take over the country charts hand in hand. Who knows? Maybe some real feelings will come out of this fake relationship. It happens on TV all the time. I’ll be right back, phone call.”

I forced myself not to shoot daggers at Laney’s manager’s back as she stepped away, focusing on my sister instead. “Is this what you want? What about Everett?”

My sister stiffened, and I instantly regretted asking.

But then she shook it off and nodded. “If our managers think it’s a good idea for Riley and me to fake bein’ in love, then that’s what we’ll do.”

*Mmokay.*

Biting my tongue, I watched Paisley usher my sister away with a promise to see me soon, wishing Riley himself wasn’t singing the soundtrack to this moment.

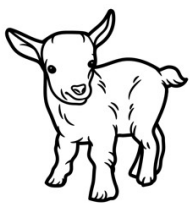
But honestly, what had I expected would come of the sparks that’d seemed to fly between us with such a burn they could’ve lit the stage on fire?

I’m me. He’s him. And shoot, Laney’s Laney.

Maybe a real romance would wind up blooming between them, and she’d add his heart to her collection, along with Everett’s.

*Okay, that was mean. And not fair to Laney.*

But if that was how it all went down, I knew one thing for sure: Laney might steal Riley's heart, but dang it, some completely illogical part of my brain told me he'd *still* always have mine.



**1 /**

*Present.*

“How’d your date go last night?” Paisley asked, handing me a water bottle.

I groaned and let my head fall back against the limo’s headrest, then slowly let it roll to the side, giving her a look I hoped said it all.

“That good?”

I turned my head the other way, staring out the darkened window as we exited the freeway toward LAX.

Paisley wasn’t just my manager—thanks to certain events a couple of years ago that resulted in my old one being kicked to the curb. By a goat. She was also a pretty good friend, and she knew all about the epic failure that was my love life.

Should I really be surprised it was such a failure, though? Being famous had its perks, but when it came to honest-to-goodness dating that resulted in more than just a discreet hookup or a fame-chaser hoping to land their own dreams by association? I’d never met a single person in the music or movie industry who had that kind of dating down pat.

Getting a date wasn’t the hard part. The hard part was finding a woman who wanted to be with me for me. Not for what I could give her or what it would mean for her career to be on my arm. And most importantly, given my track record, not because she hoped a tabloid photo with one of *People’s*

sexiest men would make her ex-boyfriend jealous enough to beat his chest and come crawling back.

Images of the brunette from last night flew through my mind. She was pretty in an LA sort of way. I'd met her at a party sponsored by my label the last time I was here, and at the time, she'd had a boyfriend. When I ran into her at a coffee shop yesterday morning, she'd told me they broke up and started batting her eyes like a toad in a hailstorm.

My momma was always one of those everything-happens-for-a-reason folks, so I told myself it was fate we'd run into one another. LA wasn't exactly a small town, after all. What were the odds?

But then, when I realized she was fit to be tied the second we arrived at the restaurant Paisley had pulled strings to close down so we could have a private dinner, I had a feeling she was there for more than a date with the man behind the music.

"That bad," I confirmed. "Not only do I think she was hopin' our date would've been a more public display, but she spent the whole time talkin' about—"

"Her ex?" Paisley guessed.

I hung my head. "What else? Am I a magnet for women who are hung up on other men? Is there a blinkin' neon sign on my forehead or somethin'?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Most people don't see your forehead."

I chuckled when she tapped the black Stetson on the seat between us. "Next time, maybe you can do a little pre-date interview with the girl. Ask her if she's still in love with someone else?"

Paisley rolled her eyes. "Requesting for a restaurant to close down so you can have a date there in peace is one thing, but I draw the line at pre-date interviews."

The limo slowed to a stop at the curb, and I picked up my hat. "Ah, come on, Pais. At least do a little of that social media diggin' you're so good at. I've got friends whose managers vet all the women they date."

“Fine. I’ll stalk her socials, but that’s it. And not in a creepy, privacy-violating way. Just your average why-is-her-ex-still-in-her-profile-pic stuff.”

“You’re the best.” My driver got out and headed toward my door, so I looked over at Paisley as I snagged my hat and guitar case. “Ready?”

“Let’s do this.”

We were mobbed by fans as soon as we got out of the limo. Since they had sparkly signs and photos for me to sign instead of luggage, I figured they’d gotten wind I’d be here and weren’t at the airport to travel today.

Normally, I didn’t have to come through the main airport because my limo could pull right up to my private jet on the tarmac, but this was a special situation. I was getting ready to do a tour of USO-sponsored shows for the military community, so Paisley set up an appearance at the USO’s airport lounge to build the hype.

When we finally made it into the military-only lounge—thanks to the help of my security detail and TSA agents—the atmosphere was a heck of a lot better.

I didn’t know if it was because these service members and their families were too exhausted from traveling to care about my presence in their quiet retreat within LAX, but other than a few smiles, waves, and compliments on my music, they largely let me be.

It could’ve also been because I made a habit out of doing whatever I could to give back to the military community. What good was a pile of money if you didn’t do something worthwhile with it?

Over the years, I’d done exclusive shows on their installations around the world. I’d donated to organizations that got veterans back on their feet after separating from active duty for one reason or another. I was an advocate for better treatment from the VA and had even helped build new houses with my own two hands for vets who’d lost theirs.

Not to mention what I did for those I could by way of a job and a new life on my ranch back home, but that wasn't public knowledge and I hoped it never would be.

I couldn't explain the pull I felt to share some of my wealth with the military community in whatever way I could, but it ran deep. It was like something in my bones—something in my roots, which were still a mystery to me—told me these people were *my* people, even though I'd never donned their uniform.

The media appearance and intimate acoustic concert for those waiting in the lounge went off without a hitch. And then a few hours later, as our team made our way through the crowd of people that'd only grown larger as word spread that I was here, a sight against a nearby wall had me halting in place.

Aubree Cole sat on the floor with her knees tucked up to her chest, her head resting against the wall, and her eyes closed. Her hair was pulled back in that low bun she always wore, and she had on her black and blue flight attendant's uniform, the long pencil skirt grazing the tops of her bent knees.

As with every time I saw the woman, my heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. But as I took in the slight crease between her brows, visible even from here, my chest seized.

The first time I'd seen her—six years ago, sitting in nearly the same position she was now—she'd been upset. I'd coaxed her into a smile though, and it'd been the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But I'd never found out the cause of her distress, and even though we'd spent the last six years sharing meals and going to family events and hovering around the edges of each other's lives, we hadn't talked about that stolen moment that had me thinking I'd met *the one* in the most unexpected place in all the world.

Why? Because... well, life was funny, and it wouldn't have been right considering what had happened later that day.



But as I studied her over the crowd of women vying for my attention, something in my gut told me she wasn't just taking a beat to relax after a long flight or a stressful day. Surely, there were better places to do that than on the dang floor in the middle of a crowded terminal.

No doubt about it, Aubree Cole was having a hard time. And just like that day all those years ago, I felt called to fix it.

"What's wrong?" Paisley asked. She craned her neck to follow my gaze, but she was too short to see over the women and security guards surrounding us.

"Aubree's over there."

"Ah, shoot, I wish we could go say hi, but we really need to get going. You have three more appointments—"

I didn't think. I just pushed through the crowd, my eyes trained on Aubree, knowing my security team would adjust their forcefield right along with me rather than try to herd me in any particular direction.

When I neared her, right along with the crowd who'd continued to press in, I sent a look to the head honcho of my team.

He nodded back, and suddenly there was a wall of brawny, tattooed men forming a semi-circle around us, giving me the space and privacy to crouch down to Aubree's level.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Aubree Cole," I said, tipping the brim of my hat and resting my guitar case on the ground beside us.

I almost said something about how we had to stop meeting like this, but I couldn't. Bringing up that day all those years ago wouldn't do me any good.

It was probably all in my head, but the five minutes I'd spent with her under that stage... I'd felt something between us that, at the time, I was sure would lead somewhere great.

The only problem was it'd been one-sided, and I knew that because we'd never spoken of it again.

Plus, she hadn't seemed at all bothered by the news that I'd have to fake a relationship with her sister for the sake of our careers. And other than occasional family gatherings over the years where she'd avoided me like I smelled like something she'd stepped in, we'd barely spoken at all.

Despite the fact that somewhere along the way, her family had become more of a family to me than I'd had in a long, long time, us two? Shoot, we hardly knew each other.

Whatever I'd thought I'd felt between us six years ago had never felt like a mutual thing, so bringing it up now would only lead to disappointment.

Aubree's gaze flicked around us before landing back on mine. "Riley, what are you doin' here?"

"Had an appearance at the USO."

"Of course you did."

I tilted my head in question.

She blew out a breath. "Out of all the airports in all the world, of course you'd have an appearance *here*. Now. When I'm sittin' here... like this."

"And why are you sittin' here like this?"

"Because I just got fired."

My jaw clenched. "You were *fired*? Why?"

I couldn't imagine what she could've done to warrant that, so on her behalf, I had half a mind to throttle whoever made that mistake of a call and put this hopeless look in those dark blue eyes.

"It's a long story."

I laced my fingers together, waiting. Aubree wasn't a talker by nature. And I didn't just mean the way she never seemed all that willing to talk to me.

She blinked at me for a long moment, then right when I thought she wouldn't give me more, she sighed. "I guess I'm sittin' here tryin' to figure out what I'm gonna do next. Pretty

sure I won't be able to get hired at any other airline after this, so I think I might need a whole new career."

I wanted to ask what the *this* was that had her feeling so hopeless, but she actually didn't need to say more. It didn't matter.

Clearly, she was content to keep me at arm's length and not let me in, but none of that mattered because I'd do whatever I could to help Aubree Cole. And not just because my idiotic heart had spent the last six years pining over her like it had a death wish, but because I'd do anything for any of the Coles.

That family had done more for me than they'd ever know, and nothing would stop me from repaying their kindness for the rest of my life.

I patted my guitar case with what I hoped was a winning smile. "Well, you know what? This is all pretty handy, actually."

She quirked a brow. "How so?"

"I'm in the market for a flight attendant."

"Uh... what?"

I looked over my shoulder to find Paisley, happy to see she'd remained in our bubble of protection from the still-clamoring fans. She looked nervous, though, and I was sure it was because photos of me crouched before this pretty flight attendant would be all over the internet in an hour if they weren't already.

But I didn't care a bit.

"Paisley, Jordan is about to take maternity leave, right?" I asked.

Aubree shook her head and smiled shakily at Paisley, almost like she hadn't realized she was here. "Hey, Pais. Sorry, rough day."

"I heard. I'm sorry about your job," Paisley told her in a soft voice before turning to me. "And yes, Jordan's supposed to leave next month."

“Has anyone lined up a replacement yet?”

“Of course.”

Paisley had a knack for understanding silent communication. Somehow, the woman could take a look or a nod from me and make things happen just the way I wanted them to. She was a far cry from my old manager.

Not that I wanted to think about *him* right now.

Trusting her to do her thing, I flared my eyes at her in just the right way, hoping she took it to mean I needed her to shuffle some plans around. She'd get the replacement flight attendant another job and some compensation for the inconvenience, but there was no way I'd let this opportunity to help a Cole in her time of need pass me by.

Especially not *this* Cole, in particular.

As usual, Paisley seemed to get the message, quickly turning to the tablet that was so glued to her hands she likely slept with it. If she slept at all, of course. “Actually, no. It fell through, so we still need someone.”

I swiveled back to Aubree with a grin and a wink. “Looky there, you're all set then.”

“All set? Riley, you can't just—”

“I can, and I just did. Now, come on. Let's get you somethin' to eat, and you can hitch a ride back to Charlotte Oaks with me on the jet.”

Her eyes bulged. “You're headed to Charlotte Oaks?”

“Um, no,” Paisley cut in, stepping forward and shooting me a warning look. “You're absolutely *not* headed back to Charlotte Oaks because we have—”

“Nothin' that can't be rescheduled,” I said. “Besides, don't you miss your girl and the fam?”

Paisley had looked like she was about ready to box my ears, but the mention of the family and Laney—her best friend and the country star Cole sister she used to manage before

Laney had quit needing a full-time manager—had her deflating like a balloon.

An angry balloon, anyway, morphing into an almost wistful shell of one. If that were a thing. I was a little distracted at the moment by the hopeful expression that'd come over the pretty lady against the wall, and I hoped against all hope that Paisley would let me take Aubree home.

“Fine, yes, of course I wanna see them,” Paisley finally said. “It’ll be good to get back there for a quick visit.”

“Sure will,” I agreed. “And Aubree, isn’t there some big party tomorrow night at Jackson and Bailey’s new place? A housewarmin’ deal? I didn’t think I’d be able to make it thanks to my schedule, but now I’m glad for an excuse to be there.”

Aubree nodded. “I was sittin’ here wonderin’ if I should even go since I’d probably just bring them all down with my mood.”

“No need for that, darlin’, ’cause you’re not gonna feel down once you see your new digs.”

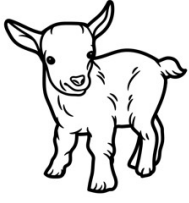
“New digs?”

“The jet. I have a feelin’ it’s a tad bit nicer than the commercial planes you’re used to.” I shrugged and rubbed my nails against my flannel, making a show out of acting like a big shot in the hopes of making her smile. “And I’m sure you’d rather hitch a ride with us than have to get on one last flight home with your ex-employers, right?”

She snorted. It wasn’t the smile I wanted, but at least I’d gotten a little life to swirl through those deep-blue eyes of hers. “Definitely.”

I clapped my hands together and rubbed them up and down. “Well, all right, then. It’s settled.”

She finally blessed me with a grin, and just like the first time I’d made her smile when she was having a bad day, it packed one heck of a punch.



**2 /**

Riley hadn't said a word about how similar our meeting at LAX was to the day we'd met, and it'd confirmed something that I'd always wondered: he hadn't known it was me.

It made sense, though. I couldn't really blame him.

To Riley, I was one of hundreds of women wearing that Air Force uniform that day. Yes, he'd said there was something different about my bun, but you know what?

Riley was a dang flirt. Of course he'd said that.

I'd worn my hair like that countless times in the years since, and never once had he tapped it in that cute way he'd done that day.

Not that it would've been very appropriate to do that when he was pretending to be out of his mind in love with my sister, but a girl could dream, couldn't she?

And as he'd knelt in front of me today looking all knight-in-navy-flannel with concern and sweetness lurking behind his friendly smile, I was on the edge of my seat waiting for him to comment about the first time we'd met.

Well, not quite on the edge of my seat since my nearly-numb butt was planted on the cold tile floor, but I was definitely white-knuckling my legs as I held them to my chest.

"Wanna tell me what happened?" Riley asked, jerking me from my thoughts.

He sat in the chair across from mine on his private jet, which really was as nice as I'd expected it to be. Buttery leather furniture, cream in color, with burnt orange accents.

Gleaming wooden tables and side paneling, all holding specialized cup holders that would keep a drink chilled or warm at the flip of a switch.

Oh, and luxurious carpeting that made me want to slip off my low-heeled pumps and squish my toes in it.

But I didn't.

Because that would be weird.

Riley had been right about my "new digs." Working on this jet would be a big change from the jam-packed commercial airliners I was used to calling my home away from home.

I looked over my shoulder at the closed door of the cockpit, and a realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

I didn't want to be on this side of that door. I wanted to fly this thing. But... that dream was dead and buried, right?

Right.

Best to put it out of my head and settle in. I'd chosen a basic aviation job in the Air Force over flight school. Then I'd chosen to become a flight attendant over flight school yet again when my contract had ended. I'd made my bed twice already, so it didn't make sense to stop sleeping in it now.

At least this jet was an upgraded "bed." I hadn't yet seen the galley to check out where I'd be spending most of my time after Jordan went on maternity leave, though. He'd told me to make myself comfortable on this flight as if I were his guest and not his employee. There'd be plenty of time for a tour later... but employee?

Was I sure that was what I wanted to be to Riley?

First, I'd been his fake girlfriend's sister, never home thanks to the Air Force, and then to life as a new flight attendant trying to work her way up the ladder.

Then, once things ended between Riley and Laney and she started her happy life with her one true love, I became just another member of the loud and proud family who'd welcomed him into the fold.



Despite how strong our connection was when he'd made me feel better on that deployment, I'd kept my distance because it was too hard to be around him when he never showed any signs it'd ever happened.

When he'd never showed any signs he knew I was the same girl he'd so sweetly comforted.

And now that my suspicions were confirmed about that, and we sat on his jet after he'd comforted me yet again, asking me if I wanted to tell him more about what happened... well, all I wanted to do was get far, far away.

*Employee, though, remember? Fat chance of that.*

"Not really," I replied, hoping the small smile was enough to let him know I was okay and didn't need him to press.

"That's fine. It's a long enough flight, and I'm a patient man."

"Not sure if it is long enough," I said with a wry smile. "But I appreciate you askin'."

He winked. "We'll see."

*Goodness.*

His winks were still so dang charming that I had to look away, opting for the fluffy white clouds out my window. Sure, the sun reflecting off them made them a little too bright to look at without burning my eyes, but it was probably safer than catching another one of those deadly winks.

"Yeah, well, I don't know if you're the most patient man in the world, but you might have to be."

"Why's that?"

"I'm not feelin' much like talkin' about it."

"I am. And you will."

My gaze unwillingly zipped back to his, and dang it, staring at those bright white clouds meant giant blobs of blackish-blue-green prevented me from seeing his face for a few seconds. "You sound mighty confident about that."

“That’s because I am.”

“And why is *that*?”

“Cause I already know you’re not a chatty sort of woman. So, no pressure, but we’re gonna sit here and relax, you’re gonna have some fun bein’ waited on durin’ a flight for once instead of the other way around. And then, at some point, I have a feelin’ you’ll come around.”

My breath hitched as Jordan appeared, handing me a glass of chilled champagne with two raspberries floating merrily on the top.

We’d met when we first came aboard, and once again, I noted that she didn’t look very far along in her pregnancy for someone a month away from maternity leave.

But considering the regulations around flying and pregnancy and the fact that Riley was her boss, I had a feeling her maternity leave could start sooner than on a commercial airliner and extend all the way until Kindergarten if she wanted it to.

I thanked her, then watched her hand a cold beer to Riley before excusing herself.

“If I do come around—and I’m not sayin’ I will—but if I do, then what?” I asked him, knowing it was probably a terrible idea.

“Well, Miss Aubree, then it’ll all come pourin’ out like a fountain. And I’ll be right here to listen.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed, and then instantly regretted it because victory danced in those light blue eyes of his. I tried for a mock scowl. “There you go again with that confidence.”

“Shoot, I’m not all that confident. I’m just... readin’ the room.”

“Readin’ the room?”

He pushed a tiny blue button near the cupholder on his armrest and slipped his beer into it, then leaned forward so he could put his elbows on his knees. “Yeah. You wanna tell me. It’d probably be a relief to rant about it, but you don’t rant like

Kota, and you don't have a Paisley to spill your guts to like Laney does. Not one I've ever heard about, anyway. So, it'll take a minute, and you're not in the mood right now. I get that. But like I said, I'll be patient, you'll get a little more comfy, and then I'm down to be a listenin' ear whenever you're ready to let it all out."

*Huh.* So that was what it felt like to be hit in several sore spots with the touch of a feather rather than a baseball bat.

No, I didn't rant like Kota. No, I didn't have a BFFL-style *girlmance* like Laney and Paisley's.

*Thanks for reminding me.*

I wanted to hate him for it, but it was Riley, so I obviously couldn't. It wasn't his fault he saw more than I wanted him to.

I gaped at him, then genuinely laughed out loud because how could I not? "Wow. You sure have a way with words. And you never seem to run out of them, either."

His chin fell to his chest, then he did that dumb slow lift of his head so I saw his half-grin under his hat before I found his eyes. "I've heard that."

At least he didn't wink again.

"You should put all those words to music. Might win you a Grammy."

"Eh, my mantle's a little crowded as it is."

We chuckled together, and I reveled in the warmth that spread through me despite his oh-so-helpful offer to be a sounding board. I may have intentionally kept my distance from this man because it was too hard to be around him while silently suffering, but I couldn't deny his effect on me.

He'd been a pretty regular visitor to my hometown once he and Laney had "broken up" their fake relationship. And every time I'd come home from a rough work trip when he and Paisley had been in Charlotte Oaks, it seemed to only take five minutes interacting with the guy to erase an entire week of work woes.

It was always superficial conversation, but still. He'd ask how my trip was, and because I loved my job and hated complainers, I'd tell him happy little things that I'd enjoyed.

Instead of lamenting over getting ignored by passengers while greeting them on their way onto the plane, I'd tell him about a really sweet old lady who'd brought books for each flight attendant because she'd been one in the sixties and loved to read when she had downtime.

Instead of telling him about the rude man who'd pressed his call button mid-flight only to place a chewed-up piece of gum in my hand before I realized what he was doing, I'd told him about the little girl who'd pressed her button just to tell me how pretty she thought I looked in my uniform.

And instead of unloading about how I'd been treated during an especially long delay, I'd told him about the eighty-year-old Air Force veteran who'd used the extra time to regale me with some far-fetched stories from the good ol' days.

For some reason, even though talking to people had always been a struggle for me, talking to Riley was as easy as breathing. As brief as our conversations had always been, they weren't awkward or stiff, and I often walked away wondering who'd taken over my brain and somehow prevented me from overthinking every word that came out of my mouth.

And now, my lips burned with the urge to unburden myself with my heck of a morning. I bit down—hard—on my bottom lip, hoping to stop the flow of words.

Riley hadn't been wrong about everything he'd said, but I wasn't ready to give in yet. Doing so would probably make him do that stupidly attractive guffaw of a laugh that would've made any other man look like a donkey.

But not Riley.

Nope. Unfortunately, Riley throwing his head back and laughing like that looked more like a slow-motion TV commercial for what happened when you took whatever new-fangled antidepressant they were selling.

Riley's gaze tracked the movement of me biting down on my lip, and he immediately covered his own mouth with the hand that'd been propped under his chin a second ago.

Then he looked out the window, and if I wasn't mistaken... he was either a mind reader—already fighting off a laugh because he'd known I was about to start talking—or he was looking at my lips in a much different way.

You know, like how guys do in books right before they kiss the girl.

Right. Riley. Real life, not a book, so the first one, for sure.

There was no way this ladies' man of a country star could ever feel the same way about me that I felt about him. So since it was probably my own delusional thinking that prevented me from speaking, it was time to grow up and just talk to the man.

After all, he'd all but picked my butt up off the airport floor after I'd been fired and offered me a job on the spot. Telling him what happened was the least I could do.

“Okay, okay. I'll tell you.”

Victory danced in his eyes again as he swung his gaze back to me, and he propped his chin on his hand once again. “I'm all ears, darlin'.”

Fighting a wince at the endearment I knew was not exclusively mine, I took a deep breath and got ready to spill my guts. “So, there's this guy at my work. He's, um... my ex.”

Riley's bright blue eyes immediately dulled, and he shifted in his seat. Then he looked around wildly, causing alarm to course through me.

“What is it?” I asked, following the erratic path of his eyes.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“It's like this rollin' sound... and maybe, is that the beepin' noise when a big ol' truck kicks it into reverse?”

I turned to him, narrowing my eyes. “Uh, what?”

He relaxed in his seat again, shooting me a half-grin. “It’s the sound of me backin’ right out of this conversation. Not sure I’m up for bein’ a listenin’ ear to another beautiful woman’s tragic love story. Last night’s date had been nothin’ but ex-talk, so I’m a little talked out in that area.”

My heart cracked in two. Not just at the thought of him dating, because I had no right to feel any type of way about that. It was just that... Riley had no idea. He’d been rejected—or willingly used—by so many women who were in love with other men.

According to Bailey, who’d filled my sisters and me in during one of our girls’ nights, Riley had been someone’s high school prom date just to make a girl’s ex jealous and got punched in the face for his trouble.

After that, there was another woman who strung him along for similar reasons, and then there was the fake relationship with my sister that he knew would never turn real, thanks to her love for Everett.

Bailey herself had agreed to date him even though she was in love with her best friend—now husband—and she’d only told us about his history because she’d felt so guilty for saying yes to the date after she found out about everything.

And yet... here I was, head over heels for him, and as far as he was concerned, I was nothing but Laney’s little sister. One of the Coles. His newest employee.

“Ah, shoot,” he said with a sigh. “I can’t let my own baggage keep you from unpackin’ yours. Never mind, come on. Lay it on me.”

I chuckled. This poor man.

“Don’t worry. That’s not what this is. It’s not...” I trailed off as my throat closed up, looking down at my hands.

I wasn’t upset about what he’d said. This surge of emotion was brought on by helplessness. If I were brave, I would speak up and tell him how I felt. I would tell him that, in case he didn’t know, it was me he’d met on the Fourth of July six years ago, and I would never put another man before him

because no other man would ever hold a candle to him in my eyes.

But... I wasn't brave. I'd always been independent. Always been content with my life and quick to handle business with no fuss or muss. But I wasn't brave, and for some dumb reason, I had a habit of finding guys who put me in situations where I was stuck with the consequences and couldn't do a thing to stop them.

First, there was the high school boyfriend who'd convinced me not to follow my lifelong dream of becoming a pilot because he'd wanted me to go to college with him in Florida. I'd agreed because I was young and dumb, and he was the first boy to ever look past my loner vibes and give me the time of day.

But when I'd gone to his house to tell him I'd gotten into the university? He'd been kissing a cheerleader on his front porch for the whole town to see.

And see, they did. Brenda Johnson still brought it up from time to time when I went through her line at the checkout counter. She'd been trimming her roses across the street when she'd witnessed my humiliation, and even though I hadn't wanted to go to Florida for college after that, I had decided to escape the gossip in Charlotte Oaks by joining the Air Force instead.

In hindsight, I should've gone to flight school. But the Air Force had seemed like a good way to be near planes and start fresh at the same time, so off I went.

The day I met Riley, I'd been dumped while on deployment after I'd already been cheated on without being given a chance to improve whatever it was about our relationship that caused him to stray. If he'd just told me what was missing, maybe I could've fixed it. But no, he'd done what my last boyfriend had done, and I was about ready to give up on love altogether.

And then the famous singer who almost had me rethinking that because I'd somehow stepped into a romance novel got into a fake relationship with my sister five minutes later, and

even if we wanted to, there was nothing either of us could have done about it.

Talk about feeling helpless.

Every relationship I'd been in had followed the same pattern of me thinking we were good, hoping for the future, and then BOOM. Show's over, shots fired, no game plan required because I was too late anyway.

What happened this morning was the culmination of all of it, though. I'd never been in a situation *this* bad at the end of a relationship.

And now... even though we were far from in a relationship, was my presence on this plane setting myself up for the pattern to repeat yet again?

I couldn't let Riley swoop in and save the day. That would make me completely reliant on him. If he could become responsible for my livelihood with the snap of his fingers, he could somehow drop that responsibility just as fast. Then where would I be?

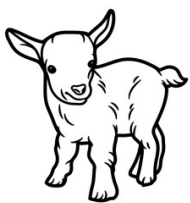
And... *dang it.*

Images of getting my wings wouldn't let go even though I'd resolved to shove them away. I wasn't sure if I was brave enough to go for it after bailing twice before, but if I did go for it... I'd need a job so I could afford the training. Which meant risking this one when I had nothing else lined up?

*Repeat after me, Aubree: Don't do it.*

Riley must've heard the shakiness of my last inhale as I mulled all of this over because it had him sitting forward and resting both elbows on his knees again. "Hey, I'm sorry, Aubree. I shouldn't have joked about not wanting to hear about you and your ex. That was bad form. You can tell me, even if it *is* some kind of 'I wish I could be with the man I love but I can't' type of thing. I promised to listen, so that's what I'll do."





**3 /**

## aubree

Before I could reply, Paisley approached us from where she'd been on the phone at the back of the plane. *Saved by the manager.*

“Hey.” She slipped into the seat next to Riley, then looked between us with wariness in her brown eyes. “Everything okay over here?”

“Yep. All good,” I replied.

“Aubree was just about to tell me what happened this mornin’,” Riley said, giving her a look that seemed to ask for some privacy.

“Oh, I’ll give you two some time to talk. I’ve always got more phone calls to make.”

When Paisley started to rise, I held out a hand. Part of me had hoped he’d let me off the hook, but he really did deserve the story after helping me out. For that matter, so did she. “No, Pais, it’s fine. We’re practically family. You can stay.”

I was relieved when she settled back into her seat, and even though I expected to see something negative cross Riley’s features, it was actually the opposite.

His shoulders lost a little of the stiffness they’d carried, and he leaned back and crossed one booted foot over his knee like it made him happy that I was relaxed enough to open up. Not just to him, but to Paisley, too.

I had no idea what it meant, but it was... *nice.*

Like he wasn’t trying to hoard my story as something I’d only trust him with, he was just happy I felt comfortable

sharing it.

*Stop swooning over every little thing he does!*

“So, before I start, I have a question,” I said, putting on my total-professional voice and pretending they weren’t... Well, *them*.

Riley’s lip twitched. “Shoot.”

“How long is Jordan planning to be on maternity leave?”

They exchanged a look, then Paisley’s focus went to her tablet and Riley shifted uneasily in his seat. “Why do you ask?”

“I’d like to know how long to expect this temporary employment to last so I can make arrangements.”

He lifted a brow, pointed at me, and then kept his finger hanging there as he slowly turned to look at Pais. “Is it me, or does she sound like a stranger in a job interview or somethin’?”

Paisley only tucked her lips between her teeth as if she were trying not to laugh, but she didn’t look up from her handy-dandy tablet.

“I’m serious,” I said, sitting up straighter and tugging on the bottom of my uniform. “I appreciate what y’all are doin’, but I don’t need it to be a permanent thing. I can figure somethin’ out while Jordan’s on maternity leave, and then she can come back.”

*And it’ll give me time to line up another job I have no risk of losing over a stupid crush.*

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind when I offered you the job, Aubree.”

His use of my name instead of *darlin’* or some other term that would have annoyed me from anyone but him had me wondering if I’d offended him. I hurried to fix it. “Again, I appreciate it. But please, do me a favor and think of me bein’ here like I’m holdin’ Jordan’s spot, not replacin’ her.”

Paisley finally looked at Riley—probably for a little direction since this was clearly unexpected—but his eyes were still locked on mine. So focused it felt a little like someone using chopsticks to pull out my thoughts like individual pieces of rice from a takeout box.

“All right,” he finally said, giving Paisley a short nod before looking back at me and crossing his arms over his chest. “Deal. You’re only here until Jordan comes back from maternity leave.”

“And when will that be?”

“Six or eight months minimum, but we’ll get back to you on that,” Paisley replied.

If she thought she was sneaky enough for me to miss the alarmed little eye flare she sent Riley, she was very wrong. I had a feeling these two must have already made a very generous arrangement with Jordan that didn’t involve her coming back, but they’d agreed to my terms, so it was up to them to figure it out.

“I’ll make sure I’m prepared in six months, just in case.”

Riley seemed to be working hard to fight a scowl, and that was a very new look for him. Normally he was the opposite of the grumpy hero in those small-town grumpy/sunshine books that were so popular these days.

In fact, if we were the characters in one of those books, I had a feeling I’d be the woman of few words and he’d be the sunshiney guy who got joy out of poking at me to make me smile.

But right now? He was giving me serious grumpy vibes, and I was ready for *my* Riley to reappear.

“Can I... Um, can I tell you what happened this mornin’?”

*Bam.* Just like that, Riley’s warmth returned in the form of a caring smile. Try as he might to be gruff, at heart, he was as ooey-goey as they came. “Please do.”

“Okay. I know right away how bad this sounds, but for the last few months... I’ve been dating my boss,” I admitted,

wincing when Paisley wrinkled her nose.

“Was, as in past tense?” Riley asked. His expression was totally blank.

“Yes. I tried to break it off with him—”

The boot Riley had propped on his knee hit the floor with a thud. “*Tried to?*”

“Succeeded,” I amended. “Not like he didn’t *let* me break it off or anythin’.”

“Good.”

“I’d tried to do it easy, though, knowin’ how messy it would get if we didn’t end things as friends.”

“I take it you didn’t succeed on that front?” Paisley asked.

“I sure didn’t. He was mad, to say the least.”

A muscle in Riley’s jaw flexed.

*And we’re back to Grumpsville, already?* Gone was the flirty, sweet man who’d been so eager to hear my story so he could be a listening ear while I let it all out.

Now, he was hanging on my every word with the kind of focus I figured heart surgeons probably had when someone was wide open on their table.

No, that wasn’t right.

He didn’t look life-savingly focused.

He looked life-*threateningly* focused.

What was with this new side of Riley? I’d been a fan of his before we’d even met, and I’d gotten to know him—on the surface, at least—well enough over the last six years to see a few different sides of him.

Flirty—with every woman who crossed his path. From Laney when he was faking it during their publicity stunt to old Mrs. McClusky or any of the members of the local Wine Club—formerly a book club—when they stopped by the house with baked goods just to see him when he was in town.

He could be sweet and uncle-y with Phoebe—the adorable little girl who’d stolen all of our hearts when she’d moved to Charlotte Oaks from New York and became part of our extended family.

And I’d even seen a competitive and athletic side during Thanksgiving football games with my family and the Wilson family next door that Laney had married into.

But this fiery, protective side? This grump, whose strong chest rose and fell with such effort that I could visibly see through it moving beneath the tight black T-shirt he wore under his open flannel?

I’d *never* seen this, and now it seemed like it was as quick to trigger as it was difficult to resist.

Clearly, Riley had the wrong idea about what went down with my boss, and I needed to set him straight. But knowing this protectiveness involved *me* had something that felt a lot like butterflies fluttering in my belly.

I cleared my throat. “I hadn’t known it at the time, but there was a reason I’d been gettin’ such great shifts durin’ our relationship. I just thought I’d finally put in enough time with the airline that the rough hauls from my rookie days were behind me. But really, Branson had been doin’ some schedule-shiftin’ on his end, and that was why I’d been flyin’ such great routes.”

Riley held up a finger. “Hang on, now. *Branson*? That’s his name?”

I nodded. “Why?”

He smirked. “Just unique, that’s all. What’s his last name? Just so I can hear the winnin’ combo of a name his parents picked out.”

“Uh, Thomas. Branson Thomas.”

Riley nodded slowly, flicking his eyes to the side to meet Paisley’s before turning back to me. “Mm-hmm. Sorry to take a little detour there. Keep goin’.”

I shifted in my seat. “Right, well... so after I broke up with him, I guess he went straight to HR and reported me. He said I’d manipulated him into given’ me the best routes, and I’d been inappropriate with him. Hostile work environment or some such thing.”

“Seriously?” Paisley asked in a shrill tone.

“Yep. I’ve never been more embarrassed in all my life than when they sat me down and told me everythin’ he said I did.”

Riley’s jaw flexed again. “What did he say?”

My cheeks flamed, and I shook my head. “If it’s all the same, I’d rather not repeat it. Let’s just say they called it ‘conduct unbecoming of a flight attendant at the company,’ and they had no choice but to let me go because of it.”

“Hang on,” Paisley cut in again, leaning forward. “There is so much wrong with what you just said. How can they do that based on his word alone? What did they say when you told them the truth?”

I stared down at my hands. “Those crotchety HR guys didn’t give me much of a chance to explain myself. And I tried... but you said it, Riley, I’m not like Kota and Laney. I’ve never really been one to rant or speak up when I’m not ready. And the way they looked at me? Shoot, no part of me wanted to throw a fit.”

He frowned. “That ain’t what I meant by any of that, darlin’.”

“Well, whatever you meant, I know a losin’ battle when I’m sittin’ in the middle of it. Their minds were made up, so I left.”

Riley didn’t seem to like that answer much because he whipped off his hat and tossed it on the low table between our chairs. Then my hands clenched into fists when he ran his fingers through his hair like he always did when he took off his hat.

I wanted to run *my* fingers through that hair.

*Stop drooling, Aubree.*

It was the first time all day I'd seen him without his signature black Stetson, and just like when we sat at the dinner table at my parents' house, I found myself wondering why I could never decide if I liked him better with the hat or without it.

Oh, who was I kidding?

I just liked him. Period.

"Aubree, honey," Paisley said with a shake of her head. "This is *not* okay."

"I know. But I was the one who started datin' my boss when I should've known better."

They stared. I stared back.

"Besides," I rushed on, "even if they didn't fire me, who's to say they would've fired *him*? Maybe he'd only get a slap on the wrist, and then who knows what kind of routes I would've found myself on?"

"Is that the whole story, then?" Riley asked, eyes boring into mine.

I nodded.

He nodded back, then looked pointedly at Paisley, who lifted her tablet from her lap and stood. "I'm on it."

She was gone before I could even blink, and my gaze flicked between her retreating form and Riley's intense gaze. "Wait, she's on what?"

"She's gonna work a little magic, that's all. Not for you to worry about. I'm just glad you're not workin' for a company like that anymore, and workin' for me instead. Temporary employee or not, you can rest assured nothin' like that would *ever* go down on my watch."

Likely he meant it wouldn't happen because we weren't going to date, so how could it? Well, that and he was a much better man than Branson. But my silly little heart only focused on the first reason because it'd already been an emotional whirlwind of a day and my defenses were down.



I swallowed hard. “I know it wouldn’t.”

“Good.”

Did they make that orange Emergen-C powder to build up an immunity to having feelings for Riley Conrad? If so, I hoped they stocked it at Costco. I’d need buckets of the stuff to protect my heart for as long as this position lasted.

“But, Riley... what’s Paisley gonna do?”

His lips twitched and he looked down, sighing heavily. “Let’s just say Branson Thomas is gonna get a sudden urge to tell his employers the truth about what all went down, and the gentlemen at HR are gonna find themselves fessin’ up to their part in it. Stuff like that doesn’t land well these days, so unless that airline wants a media firestorm rainin’ down on them, they’ll take out the trash.”

My eyes bulged. “You know she’ll do all that even though all you did was give her a look?”

“We’ve got a sort-of shorthand now that we’ve worked together a few years. She’ll get it done.”

My stomach clenched. If they had a shorthand, I wondered if that meant...

*Nope. Do not think about your crush and your sister’s best friend.* Paisley was a total professional, and as flirty as Riley was, he likely wouldn’t risk losing a great manager by starting up a romantic thing with her.

Either way, Paisley the great manager was about to start a war with my old employers, and I really hoped it didn’t make a bad situation even worse.

“Riley—”

“*Aubree.*” His eyes blazed, and his jaw worked like he was trying to find the right words. “What happened to you over there won’t stand, and I care about you and your family. Ain’t nothin’ you can say that’ll convince me not to let Paisley scare them into gettin’ their act together so nothin’ like this happens again. It’s bad enough it happened to you, but do you really want him to continue to act like that and get away scot-free?”

I shook my head, moved beyond words. Not that I'd ever been as wordy as he was.

“Didn't think so.” He sat back, taking a sip of his still-cold-thanks-to-that-fancy-cupholder beer. “Now, how long you wanna stay in Charlotte Oaks with the fam before startin' work with me?”

The subject change was jarring, but I shook it off. “Um, well, doesn't Jordan leave in a month? I figured I'd just be home until then.”

He shrugged. “Jordan wouldn't mind gettin' paid her full salary while also gettin' to leave a month earlier.”

“Oh, gosh, no. I couldn't—”

He waved a hand to cut me off. “Shoot, you'd be doin' her a favor. She's gotta get a bigger place now that this kid's on the way, so it'll give her more time to get all that squared away.”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times.

“Besides,” he said, giving me a smile that looked a little wolfish, “I'm about to head out on a USO-sponsored tour that'll be free for the military. Seems like somethin' you'd like to be part of, am I right?”

I nodded.

“Thought that might be the case. See? This is gonna be fun. I'm not happy about the way things went down, but seein' you here on this plane, I gotta admit I'm happy you're here.”

Tears blurred my vision. “Temporarily.”

He made a noncommittal noise, lips pulled thin.

“Thank you, Riley.”

I didn't even allow myself to think about a possible deeper meaning behind him being happy I was here.

It didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that I'd been mistreated this morning, and right when I'd felt the most helpless... Right

when I'd been about to head home, mad at myself for not handling it all better, Riley had stepped in once again and saved my day.

Just by being his kindhearted self.

Sure, I'd made sure it was temporary to protect myself, but *thank you* wasn't nearly enough to express my gratitude. For this job, Paisley's efforts to get my old employers to clean house, and the comfort of simply being here with this man right when I needed him the most.

Riley set down his beer and leaned forward. "You're welcome. At this point, there's nothin' I wouldn't do for a Cole or a Wilson. So get used to it."

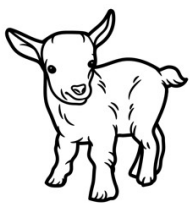
I smiled, finally taking a sip of that champagne Jordan had delivered.

And for the first time, being just another member of the Cole family in Riley's eyes didn't feel so bad. He was my boss for now—which meant I couldn't tell him how I really felt about him—but that was okay.

I'd settle for knowing he simply cared about me as a Cole, and maybe, just maybe, I'd let myself get used to it.

Like exposure therapy.

Surely, after a few months of internally dying over those winks and smiles, I'd become desensitized to them, and all those old feelings would simply fade away.



4 /

Firelight danced in Aubree's eyes as she laughed with her sisters, and as much as I wanted to focus on my conversation with Everett and Jackson, their voices might as well have been coming through a wind tunnel.

My fist clenched around the guitar pick in my hand. Paisley had done exactly as I'd hoped with Aubree's old employers yesterday, and even though they were already making changes over there, I still felt the urge to track this Branson Thomas joker down.

I'd never been the kinda guy who went looking for trouble, but I'd also never found myself in the kind of situation where someone had hurt a woman I cared about.

A woman I cared about.

Yeah, I sure did care about Aubree Cole. More than she'd probably ever know.

And since she'd relaxed more and more with every passing minute since our chat on the plane, and that was all that mattered, it was the only thing stopping me from taking a quick hop to wherever Branson lived. Paisley's threats of a PR nightmare for the company would have to do.

"You know," Everett said from the Adirondack chair beside mine, "you might wanna blink or look away every now and again."

Startled, I did both. Blinked, looked around at the circle of family members around the fire, then looked at him. "What?"

“You’re starin’ pretty hard at my sister-in-law right now. Or, at least, I hope it’s my sister-in-law you’re lookin’ at and not my wife.”

“Or mine,” Jackson added from my other side.

Aubree was across the fire pit from us, sandwiched between Laney and Dakota, with Jackson’s wife, Bailey, on Dakota’s other side, and Paisley beside Laney.

The five of them were wrapped up in some conversation that had them gasping for air as they laughed, and while they were all beautiful women, I only had eyes for one.

I chuckled. “Rest assured, boys, your pregnant wives are safe from me.”

“But Aubree’s not?” Everett pressed.

I didn’t have to look at him to know there was some kind of rueful smile on his covered-in-scruff face. I heard it in his tone, clear as a bell.

Clearing my throat, I looked around the circle again. I was glad the parents were engrossed in some story Jackson’s adoptive daughter, Phoebe, was telling and that the women were too far away to hear us.

The only one paying us any mind was the pygmy goat who sat at Phoebe’s side, her icy blue eyes fixed right on me.

Ruffled by how much it seemed like she could understand every word we said, I turned back to Everett. That smile was still in place, but I could see the warning in his eyes.

The Coles and Wilsons were a tight-knit group. The families had lived next door to each other since before the three Cole sisters and four Wilson brothers were even born, and the parents were best friends. They’d even recently knocked down the fence between their two yards so they could have one big shared yard.

That meant the Wilson boys had a special kind of big-brother protectiveness for Aubree, Dakota, and Laney—well, a little different for Everett and Laney since they were childhood sweethearts and now married—but still.

The men on either side of me would never let anyone hurt those Cole women, and they weren't shy about making sure I remembered that.

"Aubree's safe, too," I assured Everett.

And she was because she wasn't just safe *from* me if she didn't feel the same way about me as I felt about her. I'd never hold that against her, and she hadn't done anything over the years that told me she was into me, so my hopes weren't all that high. But it was bigger than that, too, because on the off chance she did return my feelings... she'd be safe *with* me.

"I dunno, I think I can see it," Jackson mused, his own eyes on Aubree now.

I fought the urge to snort. I could see it too. But that didn't mean it would happen.

Everett ran a hand over his jaw and shifted in his chair. "Yeah, maybe so. I wasn't your biggest fan when we first met, Conrad, but you've grown on me. I could probably get behind the idea of you and Aubs."

Shaking my head, I grinned at the memory of my first meeting with Everett. As soon as Laney and I entered into our fake relationship, she'd told me all about how much she loved Everett and how that meant our publicity stunt would never turn into more than that.

And the day I'd come to Charlotte Oaks with her for her high school reunion and met the mechanic I'd spent years letting Laney cry on my shoulder about? He'd looked like he was about ready to throw me across the parking lot of his auto shop.

Poor guy hadn't known at the time that our relationship was just for show. But once he found out, I'd been shocked by how quick he changed his tune about me.

That was Everett, though. Every person around this fire had a dang good heart, and it was just another reason I was grateful to be sitting here with them.

Unease swirled in my gut at that thought. What would happen if I told Aubree I'd always carried a torch for her, and

then things went sour? Would I be welcome here anymore?

Just the idea of that had me trying to stuff those feelings where the sun didn't shine.

I wasn't sure losing this family was worth the risk. Before them, I'd had no one.

Well, I'd had my uncle, Jim. He'd been the jerk of a manager that Paisley had replaced. But after my parents had died when I was twelve and he'd taken me in, my life had been a strange blend of something I wanted to escape and something most music-loving kids could only dream of.

He'd been the one who'd made me a star. But he'd also been the one who'd treated me in such a way that I'd wound up needing therapy as an adult.

Good times.

"You don't seem too keen on it," Jackson said in a low tone.

"I'm not. Aubree's been through some tough stuff lately, and what she needs right now is a soft place to land, not another relationship."

I wasn't sure what Aubree had told the rest of the family about her ex and the reason she'd be my new flight attendant, so I didn't say more. But hopefully that'd be good enough to end this conversation before I started to hope for something that would never be.

"I'll admit I was a little distracted by the baby news when y'all came in tonight," Jackson said, "but what was up with the way she looked at you? She slammed my front door so hard I thought the house was gonna come down."

I smirked. "Oh, that? Well, she might've been a little caught off guard when I told her about her new salary right before we walked in. Seems it's quite a bit more than she was makin' at her last job."

"And that bothered her enough for her to look like she wanted to thump you with a pear-head ratchet?" Everett asked.

I lifted a brow. "Am I supposed to know what that is?"



Everett sent me a blank look. “It’s a ratchet. With a head shaped like a pear.”

“Huh. Learn somethin’ new every day.” I grinned when he shook his head, muttering something that sounded a lot like *pretty boy* under his breath.

I might not be a mechanic or know much about fixing cars, but I knew how to get my hands dirty on a ranch. That had to count for something.

“It wasn’t so much the salary that bugged her. It was the fact that she insisted I was overpayin’ her, then I Googled the average salary of a flight attendant on a private jet and showed her the proof right there in black and white. Then I made a joke about her insistence on her employment bein’ temporary and how maybe the salary and the chance to hang out with me all the time might make her change her mind, and all of that combined seemed to ruffle her feathers a bit.”

“I’ll say,” Everett muttered.

Jackson chuckled, then excused himself to use the little boy’s room. When he was gone, my eyes found Aubree again. Man, she’d been cute as heck when she’d stormed into this house behind me and slammed that door. For a quiet one, she sure had a not-so-quiet fire in her that I was starting to think I was addicted to stoking.

Everett followed my gaze and shook his head, letting out a long breath. “I think I changed my mind.”

“About what?” I asked.

“About you and Aubree. I’m glad you don’t seem to wanna go there, but do me a favor and stick to your guns on that, all right?”

I stiffened. “Come again?”

“That girl is like a sister to me and always has been. If you’ve got her set up with a good job with great pay, leave it at that. I don’t wanna see her out of a job if it doesn’t work out between y’all, and I definitely don’t wanna knock you over the head with that ratchet myself if you hurt her.”

A lump the size of the newly renovated house behind me clogged up my throat, and it took a few seconds to swallow it down enough to speak. Hearing those words felt a lot like he'd gone ahead and hit me with the ratchet right there and then.

"Like I said, she's safe."

"Good."

"Uncle Riley," Phoebe said as she danced around the firepit and hopped to a stop in front of me. Jackson came back right then, ruffling her hair before he took his seat again. "I have something for you."

I beamed up at the girl. I wasn't her uncle, of course, but I had to admit I loved that I rated the title. "Oh, yeah? Whatcha got, darlin'?"

Phoebe reached into the pocket of her floral sundress and pulled out a rainbow-colored bracelet made of yarn. Everyone in this circle besides Aubree, Paisley, and myself was wearing a similar one in different color patterns, and it didn't take a genius to know where they'd all gotten them.

But seeing Phoebe pull one from her pocket and extend it to me had my chest aching like I had the weight of an anvil on it. "Wow, look at this."

"It's a friendship bracelet," she said with a happy little grin. "Or, I guess, a family bracelet, but that's not what the book calls it. That's where I learned how to do it. I got a book telling me how to make them for my birthday. We all have them, and I made you one, too. It means you're part of the family."

My throat was tighter than ever as I ran my thumb over the intricate knots. "I'm honored, Pheebs. Thank you."

"You're welcome! Do you need help putting it on? It's hard to do it with just one hand. You know, because you can't use your other hand and all."

"I'd love some help."

I handed the bracelet to her, and as she tied it around my wrist, my eyes moved up and found Aubree's as if they were

magnetically drawn to her. Tears welled up in hers, and a soft smile played over her full lips in a way that made that weight on my chest sink in a little deeper.

Phoebe finished up and clapped her hands, drawing my focus back to her. “Looks great. You promise you won’t take it off?”

“I sure do.”

“Well, you can take it off when you go on stage, I guess. Might not be the kinda fashion statement you’re trying to make, and I’m not allowed to wear jewelry or anything at my dance recitals, so I totally get it. But put it back on when you’re done, okay?”

I poked her in the side. “Darlin’, I’d be proud to wear this bracelet on stage. Then the whole world would know how happy I am that I’ve got someone like you in my corner.”

The smile on Phoebe’s face was wide enough to split it right open, and she threw her arms around my neck. “Thanks, Uncle Riley. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Little Miss.”

“Oh my gosh, Daddy!” Pheobe squealed, clasping Jackson’s arm and nearly tripping over herself as she hopped from me to him. “Gertie is the only one I haven’t made one for! I should make her one too or she’ll feel left out!”

There were a few chuckles around the fire, and I looked down at the goat we often referred to as Pheobe’s emotional support animal. She tilted her head to the side, looking more than a little skeptical about the idea.

“Uh, sunshine,” Jackson start, his face lined with pain, “I hate to break it to you, but that bracelet wouldn’t last a day on Gertie. She’d chew it off in a blink.”

Phoebe’s face fell, and Jackson’s looked strangled. There was nothing he hated more than saying no to that girl.

“Tell you what you can do,” I said, poking her in the ribs. “Why don’t you make her a friendship collar instead? Then she won’t be able to chew it off.”

Phoebe looked down at the two bracelets I assumed were for Aubree and Pais. “It’s a little thin...”

“I’m no expert, but it looks like you braided three strands together to make ours, right?”

She blinked at me, floored that I’d be able to figure that out. “Uh, yeah.”

“So, why not make three this size, and braid them together? Then it’d be nice and thick.”

You could’ve heard a cricket sneeze at that moment, it was so quiet around the fire. In fact, the fire itself seemed to be holding its breath.

But then Phoebe pointed at me with a huge grin. “Uncle Riley is a *genius!*”

I shrugged. “I do what I can.”

Newly energized, Phoebe kissed me on the cheek and then pranced over to Paisley and then Aubree to give them their bracelets, and I tried to use a sip of my beer to get rid of the lump in my throat.

When I looked down at Gertie, I could’ve sworn she gave me a look that meant something like, “Well, done sir,” complete with the tipping of an imaginary top hat before she trotted away.

“*Uncle Riley,*” Jackson said with a head shake. “Did I ever tell you how much I wanted to deck you the first time I heard her call you that?”

I laughed at the memory of when Jackson had been worried about me making a move on Bailey when they were still “just friends.” Not that I hadn’t tried. She was gorgeous, and she’d seemed interested—unlike Aubree—so it was worth a shot.

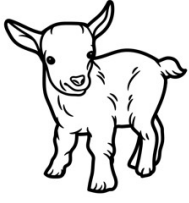
Until I found out on our first date that she was secretly in love with Jackson, and then she became another in a growing list of women I attempted to date whose heart was already spoken for.

“Nah, but you didn’t need to,” I replied. “I read that message loud and clear. You Wilsons don’t need words to tell a man to step off when you think he’s after your woman.”

They both chuckled at that, but then Jackson jerked his chin toward Aubree. “At least you don’t have to worry about that with Aubs. Far as I know, anyway.”

I nodded, not missing the warning look in Everett’s eyes.

Then I looked down at the colorful family bracelet on my wrist, knowing he was right about me needing to stick to my guns where Aubree was concerned. Her heart might not belong to any other man, but that didn’t mean it was risk-free to try to make her mine.



“Aubs? You awake?”

My eyes popped open at the muffled sound of Kota’s voice through my bedroom door. “Yeah, come in.”

Dakota still lived at home since she was saving up for her dream house, and I’d moved back in after I got out of the Air Force. It’d made sense since I knew I’d be gone too much to justify paying rent somewhere else after starting my new career as a flight attendant.

You know, another career that was pilot-adjacent but not the real deal. *Sigh*.

The door creaked as she slid inside, pressing her back to it as it closed. “Doin’ okay?”

I leaned up on my elbows, grinning at my younger sister. She was sassy and bold, but as a nurse, she was also a bit of a mother hen sometimes. “Yes, Kota. I’m good. Thank you for carin’.”

“You’re my big sis. Of course I care.” She skipped over to my bed and plopped down, leaning her back against the wall and crossing her legs into a flannel pajama pretzel.

The move reminded me so much of when we were kids, and she’d sneak into my room after lights out. We’d stay up as long as we could, giggling and talking until we fell asleep in whatever position we’d last been in.

Sometimes I woke up with her feet in my face, and sometimes I woke up on the floor with my own feet propped up on the bed. But that was when we were kids.

As teens, things had changed.

“This reminds me of when we were little,” Kota said with a sigh as she gazed around my darkened room.

“I was just thinkin’ that.” I pushed up, leaning my back against the headboard. “You wanna have a sleepover like old times?”

Surprise crossed her face, and then she nodded with a warm smile. “I’d love to.”

“Great.”

“I miss those days,” she said quietly, looking down at her hands. “Well, sorta. I guess I miss bein’ closer to you. I can tell somethin’ is up, but I don’t know if you’ll tell me what, and that stinks.”

I chuckled and ran a hand through my hair. Dakota wasn’t one to mince words, that was for sure.

But she was right. We’d grown apart during my first year of high school. As a quiet, bookish middle sister, I hadn’t made many friends and had pretty much kept to myself.

Laney was two grades ahead of me and always with Everett and his friends, and Kota was still in middle school. By the next year, when she showed up at Charlotte Oaks High? Shoot. It took the girl about ninety seconds to become the most popular kid in her grade *and* mine.

And yet... I still found myself reading under a tree while she held court in the quad instead of joining her.

But we were adults now, and even though I was gone for four years in the Air Force and gone a lot now as a flight attendant, that didn’t mean we couldn’t try to bring our childhood closeness back.

And to do that, I figured I should start by opening up to her. “You’re not wrong. Somethin’ is up, and I’d love to talk to you about it if you wanna listen.”

The moonlight coming through my blinds allowed me to see the sparkle that lit my sister’s face as she straightened her shoulders and grinned. “I’m all ears.”



I worried my bottom lip between my teeth as I tried to figure out where to start.

Shortly after Riley, Paisley, and I had arrived in Charlotte Oaks yesterday, I'd told her and my sisters about my emotional rollercoaster of a day.

They'd been mad on my behalf and happy that Riley had been such a big help, but I'd ached to talk to them about the conflicting emotions the whole thing brought up.

We hadn't talked about it at all tonight, though. We were way too busy celebrating the news that both Laney and Bailey were pregnant. That'd been the surprise of a lifetime, and even though part of me wanted to keep my drama to myself so I wouldn't rain on the baby parade, I'd also had a strange urge to unload my feelings. That almost never happened..

It'd be awkward to talk about with Laney, considering her public ties to him. She'd probably worry about what might go down in the media, and now that she and Everett were happily married and living in their gorgeous, custom-built home, I didn't want to bring the paparazzi to their doorstep.

And I knew if my momma caught wind that I might have feelings for a man she practically doted on as if he were her own son, she'd try to play matchmaker. The woman had gotten relentless about me settling down now that Laney and Everett had, and she wouldn't give a single hoot about the reasons that'd be a bad idea.

But Dakota? Maybe she was exactly the right person to talk to about this. She was a steel trap when it came to secrets, and she certainly wouldn't pull any punches if I asked for her advice.

"You know... you gotta start talkin' if you want me to listen," she teased.

"Yeah, good point. Okay." I blew out a breath. "So, Riley is a sweetheart for helpin' me out and all, but I'm a little worried about it."

"Because of the way you feel about him?"

My mouth popped open. "Because of what?"

“Oh, come on, Aubs. It’s obvious.”

“It is?”

She shrugged. “I mean, maybe not to anyone but me, but I guess even though we don’t see or talk as much as we used to, I’ve always been able to read you like you read your books.”

We both looked over at the three bookcases that made an L-shape in the corner of my room. They were packed so tightly with paperbacks I’d had to start stacking them horizontally on top of the vertical rows just to cram them all in.

“Do you think it’s obvious to... him?” I asked quietly, not meeting her gaze.

“I’m not sure. Would you want it to be?”

“It’d just make things complicated. Best he doesn’t know I’ve got a crush on him.”

“Why? You think he wouldn’t feel the same way? Because *girl*, you should’ve seen the way that man was lookin’ at you tonight.”

I sat up straight. “How was he lookin’ at me?”

“Like you were a freakin’ snack, that’s how. No, worse. Like you were the whole dang *meal*.”

Flushing, I waved away her words. “Um, no way. That’s just his face. Pretty sure he looked like that in an interview with Diane Sawyer once.”

Dakota scrunched up her face. “Diane Sawyer? Ma’am, I think that woman has been retired for years, and I don’t think she was interviewin’ country stars even when she wasn’t. Pretty sure she did the serious news and stuff.”

“You know I’m not much for TV,” I grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah. But still. He might turn on the charm in interviews, but trust me, the way that boy was lookin’ at you at that party tonight—and oh my goodness, by the *fire*. Phew. I felt like I needed a fan.”

I fell back against the headboard again, wincing in pain when my head hit the hard cherrywood. Why hadn't I opted for one of those upholstered ones that would've cushioned my dramatic landing? Note for the future.

"Why is that a bad thing?" Kota asked, reaching forward and shaking my knee. "You'd think any girl would love to hear that Riley Conrad was makin' swoony eyes at them."

"Because it's weird."

"Weird, how?"

I sat up again. "Let's just say you're right, and Riley was makin' swoony eyes at me—"

"I am because he totally was."

"Hush and lemme finish."

She held up her hands, then made the motion of zipping her lips and tossing the key.

"Let's just say he was, and if I told him about my little crush..." I swallowed, shifting under the weight of that massive understatement. "What then?"

Dakota tilted her head to the side. "Uh, hopefully there'd be kissin'. And lots of it."

My cheeks heated, and I covered my face with my hands. "What happens when photos of us kissin' get splashed all over the tabloids?"

Dakota wrinkled her nose. "You frame them?"

I picked up my pillow and brought it around my side, swatting her with it. "No, Kota. We wouldn't *frame* them. It'd be so awkward for everyone. Laney is finally gettin' to live a peaceful, paparazzi-free life with Everett. And now they have a baby on the way. After all the media hounding she got when the news first broke about their fake love triangle, the last thing any of them needs is for her *sister* to get into a relationship with her *ex*."

"Uh, hmm. Yeah. I mean, pretty sure that one can be gotten over quick enough not to matter. It's not like *you're*

famous. The gossip never lasts when a celebrity dates a normal person the way it does when two celebrities date. Probably because no one thinks it'll work out."

I slow-blinked at her. "Fine, onto the next issue."

"Ooh, honey, how many you got? Are we talkin' like a full twelve-month subscription here?"

I glowered at her. "You're not as funny as you think you are, ya know."

"Sure I am. I'm hilarious."

Snickering, I shook my head. I only had two more issues, not a full twelve-month subscription.

Only, if I told Dakota about my issues with him being my boss it might lead to uncovering everything I've held close to the vest for my entire life. No one knew about my dream of becoming a pilot—well, other than that jerk of a boyfriend who derailed that plan in the first place—and I wasn't sure I was ready to talk about it with Kota.

I was still reeling from the way being on Riley's jet had that old dream shooting back to the surface like someone had freed it from a cage at the bottom of a murky lake.

But as much as I didn't want to discuss all of that with my sister, the fears that came up when Phoebe gave Riley that bracelet tonight would lead to talking about him in a way that somehow felt wrong.

It'd mean talking about my concern that he hadn't had a family who loved him since his parents died, and I didn't want him to lose the Coles and Wilsons if we got together and it ended badly. And it'd probably also lead to me talking about all the things I knew he deserved in this life because of what a great man he was despite all he'd been through.

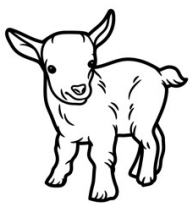
That was... deep.

That kind of talk would take this conversation away from me telling my sister about my secret crush in my childhood bedroom and into the territory of confessing some big, meaningful love.

She'd probably laugh.

Plus, as much as I felt like I saw the pain behind Riley's winks and smiles that he thought no one else could see, that pain was *his*. It didn't need to be gossiped about at a throwback slumber party.

So, I settled on giving her the other reason—even if it led to talking about myself. “Kota, he's my *boss*.”



**6 /**

Dakota let out a very unladylike snort. “You know what? Do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Pull out your phone.”

I frowned, reaching toward my nightstand and removing it from the charger. “Kay, now what?”

“Go to your favorite drug—sorry, *book*—dealer’s website.”

Totally lost, I chuckled as I cued up the site. “I’m there.”

“Okay, search this up—”

I let the phone fall to my lap. “Kota, I thought you said you wanted to listen to my problems. Why are you havin’ me look for books right now? Is there some self-help book you think is gonna help?”

“Type this in the search bar,” she said with her brows raised, waiting until I brought the phone back up and had my thumbs at the ready. “*Romance books with hot bosses.*”

I closed my eyes, letting the phone fall to my lap again as I slowly met her gaze. “Really?”

“Really. I don’t have to be a certified bookworm like you to know that’s a hot trope right there. I mean, I’m more into movies, but I figured the book thing would be more up your alley. All them swoony alone-in-the-breakroom scenes. All that late-night work when it’s just them two, and their connection is too hard to resist, and they can’t help but

passionately make out right there on his desk. *Me-oh-my*. That's some forbidden love at its finest."

"I'm gonna kick you, Dakota Jolene."

She cackled, then picked up my pillow from where it rested between us and launched it at me, smothering my own laughter as she pressed it to my face. "Not if I kill you first!"

I wrestled the pillow away, and she leaned back again, our giggles dying down as a shaky sigh left me. "Thanks for the laugh, but after what happened with Branson..."

"Aubs, what happened with Branson was not the stuff of office romance books and movies. That was just wrong."

"It was, but it also makes me a little wary of gettin' into another relationship with the man who controls my schedule and my paychecks."

Dakota tsked. "Sissy, look me in the eyes and tell me you think Riley Freaking Conrad—the same man who now wears a dang rainbow yarn bracelet on his wrist because he's just as wrapped around Phoebe's little finger as the rest of us—would be a vindictive jerk to you if somethin' went wrong."

I looked her in the eyes... but I didn't make a sound because obviously I couldn't tell her that. There was no truth to it. But my hesitation was about my job stability and protecting Riley from losing our family, and if I couldn't be honest with her about that, I had to pretend she'd won this round.

"Exactly." She folded her hands in her lap and shimmied her shoulders, looking mighty pleased with herself.

"It could still get awkward between us, though, even if he wasn't a vindictive jerk like Branson."

"It could, but shoot. I'd take a little awkward if it meant at some point I also had a chance to revel in that swoony stare of his for a bit."

"Sure you don't wanna have a go at him?" I teased, knowing she didn't.



How did I know? Because if Kota wanted to be with Riley, they'd be together.

She wouldn't have kept her feelings to herself if she were in my shoes. She wouldn't be sitting here whining about all the reasons she shouldn't tell him how she felt.

She would just do it. She was brave like that.

I pulled my lip between my teeth again and nibbled. Was that something I could learn from her? Could it maybe be contagious if I spent enough time around my plucky little sister?

“Riley is a dreamboat, no doubt about it. But he's not really my cup of tea as far as boyfriends go,” she said with a little shrug. “Besides, I'm pretty sure you've felt some type of way about him for like, what, the whole time we've known him? Ever since Laney first brought him home to meet the family and told us about their fake relationship?”

I cringed.

Her nose wrinkled. “What's that look? Yes, that long? Or no? Your face looks weird.”

“Hush. Um...” I paused, weighing my options. I'd already told her more than I'd ever told anyone about my long-buried feelings. What was one more secret? “Okay, here's the thing. I sorta met Riley before the whole fake-dating stunt came about.”

Her brow furrowed. “Uh, okay. I didn't realize you ran in celebrity circles. Weren't you in the Air Force back then? How would you have met him?”

“Remember that show he and Laney did right before the news broke about their relationship? On my base when I was on deployment?”

She nodded, eyes wide.

“I'd just found out I'd been cheated on and got dumped—”

“Again?” she shrieked.

“*Again*. Thanks. Anyway, I was bein’ a big baby and cryin’ under the stage, and Riley saw me.”

“Ah, dang. Bet you looked *real* cute.”

“Oh, the cutest,” I deadpanned. “Pretty sure there was snot involved. I don’t like to think about it.”

She giggled. “What happened when he saw you?”

“Oh, you know, he came over and put on that charm of his and made me forget all about what I was upset about.”

“Well, yeah, who’d be worried about some guy who’d be dumb enough to cheat on his deployed girlfriend when *Riley Conrad* was sayin’ all the right things, lookin’ the way he does?”

I smirked, picking at my cuticles.

“Probably lookin’ at *you* the way he does, too,” Kota added.

Her whispered tone was almost reverent, and I had to laugh. “Yeah, I’d say there was a fair amount of somethin’ in the way he looked at me. But then two seconds later, Laney and Paisley told me all about their grand plan for world domination by makin’ them the king and queen of country music. And that was it.”

“That was it?” she asked, none of the previous light in her expression.

“Yep. Honestly, it’s pretty silly. He made me feel better, but it wasn’t like he asked me out or promised me forever. He’d just been a sweetheart when that was exactly what I’d needed, and he then went on with his life, and I went on with mine.”

“All right, but if the moment was that big, you’d think he’d have felt somethin’ too, right?”

I shrugged. “Once again, he is who he is. Total charmer. I highly doubt it made as big of an impact on him as it made on me.”

“Y’all haven’t talked about it since then?”

“Nope. I don’t think he even knows it was me he was talkin’ to that day. When he and Laney came to town after I got home from deployment, he didn’t do or say anythin’ to show he knew I was the same girl he’d talked to that day.”

Dakota frowned. “You know what else is common in romance movies? Er, books probably, too. But that’s your area of expertise.”

I rolled my eyes. “What?”

“Miscommunications. Pointless ones. Ones where a simple conversation would clear up some stuff the characters have been holdin’ onto for way too long. Eye-roll-worthy stuff right there, if you ask me.”

“What’s your point, Kota?”

“Don’t be eye-roll worthy, is all. You had what sounds like a life-changin’ moment with a famous country singer, and for years you’ve told yourself he didn’t even know it was you. One conversation is all it would take to put that to rest.”

I let my gaze travel back to the bookshelf, knowing she was right about how common that kinda thing was in books. And she was also right about it being eye-roll worthy.

Except...

“You know when a miscommunication *isn’t* eye-roll worthy?” I asked.

She quirked a brow and waited.

“When there’s a reason they haven’t had the conversation to clear it up.”

“Better be a good one.”

I lowered my chin, looking up at her through my lashes because I was honestly shocked I was about to admit this out loud. “Because maybe the woman isn’t as brave as some other women might be. Maybe she’s scared of speakin’ up only to get her heart broken.”

Okay, *shoot*. Maybe to a woman like Dakota, that would *still* be eye-roll worthy.

But Dakota's entire demeanor changed at my words, and she scooted across the bed, climbing under the covers with me like she'd done when we were kids.

Slowly, I laid down next to her and took her offered hand, then tilted my head until the side of mine rested against the side of hers.

We stared at the ceiling for a long moment, then she sighed. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

"What do you mean?"

"You went off and joined the Air Force when you graduated, and you didn't seem scared at all to leave home and serve our country and travel to all those places—sometimes genuinely dangerous ones, at that. Then you became a flight attendant, and half the time you're out there livin' in hotels, totally on your own. You *are* brave, sissy."

I swallowed, knowing she was right about that, despite everything I'd always thought about myself when compared to my sisters.

*Why*, though?

And what was so scary about speaking my truth when I could be brave and independent in so many other ways?

"Thanks, Kota." It was all I could think to say.

"You're welcome." She squeezed my hand. "So, what now?"

I bit my lip. "I guess I need to figure out how to have that conversation so I can clear up the eye-roll-worthy stuff."

"And then what?"

My tummy fluttered as I remembered Riley being so cute with Phoebe about the collar for Gertie. I hadn't noticed him looking at me in any *snack* or *meal* kinda way, but I had definitely noticed that.

And then I'd proceeded to die from a sweetness overload, imagining our resident paramedics—Jackson and Bailey—using CPR on me right there in the grass.

“Then,” I started, taking a deep breath, “I guess we’ll just see if he knew it was me, and go from there.”

Kota tsked, then pulled the blankets up to her chin. “Keep me posted. And Aubs?”

“What?”

“We’re like... old, now, so we’re gonna sleep on this sleepover instead of stayin’ up all night, right? I gotta work tomorrow.”

I chuckled and closed my eyes. “Yes, we’re gonna sleep. Night Kota-bear.”

“Night, sissy.”



It’d been too late to text Riley after Dakota and I finished talking last night. Sure, I may have romantic feelings for the man, but a middle-of-the-night text would probably send the wrong message.

And if Dakota was wrong and he didn’t think of me as a snack or any other thing he wanted to devour, it’d probably be an unwelcome message, at that.

So, as soon as I’d hugged Dakota, thanked her for last night, and then booted her from my room so I could muster up the courage to send this text, I pulled out my phone.

Me: Good morning. Have a good time with the guys last night?

I hit send, nibbling on my bottom lip while I waited to see if he’d reply.

Maybe he was still sleeping. When the rest of us were ready for bed after the housewarming party, Riley had gone to The Proud Oak with Everett and Jackson for a round of beers to celebrate the baby news.

Their other local brother, Adam, met them there when he finished his shift at the Charlotte Oaks PD. We'd all missed him at the party last night since he'd had a case he couldn't cut away from, but I was glad he'd made time to hang with the guys when he could.

Adam was always so serious, so all work and no play. Much like Paisley in that way, I guessed. You'd think they'd get along great, but since they were actually kinda like oil and water when they were together, maybe it was a good thing he hadn't been there last night.

My phone buzzed in my hand, jerking me from my thoughts about asking Laney why her bestie and her brother-in-law seemed to hate each other so much.

Riley: Yeah, it was a blast. Wish you would've been there.

I stilled. Was it me, or was that kind of forward?

Of course it was forward. This was Riley.

And while I'd had his number for years because he'd insisted on paying for the catering for a surprise anniversary party I'd once thrown for my parents, this was the first time I'd texted him about something that wasn't catering-bill related.

Yep, I just wasn't used to this. He probably sent flirty texts without even meaning to. It was just his way.

"Stop it, Aubree," I scolded myself.

It was a good thing Kota had gone downstairs for breakfast so she wasn't here to witness me being all scaredy-cat-ish again after all my big talk about turning over a brave new leaf.

Time to bite the bullet.

Me: Maybe next time. Have you had breakfast yet? We could meet at the diner if you haven't. There's something I wanted to talk to you about.

There was a quick flash of those dots that told me he was responding, but then they disappeared. And they stayed gone

for a full freaking minute.

Seriously. An actual minute. I watched the clock.

*Oh no.*

Abort mission! What had I let my sister talk me into?

Just when I was about to text him back and say something about accidentally meaning to text someone else—who, though? Anyone, I didn't care—the dots reappeared, and my heartbeat ratcheted up like *whoa*.

Riley: I'd love to meet you at the diner. See you in fifteen?

I gasped out loud, my fingers flying over the keys.

Me: Slow your roll, Cowboy. It's a ten-minute walk and I just rolled out of bed.

Riley: Fine. See you in twenty, then?

Me: Some of us need more than ten minutes to get ready.

Riley: I doubt that's you, but all right. How bout thirty? I'm starving.

I chuckled and sent a quick text telling him that was fine, then tossed my phone over my shoulder. It hit the wall with a loud *thunk*, and I winced, but then I jumped sky-high when my gaze caught on my open door.

Gertie—the pygmy goat who lived mostly here but often had sleepovers with Phoebe at Jackson and Bailey's house—stood in my doorway, staring right at me.

“Hey, G,” I said slowly.

I loved this odd pet of ours. She'd been a gift from my daddy after he'd broken my momma's favorite Corning Ware dish. But sometimes that stare of hers was just a bit too all-seeing if you asked me.

“Whatcha doin'?”

She blinked.

“Uh-huh. Well, run along. I gotta put myself together so I can get breakfast with Riley and have a conversation that will apparently make me less of an eye-roll-worthy romance heroine.”

Yes, I was talking to a pygmy goat like she was a human who'd actually talk back.

And no, I wasn't ashamed of it.

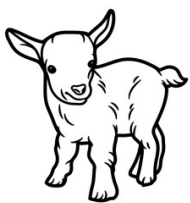
Maybe goats were just easier to be honest with than people.

Maybe because they couldn't talk back.

*Huh.* Lightbulb moment.

Gertie tilted her head as if she was considering my words. And maybe it was just my imagination, but I could've sworn I saw the old girl do something with her lips that resembled a smile before she turned and trotted away.





7 /

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about the reason behind Aubree's sudden invite to breakfast. Had I said or done something that would make her reconsider working for me?

I tipped my hat at the owner of Charlotte Oaks Creamery as she passed me on the sidewalk, grateful that I'd managed to smile even though a thought had just taken the wind out of me.

*Had I said or done anything that would make her reconsider?*

Heck yeah, I did.

I had Paisley take down the jerks at Aubree's old airline—complete with apology phone calls to Aubree yesterday, which were gratifying for me and embarrassing for her.

But taking down the bad guys meant she'd either still have a job there if she wanted one, or she'd be able to get hired at another airline because they'd surely give her a glowing reference to avoid any kind of scandal.

*Nice work, buddy. You saved her day, but you ruined your own.*

My jaw clenched so hard it made an audible pop as I continued down Main Street. But all thoughts of Aubree vanished when an odd tingling went up my spine. I felt like I was being watched. Not unusual everywhere else, but here in Charlotte Oaks? It felt a little out of place, given how casually the people of this town treated my fame.

I checked over my shoulder for the source of the feeling, and sure enough, the second I did, I spotted a girl wearing all

black with dark sunglasses and a black baseball cap pulled low over her face. Before I could get a word out, she spun around and attempted to hide behind a light pole.

She was petite, but not small enough for the forest green pole to block her from my view. The move reminded me of when a baby covered their own eyes and thought they were invisible. Not that I had a ton of experience with babies, but I'd seen them do that on TV.

Slowly, I turned to face her fully, and she peeked out to look at me. Her hair was in a low bun beneath the hat, but the little I could see of it was such a bright blonde it almost looked white.

I lifted my hand in a tentative wave. "Hey, there."

I'd expected her to come out from behind the pole and say something—maybe ask for an autograph or a photo—but nope. Instead, she darted away and didn't look back.

"Well, all right then," I muttered with a shake of my head.

The girl must not have been local. No one here acted like that around me, and it was one of my favorite things about this town.

Brushing it off, I moved on past the yarn shop and tax office until I reached the corner, then pulled open the door to my favorite diner in all the world, The Broken Oak.

I loved this place with its play on words for a name and its classic small-town diner feel. But even being smacked in the face with the scent of bacon grease and maple syrup did nothing to chase away the dark cloud that'd settled over me between the strange encounter with the girl and my nerves about this meeting.

I scanned the red vinyl booths for a head of brown hair and eyes as dark blue as the deepest oceans.

When I found those eyes—when they grabbed me by the throat from fifteen feet away—a smile tugged at my lips faster than a knife fight in a phone booth.

“Hey,” she said as I ambled up and slid into the booth across from hers. “Thanks for meetin’ me.”

“Anytime,” I replied.

Her gaze tracked my movements as I took off my Stetson and set it on the seat beside me before reflexively running a hand through my hair.

It was an auto-pilot move on my part—fixing my hair after removing my hat. But the way her throat worked while she eyed my bicep?

*Shoot.* Maybe I’d fuss with my hair more often for no good reason at all.

When our server, Norma, materialized out of nowhere and said hello, Aubree jumped like she’d been in some kind of trance. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to hold back my chuckle.

“Sorry, what?” She asked, blinking up at Norma with a dazed expression.

“Well, I’d be distracted too, honey, don’t you fret,” Norma said with a wink at me. “All I said was hello, so you didn’t miss much.”

That time I couldn’t hold it in, but I swallowed the end of the chuckle when Aubree flared her eyes at me with pink-stained cheeks.

“How you been, Norma?” I asked, flashing her a wide smile. “Grandkids doin’ all right? Tommy’s in T-Ball now, isn’t he?”

Aubree’s mouth fell open, but Norma preened. “Sure is. And that boy is a natural, I’ll tell you what. He’s already their star player.”

“Course he is. Never had a doubt in my mind with The Broken Oak’s star server as his grandmomma.”

The wink at the end of my compliment had Norma fanning herself with her order-taking pad, the other hand on her hip as she quirked it to the side. “Well, aren’t you just the sweetest

thing? Miss Aubree Cole, you hang onto this boy. He's one of the good ones."

I couldn't hear Aubree's mumbled reply very well because Norma called out a greeting to whoever had just walked in the door. But it sounded an awful lot like, "Don't I know it."

*Well, all right.*

"Y'all know what you wanna eat, or should I give you a quick minute to look over the menu?" Norma asked when she turned her attention back to us.

I looked at Aubree. "You ready?"

Her eyes flicked down to the menu, then back to me.

"Coffee?" I suggested with a finger gun.

"Yes. Definitely that."

"Two coffees, please," I told Norma. "We'll figure out the rest here in a minute."

"You got it, sugar."

When Norma was gone, I used my menu to tap the hand Aubree rested on the table between us. "What's eatin' you?"

"Why do you know about Norma's grandson playin' T-Ball?"

"Because she told me."

She blinked. "When?"

"Uh, I don't know. I come in here at least once every time I come to town. I know Georgie's biscuits and gravy are legendary, but I'm a big fan of diners, and this is one of the only towns I can get away with sittin' in one."

Her palms flattened on the table. "Okay, wait. I have so many questions."

"Well, shoot. I've done enough interviews to be a pro-question-answerer. Let 'em roll."

"She told you about her grandson playin' T-Ball at some point, but you can't even remember how long ago because you come here and chat with her so often, and yet you still

remember it happened... and you made a point to ask her about him? By *name*?”

“Why do I get the impression that question implies somethin’ not so nice about me in a roundabout way?”

Aubree’s head tilted to the side.

“Lots of interviews, remember? There’s always a bigger question behind a question like that one.”

She frowned. “I guess I’m just surprised.”

“Why? Because you see me as some bigshot celebrity, who doesn’t value the little people out here in the real world?”

Her eyes seemed to want her mouth to say a whole lot, but her lips stayed zipped.

A lot of women opened their mouths and let every thought or feeling pour out like a waterfall, but not this woman. *This* woman had me constantly looking for clues in her body language or facial expressions so I could figure out what was going on in that pretty little head of hers.

I was Hansel, gobbling up her breadcrumbs.

And whether it was a moment like this when I knew it was something beyond surface chatter, or it was the kind of simple, nonsensical musings we all had from time to time... I wanted to know it all.

I sighed. Just like on the plane, maybe she needed to get a little more comfortable before she opened up. She might not be a woman of many words, but she’d invited me here for a reason.

“Well, I won’t make you admit if that’s the way you think about me,” I said with a little grin, “but you said you had *many* questions. What’s the next one?”

She shook her head as if to clear it. “Okay, not that many. But, um, why is this the only diner you can sit in?”

“Ah, that right there is an easy one. You know what’s great about Charlotte Oaks? Other than you, of course.”

“What?” she asked dryly.

“No one cares about me. I can just be. No one in this town—or this diner—hassles me like they do everywhere else. They’re too used to givin’ Laney her privacy. Or maybe they’re just not that impressed by fame. Don’t matter to me much, as long as I get to enjoy it.”

The girl from the street flashed in my mind, but before I could give that strange encounter another thought, Norma came back with her coffee carafe, muttering to herself about how she told “that boy” to put on a fresh pot ten minutes ago so she wouldn’t have to stand around and wait for it.

“But hey,” she said to us, “at least now y’all get to enjoy it while it’s nice and hot.”

“Just how I like it,” I mused.

We thanked her as she flipped each of our white ceramic mugs and filled them with an inch of room for cream. Not that I’d use it, unfortunately.

“You know what you want?” I asked Aubree as she fixed her coffee with the sugar and cream Norma had snagged from the counter behind her.

Aubree nodded and ordered a simple bacon and cheese omelet with a side of toast, and I ordered the steak and eggs. When Norma was gone again, I leaned my forearms on the edge of the table.

“What’s that like?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Steak and eggs?”

She let out a delicate snort, and it was so cute I couldn’t help but smile.

“No, Riley. What’s it like to not be able to go anywhere in peace?”

I leaned back in the booth and blew air through my pursed lips. “Well, it can be inconvenient at times, that’s for sure. But truthfully, I don’t mind it all that much. Not enough to wanna hang up my guitar and call it a day, anyway.”

Her lips pulled over to the side, and once again, I wished I could give her a penny for her thoughts. Man, I’d even give

her a cool mil for them if that was what it took.

“That’s good. I’m glad you love what you do.”

I nodded, not quite sure how to respond to that. I was glad she loved what she did too. And I knew she did because every time I’d seen her between work trips, she’d beamed all the way through the highlights.

Short highlights, of course. Things had changed since I found her crying in the airport the other day, but before that? It was like pulling teeth to get this girl to say much to me, and that had bothered me a whole lot more than it should’ve.

But was her most recent question her way of working up to tell me she wanted to turn down my offer and go back to her newly-cleaned-out airline? Or maybe a new one?

“So, there’s a reason I wanted to meet up with you this mornin’,” she said.

*Here we go.*

“Let’s hear it,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee.

“Six years ago.”

I set the cup down and leaned forward, waiting. When she didn’t speak, I lifted a brow. “Six years ago?”

She shook out her arms. “Um, sorry. Okay. Do you remember what happened six years ago?”

“I... Uh, I got my first CMA that year, if memory serves.”

“You did.” She took a sip of her coffee, then appeared to fight a cough and a wince like she’d taken too big of a gulp and burned the inside of her mouth. “Sorry, um. Do you remember that you also did a show for deployed service members that year?”

I swallowed. Did I remember?

Did she think I *didn’t* remember?

“I’ll take that as a no?” she asked, one shoulder lifting a bit as she cringed.

“Why would you ask that?”



Surprise flared through me when she let her head fall back with a small groan and a dainty, yet frustrated laugh. “Oh, boy. Well, honestly, I’m askin’ because I might’ve been carryin’ around a little assumption for all these years, and my little sister called me eye-roll worthy for it. So, here I am, askin’.”

Something warm slid through my veins at the idea she was talking to Dakota about me. Talking to Dakota about assumptions she had about me, in fact.

By the sounds of things, whatever she assumed might’ve been the reason she’d kept me at arm’s length all this time. And if Dakota had called those assumptions eye-roll worthy...

Well, that had the slightest bit of hope flickering to life regarding my *own* assumptions.

“So, you’re askin’ if I remember doin’ that show,” I said slowly, swallowing hard when she nodded. “But what you’re really askin’, *I think*, is if I remember talkin’ to a certain pretty lady before I went on stage. Am I right?”

*Yep, I sure am.*

Aubree’s eyes flared so wide they matched the two heaping plates of breakfast Norma took that exact moment to place in front of us.

And suddenly, so many things became crystal clear.

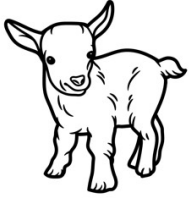
I’d taken a lot of cues from her over the last six years that I’d thought meant she wanted nothing to do with me... but now I understood.

Just like she was shocked that I remembered Norma’s grandson, Aubree assumed I had no idea she was the same woman I’d actually had to tell myself *not* to kiss even though I’d sure as heck wanted to.

Clearly, that had stung, and I didn’t blame her in the least. With the sparks between us that day, if the boot was on the other foot, I would’ve felt lower than a snake’s belly button if she hadn’t remembered me.

“Aubree,” I said when we were alone again, leaning as close as I could without dipping the front of my flannel in my

eggs, “I’m gonna tell you somethin’, and I want you to listen real good.”



Aubree's brows lifted slightly, then she gave a quick nod. "All right."

I looked around for prying eyes and ears. No one seemed to be paying us any mind, but I still wanted to make sure.

The teenagers in the booth behind Aubree were too busy talking about an upcoming bonfire this weekend to care.

Norma was busy getting another order from the window and likely wouldn't be back for a bit.

And the patrons sitting on the stools along the counter had their backs to us, and thankfully, none of them had their cheeks turned to the side so they could hear us better.

Satisfied, I returned my focus to the beautiful woman in front of me. Her eyes were wary, as if she were nervous about whatever was about to come out of my mouth.

She wasn't alone there, but since she'd finally brought it up, I reckoned now was just as good a time as any to give her the full picture as I saw it, too.

"I remember talkin' to you that day as if it were yesterday," I said, encouraged by the blush that instantly returned to her cheeks.

I *loved* that blush.

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, smiling softly. "Oh."

"Mmhm. And just so you know, that smile of yours still packs a heck of a punch."

At this, her mouth popped open, and I inwardly groaned since that wasn't the reaction I'd been hoping for.

I'd wanted her to give me that smile. And not just a small one. I wanted the big one she'd blessed me with all those years ago, the first time I'd told her that.

I cleared my throat. "I've also spent the last six years wonderin' what might've happened to make you wanna avoid me like the plague afterward. But now that I'm hearin' you thought I didn't know it was you, I guess it makes a bit of sense."

Guilt flitted over her features, and she poked at her omelet. "That's unfair to you. I'm sorry."

"It's unfair to you, too, ya know."

"What do you mean?"

I cut into my steak, taking a bite and chewing it before I answered her. "You thinkin' I wouldn't remember a moment like that, with a girl like you? Unfair as countin' cards in a high-stakes poker game, if you ask me."

Just as she always seemed to do when she was nervous, or thinking too hard, or holding something back, she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Can you do me a favor, darlin'?" I took a sip of my coffee and then gestured toward her face with my cup. "Take it easy on that pretty mouth of yours. Breaks my heart every time I see you chompin' on your lip like that."

It also had me wondering what it'd taste like if I gave it a little nibble myself, but I didn't have to tell her that part.

She gaped at me, then her lips pulled into a disbelieving grin when I snuck in the wink I used a lot more on her than on anyone else.

Chuckling, she shook her head. "Seriously?"

"Hey, there she is. That's that smile I was hopin' for."

"*Riley.*"

"What?"

Aubree shook her head again, this time all slow, with her blue eyes spreading wide. “This is why I thought you didn’t know it was me that day. You sound like a professional flirt, tryin’ to win the gold in the flirtin’ Olympics or somethin’.”

“Flirtin’ Olympics, huh? Are you ‘*the gold*’ in this scenario?”

She threw up her hands, then brought them to her forehead as she planted her elbows on the table. I heard a muttered, “What am I gonna do with this man?”

I had a feeling the question was rhetorical.

That said, I didn’t mind answering her anyway. “Oh, I can think of a few things.”

Her head snapped up, and I threw my head back and laughed.

I couldn’t help it. She looked downright riled up with all this over-the-top flirting, and contrary to her continued assumptions of me, I didn’t flirt with her—or anyone else—because I had Olympics-level goals in mind.

I flirted because there was just something about making a woman smile that made me happy. Whether she was the sweet old gal who brought me brownies whenever I came to town, a busy mom with three teens wearing sweats at the grocery store.

Or... a pretty lady I was interested in.

You know, like the one currently looking at me like she was trying to piece me together like a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle on a cold winter night.

But hey—I’d gotten her to smile.

As far as I was concerned, the world could use people like me who liked to make people smile just for the heck of it. Especially women, who had a tendency to be harder on themselves than any man I’d ever known.

“Anyway, now that we’ve cleared that up,” I started, gesturing at her plate with my fork, hoping she’d take the hint and eat her omelet before it got even colder, “now what?”

She'd just taken a bite, and my question apparently startled her so much that she nearly choked.

*Oops.*

After recovering and taking a sip of coffee—a careful one this time since Norma wasn't kidding about how hot it was—she blinked at me. “What do you mean, ‘now what?’”

“Well, it seems we've turned some kind of corner here, don't you think? In the right direction, too.”

“I'm not following.”

“Well, let's see. We've figured out that we both clearly remember that day under the stage. And feel free to set me straight if I've got this wrong, but I think we've also figured out that we both felt some sparks that day. Otherwise, I don't reckon we'd be havin' this conversation six years later, do you?”

She started to bite her lip, but at my lift of a single brow, she pursed them instead.

Somehow, that move might've been a little worse, but I shook it off and ate another bite of my breakfast.

“You felt sparks, too?” she asked quietly.

I held her gaze, making sure there was no hint of the teasing flirtatiousness that'd been there before. “Felt 'em then. Feel 'em now.”

I wasn't sure what I expected her to say, but her whispered, “Me too,” had me *this close* to slapping the table and letting out a whoop.

But I kept a lid on that bit of ridiculousness and gave her a slow nod. “Good. So, I'll ask again. What now?”

“How're y'all doin' over here?” Norma asked, and this time it was me who almost jumped out of my skin at her sudden reappearance.

I turned my chin toward the sweet, white-haired lady who had the worst timing in all the world, but it took a second or two longer for my eyes to follow.

They'd still been drowning in the deep blue ones across from me.

"We're doin' all right," I told our server. "Thank you, Norma."

"Glad to hear it. More coffee?"

"Sure," Aubree said, scooting her mug over for Norma to fill from her carafe.

I did the same, and we thanked her. But right before she turned to walk away, Aubree suddenly jumped up.

Our mugs rattled in their saucers from the impact of her thighs hitting the underside of the table, freshly-poured coffee sloshing over the rims. But it was the thud—so loud it hurt the tops of my own thighs—that caused Norma and I to sport matching, squished-up faces of sympathy pain as we stared at Aubree.

Her face, however, was *not* pained. It was white as a sheet.

And that, combined with how quickly she'd jumped up, had me immediately on alert. "What's wrong?"

But then Aubree shook her head, her cheeks pinkening up and passing right over a blush and barreling into *tomato-land*. "Nothing. Sorry. Restroom."

She didn't look at any of the diners as they stared at her, but I wanted to stand on my bench and clap my hands to get their attention before telling them to put their eyes on their plates before I slapped some manners into them.

Just in time, Norma's voice cut through my irrational anger. "Hey, sweetheart, listen up quick while she's gone."

I opened and closed my mouth, then nodded dazedly for her to go ahead.

"Don't look now, but across the street—" She stopped speaking and smacked her hand on the table, jerking my gaze back to her. Then she did a strange fake laugh like I'd said something charming, and her next words came through her smile like spaghetti from a pasta maker. "*I said don't look, sugar. Anyway, there's a woman who looks a lot like that*



burglar from that kids' show with puppets, you know what I'm talkin' about?"

I nodded, not knowing which show she meant but knowing exactly which woman she was referring to. "Is she hiding behind a pole or somethin'?"

Norma frowned before she put that serial-killer smile back in place. "What? No. She's just standin' there. But I saw you with her before you came in here, and I have to say, if you're here on a date with Aubree, but you're also stringin' that girl along, I don't think it's gonna end well for you, son."

My stomach bottomed out. There was so much to unpack there, I didn't even know where to start. "Norma, no. You've got it all wrong—"

"No, *Riley Conrad*, you've got it all wrong if you think anyone in this town will stand for Aubree gettin' hurt. And you're also wrong if you think that girl across the street is over you. Because, darlin', lemme tell you, the way she's starin' through this window right now like she wants to pick your brain apart is makin' even *me* uncomfortable. And that's sayin' a lot because I watch daytime soap operas. At night, though. I'm here durin' the day. I've got one of those DVR things now."

She pronounced DVR slowly, like it was a fancy word with three letters per syllable instead of three letters in total.

I smiled, shaking my head. "Norma, you can relax. She probably wants an autograph, but she's too shy to ask for one. Trust me, it happens all the time."

"Not here, it don't."

I dropped my chin in a single, grim nod. "You're right. Not here. But she might just be passin' through."

Norma looked me over in a distinctly skeptical way, but then she must have decided I was telling the truth because warmth returned to her lined face, and she grinned. "Good. I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that. I believe you, Riley. We're protective of our Aubree. You know how she is about... well, *people*."

I fought back a grin. Norma—who was, in fact, a person—had wiggled the fingers of her free hand in front of her in some kind of slow-motion, shooing move when she'd said the word *people*.

It was all I could do not to laugh when Aubree walked up right at that moment and slid back into the booth. I sure did know how she felt about people, and right now, she looked like all the people in this diner could disappear in a puff of smoke and glitter, and it'd be just fine with her.

“What'd I miss?” Aubree asked as she looked between us with wary eyes.

“Oh, nothin', sweetie. We were just havin' ourselves a little chat,” Norma replied, sweet as sugar now. In fact, she turned to the counter, retrieved a fresh mini-pot of cream, and pointed to the sugar on the table. “Looks like you've got plenty of room in your coffee for all that cream and sugar you usually take it with, Riley. *Enjoy, y'all.*”

I shouldn't have looked, but I did. And *yep*. Norma sidled up to Bobbi as the younger woman served a table full of rowdy kids, pointing out the girl across the street.

If there was a Charlotte Oaks watchlist, that poor fan-in-black just found her way onto it.

Norma turned back toward me and mouthed, “*We've got your back,*” and followed it up with a wink.

It should've freaked me out, but instead had my flannel feeling a little too tight as my chest swelled.

*Man, I love this town.*

“What did she mean about the cream and sugar?” Aubree asked, stealing my focus again.

I waved a hand. “Uh, usually I use a lot of both.”

“Why didn't you on the first cup?”

If she were anyone else, I would've lied. But since she was Aubree, I couldn't. “Well... because a date once told me that a man usin' all that sugar and cream in his coffee is about the least-manly thing he could do, and around you, I guess maybe

I'd rather drink gross coffee than look... Ah, *shoot*, woman. Why do you do this to me?"

She looked adorably caught off guard, but when she didn't say anything, I let it go and fixed my coffee exactly how I wanted it.

If I could admit that I felt sparks for the woman and then tell her why I'd been drinking my coffee black even though I hated it that way, the least I could do was drink it the *right* way from here on out.

"Back to what we were talking about. Before I... um, had to pee," Aubree said, flinching at her own words. "Sorry. So, Dakota kinda helped me see that I can be brave when I wanna be. It's somethin' I'm workin' on, anyway, and I promised her I'd be honest with you," Aubree started, eyes on the coffee mug she slowly spun by its handle. "So that means I have to tell you that even *if* we both felt sparks that day—"

"We did, and we still do," I reminded her.

She rewarded me with a short laugh but squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. "Right, yes. That. But Riley, there are more than a few reasons we shouldn't act on... whatever this is."

"Name 'em."

She lifted her chin.

*Well done, Miss Cole.*

"How 'bout tabloid headlines like, 'Riley Conrad Breaks Laney's Heart by Stealin' her Sister's?'" she challenged.

I grinned wolfishly. "You sayin' I've stolen your heart, pretty girl?"

If so, it'd only be fair. She sure as heck had mine in those small hands of hers, and she'd had it for longer than I wanted to admit, at that.

Aubree glared. "Fine. How 'bout ones like, 'Catfight Between the Cole Sisters Leaves Mechanic in Tears?'"

Her mention of Everett had his warning from last night flashing through my mind, but I batted it away. Aubree and I were adults. If we wanted to give this thing a shot, I wasn't about to let Everett's well-meaning overprotectiveness stand in my way.

"That's a good one, but you know that mechanic would have me flat on my butt before he'd shed a single tear."

"Do you see my point or not?"

I leaned forward and tilted my head. "Do I need to remind you who my manager is? If somethin' in the media needs spinnin' or fixin', Paisley'll do it. She always does. Next problem."

She groaned. "Fine, but you have to see that our timin' has never been right."

I huffed out a laugh. "Well, yeah. It sure wasn't when I got off that stage hopin' to track you down, only to find out I was destined to be one half of *Raney*."

"Oh my gosh, Raney." She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. "Hey, you have to admit, Raney is a lot better than *Liley*."

"One sounds like rain, and one sounds like lies. The whole world should've known we were either doomed from the start or totally full of it."

Another laugh floated out of her, warming me more than a whole gallon of this scalding-hot diner coffee ever could.

"You might have a bit of a point there."

I tilted my head. "The timing wasn't good then, and I get why you might think the timing isn't good now."

"Because you're my boss."

Nodding, I sipped my coffee. "You want me to fire you?"

With a bark of something that sounded like a gasp, a laugh, and a growl all at the same time, Aubree wadded up her napkin and threw it at me.

"What? Too soon?"

“Yes!”

I chuckled. “All right, all right. You could quit, though.”

The laughter in her eyes dimmed a bit, and she wrinkled her nose. “So, um, can I be serious for a quick second? You know, in the interest of finally speakin’ up about somethin’ I’m a little worried to admit?”

I sat up straighter. “Lay it on me.”

“Every relationship I’ve ever had has ended in a way that made me feel helpless. And right now, you *are* my boss. And that means that if things go bad between us, I could be out of a job just for the simple fact that it’d be horrible to work together after that. And right now... I’m considering making some changes, so I really need to work with you until I figure it all out.”

*Changes, huh?*

I almost asked for info on that, but there would be time for that later.

And right now? I had an idea.

Truly, I couldn’t argue with her logic because she was right—and apparently on the same page as Everett whether she knew it or not. But she wouldn’t be out of a job because I’d never do that to her, and yet, if we gave this a shot and it didn’t work out, it’d be torturous to be stuck on a tiny plane with her.

“Fair. But since you’re the one who insisted your employment was temporary, what would you think about waitin’ until I wasn’t your boss anymore?”

She shook her head. “As temptin’ as that is, there’s another reason that I think our timin’ is off right now—and might always stay that way—and it has nothin’ to do with you bein’ my boss.”

I pushed my plate away, suddenly not hungry anymore. “And what’s that?”

Slowly, Aubree’s hand inched toward mine.

My breath caught, and I flipped it palm-up, thinking—no, *hoping*—she was about to take it in hers.

But when her fingers sent fire shooting through my arm as they slid along my palm, it wasn't simply to take my hand. It was to extend one perfectly manicured finger toward my wrist, running it along the rainbow bracelet I wore there.

“Because of this,” she murmured.

Three words.

She'd only uttered three little words, and something in my gut told me it'd changed things between us in a major way.

Aubree Cole wasn't just beautiful. She wasn't just smart, or mysterious, or adorable.

She was the first woman who'd ever *seen* me.

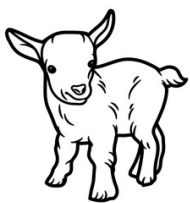
She saw behind the man whose career achievements and over-the-top persona made people constantly refer to me—even right to my face—as *Riley Conrad*. Hearing that use of my full name clued me in that I wasn't a person to them but a brand.

And even though the last thing I'd wanted to do at Jackson and Bailey's house last night was risk losing that family if things went south with Aubree... at that moment, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that the risk would be worth it.

But I also knew if I had any shot with her, I'd need to take my time.

I'd need to *show* her what we could be together before I told her I wanted to take that leap. Otherwise, I had a good feeling there was no way she'd let me.

And so, even though it killed me to do anything other than lift that hand still layered over mine and press it to my lips, I simply gave it a squeeze. “You're right. But hey, at least we'll always have that day under the stage.”



Riley's words had been on a constant loop for nearly a week now, even though we hadn't spoken a word of it since our breakfast on Sunday.

*At least we'll always have that day under the stage.*

Sure, we would.

We'd have it to hold and to cringe at for the rest of our lives.

Well, I'd be cringing. I didn't know what he'd be doing, but after the way that breakfast had floated from flirty and fun to sad and pitiful?

*Cringe. Cringe. Cringe.*

We'd hustled out of the diner pretty quickly after his simple agreement to my final issue with us. It was almost like now that we'd all but cut our hearts open in the longest—and most amazing—conversation we'd ever had, only to come up empty, we were ready to be anywhere but with each other.

Until the next day, of course, when we'd met up so Paisley could take my measurements for my new uniform. Riley had given us privacy for that part, which Paisley had used to fill me in on our schedule for the USO tour.

There were ten shows in total, two shows per weekend, and all of the participating locations for this round were located in the Southeast. We'd have a couple of overnights wherever it made sense, but if the flight was short enough, it'd just be a quick trip there and back.



It sounded great, and it also sounded like I'd have plenty of time to start flight school during the week if I mustered the guts to do it.

Tuesday night, Riley had come to our house for dinner because Georgie and Judd Wilson were going on a date, and the rest of the Wilson boys were busy in various other ways. Paisley was working through dinner—*shocker*—and Dakota was still three hours away from quitting time.

Which meant the only people at our usually crowded table were my parents, Riley, and me. For the first time ever. And even though the flirting that made my head spin was normal from him, and neither of my parents had batted an eye, I'd kicked him under the table more than once to get him to stop.

It didn't work.

Wednesday, I'd tried on my new uniform and then taken a ride to Nashville with Riley and Pais because, of course, they'd sent the wrong size. We'd obviously taken the jet because who drove two and a half hours when you could fly for fifteen minutes instead?

While in Music City, we'd had lunch at another famous musician's restaurant on Broadway—snuck in through the back and then surrounded by Riley's security team the whole time—and then we'd waited in the limo while Paisley handled the uniform thing before flying home like it was no big deal.

Thankfully, I'd enjoyed a brief reprieve from standing too close to the sun yesterday—and so far today—since Riley was in songwriting mode. But tomorrow, we'd leave for his first USO show, and then the heat would really be on because I'd have to listen to him sing.

And I *loved* hearing him sing.

*Sigh.*

I'd felt so delusional over my crush on Riley for so long. Millions of women had a crush on that man. Millions of women entertained thoughts of meeting him in a small-town diner. They dreamed of stealing his heart like they were the

star of a Christmas romance filmed in some magical little place like Snow Hill, PA.

Except, unlike the heroine in the one Dakota had said was her all-time favorite when we'd curled up to watch it last Christmas, I wasn't a school teacher named Grace who had the bubbly personality to go with the blonde hair and colorful wardrobe. And Riley wasn't some big-city billionaire coming in to build a ski resort, only to change his mind thanks to falling head over polished loafers for Grace.

He was a country star, not a billionaire, and I was a flight attendant who had to do breathing exercises in preparation to face a plane full of strangers every time I put on my uniform.

He charmed people wherever he went, and I had to work myself up to manage every bright smile, polite conversation, or terse reprimand to a rule-breaker while on the job.

I honestly never believed Riley would admit to feeling anything for me. I'd kept crushing on him without letting up, but those sparks he mentioned? I thought it was all one-sided.

“What's this I hear about you elopin' with Riley?”

I jumped at the sound of Laney's voice, so lost in thought I hadn't even heard her enter the kitchen—let alone seen her slip onto the barstool next to me at the island.

Putting a hand on my chest, I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing heart. “What? Elope? I didn't elope with Riley!”

Laney bumped my shoulder. “I was kiddin' about the elopement. Relax. Well, sorta, because Bernice *did* say that's what happened. I just didn't believe her.”

Hooves click-clacked on the floor, and we looked down to see Gertie scurrying in like she was late for a very important coffee date.

Laney and I watched as she lithely hopped onto a stool, then the counter, and finally to the top of the fridge. She turned in a quick circle—like the furry family dog she thought she was—before laying down and making herself comfortable.

Staring at us, too, like she was one of the girls here for the tea.

I smirked at her and then turned back to my sister. “What was that about Bernice? She said we eloped?”

“Yes, ma’am. Bernice saw y’all at The Broken Oak on Sunday and then heard you flew to Vegas on Wednesday and got hitched. She told Shifty the second she got home, and Everett was fixin’ Shifty’s truck, so he called *me* after they told *him* when they were pickin’ it up just now. But I think the whole town already knows, so I feel like I got it the long way.”

I blinked rapidly. “Wow. And people think small towns are charming.”

“Eh, I’m pretty charmed by this town. Considerin’ the gossip mill is word of mouth instead of ink on a page, it’s a nice change for me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t worry. There won’t be any more gossip about Riley and me—on mouths or on pages—because we settled the whole thing over breakfast on Sunday and there’s nothin’ goin’ on.”

“Can we skip to the part where you actually admit to me that you like that man? Because I’ve wondered for years, but you don’t make it easy.”

I stared blankly at her.

“I’m just gonna go ahead and take that as a confirmation and not make you say it out loud.”

“Thank you.”

Laney wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed, resting her head on the one closest to her. “I don’t know what’s goin’ on, but I can tell you’re not happy about it. So even though I won’t push you to tell me, know that I love you, and I’m sorry if you’re hurtin’.”

I leaned out of my big sister’s hold and looked over at her. “I shouldn’t be hurtin’. It’s too... It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Every woman in America—maybe the world—has a crush on Riley. You don’t see them all mopey because they’re not gonna get a chance to be with him.”

“Well, I don’t think any of them *have* a chance to be with him, so why would they mope?”

“Yeah, well, neither do I. So I shouldn’t mope either,” I muttered.

“Why not?”

The last possible thing I wanted to do was go through my list of the reasons for the millionth—okay, *third*—time this week, so I sent Laney a dubious look. “I’ll take another hug, but I’m all talked out.”

Kota had tried for an update every night this week, but my girl Gertie seemed to have a radar for it and nipped at her heels until she went away whenever she came knocking.

Laney chuckled, her eyes and smile as fond as ever as she gave me that hug and then pulled back. “Oh, Aubs. You know I’d never *make* you talk to me. I’ll always be here for hugs or here if you wanna talk, but I’ve known you your whole life. If you wanna talk, you’ll talk.”

Lot of good that’d done me last weekend. In fact, right about then, I wished I’d never let Kota trick me into being so brave.

I could’ve gone my whole life thinking I was just another woman who had an unrequited crush on the likes of Riley Conrad.

Now, I was a woman who was head over heels for him in a way that made absolutely no sense, and he’d basically told me he felt the same way.

Well, he felt *sparks*, anyway.

But still.

Now he was my boss, and we’d be spending a whole lot of time together. And no matter what you wanted to call it, we’d admitted to feeling *something*, and we’d agreed not to do a thing about it.

It was for the best, of course, but a big part of me wished I could turn back the clock and pretend I'd been sleeping when Kota had knocked on my door.

But then her words about me being brave came back to me, and suddenly there was something else I wanted to talk to my big sister about, and that something had nothing to do with Riley Conrad.

“Hey, Lane?”

“What?”

I flicked a glance at Gertie, who was still perched in her favorite spot.

*Did she just wink at me?*

“Wait, you hungry?” she asked. “I’ll fix us a snack.”

“No, but you go ahead. Gotta feed that baby, right?”

“Right.” Laney giggled and got up to make herself something.

Pregnancy had my sister in a constant state of hunger, and even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to stomach anything with all this stuff swirling around in my gut, I’d never stand between a pregnant woman and her snacks.

I bit my bottom lip while I tried to figure out how to best word my question. “Are you happy?”

Laney paused with a potato chip halfway to her mouth. “Pardon?”

“Sorry, obviously, you know I don’t mean about the baby. Or with Everett. You two are like somethin’ out of *The Notebook*.”

“*The Notebook*? Goodness, I don’t know if it was all *that* dramatic.”

I waved her off, not missing the fascinatingly well-timed snort that Gertie let out. “Anyway, I’m askin’ if you’re happy now that you’re not tourin’ the world and doin’ all the big-time country music stuff anymore.”

“Happier than I’ve ever been. I’m finally makin’ the kind of music I’ve always wanted to make. And yes, I’ve been playin’ small shows instead of stadiums, but that’s because I want to.”

I nodded and fidgeted with the edge of Momma’s favorite lemon-printed dish towel in front of me. “How did you know it was the right time to start doin’ that instead of what you were doin’ before?”

She finished chewing a chip while staring up at the ceiling like she was thinking about it. “I s’pose it was just time. The circumstances that brought me back to Charlotte Oaks—and back to Everett—led me to realize that, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t already ready to make the change. I don’t know if that helps or even makes sense, but I guess it just boils down to life just... workin’ out for the best.”

I let out a noncommittal noise.

She bumped me with her shoulder again. “Where’s all this comin’ from?”

“I’m not sure if I wanna be a flight attendant anymore.” That was a big admission by itself, but what I didn’t add was that I’d already chosen a flight school nearby and filled out the paperwork.

I hadn’t submitted it, but I’d filled it out, and that was *huge*.

Laney stilled—once again with a chip halfway to her mouth. “Really? I thought you loved being a flight attendant.”

“I love parts of it. But I don’t love all of it. Kinda like how you did with your music career, right?”

“Well, yeah, but I don’t think there’s a job out there that doesn’t have some bad that you gotta take with the good.”

“True. Okay, never mind.”

Laney eyed me warily. “Uh-uh. Don’t do that. This came up for a reason, don’t let me talk you out of it if it’s how you feel.”

I snorted. “You made a good point, though.”

“What do you think you’d rather do?”

I stared at her. “Don’t laugh.”

“Oh, bless. I would never. I’m the girl who left her small town to hit it big in Nashville, remember? And I did it, too. No dream is too big, Aubs.”

“Wow,” a deep voice said from behind us. “Do your shoulders hurt carryin’ around a head that big, Lane?”

We froze, then immediately whipped around to find Travis freaking Wilson—the Wilson brother who took the whole “Once a Marine, Always a Marine” as literal because he said he would never get out—leaned casually against the doorframe in all his bad boy glory.

Yes. Everett was the grumpy one, Jackson was the sweetheart, and Adam was the goody-two-shoes-turned-cop. And Travis? Well, Travis Wilson was the bad boy.

And even though I’d always seen him as a brother—and he was one now, as my brother-in-law’s brother—even I could admit that he wore that bad boy look just as well now as he had in high school.

In the same outfit, no less. Travis was basically *Doug* from Nickelodeon. I always thought it was so strange how that cartoon kid had a row of the same clothes in his closet—nothing but white shirts, green sweater vests, and khakis.

Travis was the bad boy version. I’d seen his closet once in high school when I’d run after the Wilson family’s beloved Golden Retriever after she’d bolted during the fireworks show on the Fourth of July. She’d been terrified. Poor thing. Hopefully there were no fireworks in doggy heaven.

That night, Buttercup had zipped into Travis’s lair in a blur of pancake-colored fluff, and I’d followed her in there in the hopes of hugging her until it was all over. But I’d come up short when I looked at the closet.

Black shirts. That was all there was. The sleeve lengths varied—black button-downs or black Henleys were scattered between plain ol’ black tees in a way that made my color-and-

sleeve-length-coordinated heart lurch—but the shade? All the same. Black. As. Night.

On a new moon, of course.

I couldn't stop myself from forgetting all about poor old Buttercup and peeking into one of his drawers, and just like *Doug* from one of my favorite childhood shows, it was all the same: ripped jeans in the same light wash that he always wore.

And now, here he stood, wearing exactly that. Without the rips, though, since that'd be against Marine Corps policy for civilian wear. The rightness of it almost made up for the fact that he was a total weirdo for wearing the same thing all the time.

I mean, come on. He was a Marine because the Wilson men had a tradition of spending at least a few years in the military... but did that really mean he needed to wear a uniform *outside* of work too?

“Surprised?” Travis asked, holding out his hands. One waving spirit fingers at us, the other clutching his motorcycle helmet.

*I rest my case.*

Stirred from our gaping silence of shock, Laney and I launched to our feet. But before we could reach him to hug the daylights out of him, Gertie stood from her spot on top of the fridge and let out a warning bleat that had Travis, the Baddy Bad Boy screaming and jumping back.

Like a *five-year-old* boy.

“Chill, Travis! It's just Gertie!” Laney gasped out between fits of laughter, clutching her sides.

I laughed right along with her as the color returned to Travis's face, shaking my head at him. “You're not scared of her, are you? She's harmless.”

“There's two kinds of people in this world, Aubby. People who love that goat, and people who don't trust her as far as they could throw her.”



I chuckled at the nickname I hadn't heard in forever, but before I could ask which one *he* was—as if it weren't obvious—my momma's stern voice cut me off.

“Travis Alexander Wilson, don't you dare lay a hand on my baby!”

Travis looked from Gertie, to Laney, to me. “Which baby?”

“The goat, dang you!” Momma said, bustling fully into the room with Georgie Wilson right behind her. “The rest of us want *all* the sugar. It's been way too long.”

Travis stepped into my mom's arms and gave her a tight hug. “Yeah, it really has, Momma Cole.”

Then he hugged Laney and me, casting a worried glance over his shoulder and muttering about Gertie being some kind of a mutant guard dog.

“I can't believe you're here! It feels like it's been forever,” Laney said as she stuck another chip in her mouth.

Travis rolled his eyes. “I was here for Jackson's weddin' six months ago, Lane.”

“Like I said, forever. Why are you back now?”

“Hopped on the first flight after I got the news about you and Bailey bein' pregnant,” he replied, tipping his chin toward her belly. “That's the kinda uncle I am. Congrats.”

“Thank you! How long are you in town?” she asked, hiking herself up to sit on the counter. But then she promptly hopped off when she caught Momma's stern *just what the heck do you think you're doin'* glare.

“Um, TBD,” he said, scratching his jaw and then running a hand over his buzzed hair.

“Forever, if I have anything to say about it,” Georgie said, winking at her son.

“Don't start with him, Georgie,” Momma said with a tsk. “You'll scare him off. Sit down and let me fix you somethin', Travis. You look too skinny.”

He absolutely didn't. Like the rest of the Wilsons, he was broad and tall and full of muscles. But since he knew my momma would see anything other than a quick and grateful, "Yes, ma'am," as an insult, he popped onto a kitchen stool and got ready to eat.

"Shoot, Aubs, what were you gonna say before?" Laney asked, poking my arm. "About that thing we were talkin' about?"

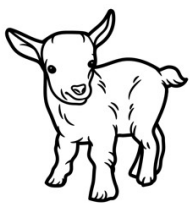
I flared my eyes at her and cut them over to our momma where she was busy digging around in the fridge.

Laney caught the hint and thankfully let it drop, sliding onto the third empty stool next to Travis and his mom.

And suddenly, with nowhere for me to sit and no answers to the question I'd been ready to ask my sister, I decided to sneak out before Momma tried to feed me, too.

I still wasn't hungry. Especially not after letting a seed of hope take root after Laney's words about no dream being too big in the career area. If I didn't make my escape while Momma's back was turned, I never would.

Gertie saw me though. That old girl never missed a dang thing.



**10 /**

On the way to the front door, I passed Dakota as she headed for the kitchen in her dark teal scrubs. Even though I'd been dodging her attempts to talk to me about Riley, I was surprised by my sudden urge to pick her brain about the career stuff.

I still couldn't believe I'd almost told Laney about my pilot dreams just a few minutes ago. Who was I, and where was the girl who'd kept that to mostly to herself all these years?

Lately, the idea of switching from serving passengers to carting them around myself had been filling me with a familiar longing, but I hadn't given it serious thought until last week's luxury plane ride from LAX.

Sure, it'd reared its wildly-attractive head after I'd watched my big sister follow her heart instead of chasing dreams she no longer connected with, but by that point, I was dating Branson. I didn't see the need to rock the boat, so I'd just stayed.

But that had been yet another mistake that I kind of hated myself for making, and Branson was no longer a factor. There was literally *nothing* stopping me from making the move or from talking about it with Laney or Dakota. My parents, even.

Nothing but myself, anyway. It felt a little like stubbornly trying to punish myself for not following my heart in the first—or second—place. The whole thing about making my bed definitely qualified as living with my terrible decisions.

But could I do this? I'd been brave enough to clear up that miscommunication with Riley knowing it wouldn't go anywhere, but was I brave enough to start a *third* career?

I'd ask Dakota. *Imagine that.*

"Hey, Kota. How was your shift?" I asked.

"Exhaustin' enough that I feel like I could sleep for seventeen years and still wake up tired."

I chuckled, deciding to table the conversation until she was feeling better. "Well, buck up. Momma and Laney are in the kitchen with Georgie, and guess who's here?"

"Who? Crap. Don't even tell me. I don't care. Should I just sneak upstairs so Momma doesn't make me eat? I'm too tired."

"Too tired to eat? Who are you?"

"I'm a woman at the end of her rope after spending the last few hours treatin' the entire Charlotte Oaks High's cheerleadin' squad for dehydration and—" She stopped speaking and let out a gag and a shudder.

"And... what?"

"Let's just say a certain cheerleader stole a mathlete's man, and that resulted in the entire squad bein' treated to a cooler full of Gatorade laced with Ex-Lax. It was the ultimate revenge of the nerds, and I'm honestly not mad about it. Don't tell anyone I told you any of this, or I'll destroy you—but yeah. I can't imagine tryin' to eat right now."

Another gagging noise.

"Yeah, you should probably go to bed before Momma realizes you're home," I said, holding back a smile. "Unless..."

She grabbed the tops of my arms and shook me, a pleading expression on her beautiful face. "No, unless. There is no unless. It was a good plan. I don't wanna eat or talk to whoever's in the kitchen. I wanna curl up in a ball and *die* right now. *Die*, Aubree."

"All right, drama llama. Suit yourself."

My younger sister mouthed a fervent *thank you* before darting toward the stairs, so I headed for the door.

At the last second, I turned around and called up to her. “Kota, it’s Travis. Travis is in the kitchen.”

Dakota perked right up at that. Gone was the weary woman who’d just completed a long shift and was ready for bed—excuse me, ready to *die*. That woman was instantly replaced by a giddy little girl who’d just gotten an IV bag full of caffeine.

She squealed with glee, and as I headed out the front door, I heard her feet pounding back down the stairs as she yelled his name.

“Wow.”

I jumped, my hand immediately flying to my heart as I spun around. Then, before I could stop it, it flew to Riley’s chest and gave him a small shove. “Crap on a cracker, Riley, you scared me half to death.”

He reached up and rubbed a hand over the spot where mine had been, but it was an almost absent gesture. For some reason, it bugged me.

*Are you havin’ feelings right now, Conrad? Me too! Now put them away!*

Pointing toward the house, he lifted a brow. “I’d be jumpy too after dealin’ with whatever caused all that screamin’.”

I rolled my eyes. “Travis is here.”

“Usually I’m the one makin’ women scream like that.”

I choked on air, but *his* face paled.

Yes, you heard me right, folks. Riley Conrad, Olympic Flirting Machine: Pale. As. Heck.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said quickly, an adorable flush replacing the chalky color from a second before. “I meant, well, you know...” He trailed off and held up his guitar case, pointing at it like it should explain everything.

*Ha!* I couldn’t help but take advantage of this strange role reversal. Usually, I was the bumbling fool and he was the smooth one. But *not today!*

I crossed my arms and tilted my head to the side. “Because of the guitar? How so?”

“Aubree Cole,” he said in a warning tone, a glimmer of his old self peeking through his embarrassment. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were givin’ me a hard time.”

I gulped, sensing the subtle shift in him. “Who, me?”

And then just like that—*insert finger snap*—he turned the tables and we were in our rightful places again.

Riley stepped forward like a lion who’d cornered his prey, then stood his guitar case in front of him and crossed his forearms over the top in that super swoony way he’d done on an album cover once.

“Or maybe,” he went on, dropping his voice, “you might even be tryin’ to twist my poorly chosen words into somethin’ a little dirtier than I intended?”

“Dirty? Me? No way. I wouldn’t. You wouldn’t. I’m gonna shut up now.”

He wore a smug smile through that entire thing, and if I didn’t think my hand might fall off now that I knew how hard his chest muscles were, I’d give him another shove just for messing with me.

“Anyway,” he said, switching easily out of whatever gear was the dangerously sexy one and into neutral, “Travis is here, but why was Dakota screamin’?”

I shrugged, wandering over to the porch swing. “Dakota and Travis are the babies, so they’re the closest.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not the same way Laney and Everett grew up bein’ groomed to fall in love one day so they could unite our clans for the rest of time, of course, but still.”

Riley nodded, still standing the same way, just angled toward me where I rocked gently on the swing. “Gotcha. So they’re thick as thieves, huh?”

“S’pose so. I think there’s just somethin’ about bein’ the youngest siblings that made them click.”

“I can see that. I mean, I’m an only child, but I guess it makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.” I looked out at my parents’ lawn and chuckled to myself. “But where Travis is the bad boy rebel, Kota has the everyone’s-favorite-obnoxious-lil-sis thing goin’ for her. They’ve always just known how to have fun. When we were all kids, they always wanted to be on the same team for everythin’ we did.”

Riley was quiet, so I looked over at him. He’d moved when I hadn’t been looking and now was leaning against the wall of the house with his guitar propped up next to him. “Guess Laney and Everett were paired up for those kinda things?”

I snorted. “Well, yeah. Those two were like magnets. It was like they couldn’t make any other choice if they tried.”

“Seems like nothin’ much has changed there,” he said with a genuine smile. “What about Jackson? Who was he always paired up with?”

“Jackson and Adam were a natural pair-up because they were so close in age. They were even in the same *grade*.”

Riley’s brows flew up and he crossed his arms. “No kiddin’?”

“No kiddin’. They were born around eleven months apart, and Adam missed the Kindergarten cutoff by ten days, while Jackson made it by four.”

“Goodness. Ain’t no rest for the wicked.”

I let out a laugh as a memory hit me, but it was too embarrassing to retell the story. I’d probably get it wrong.

“What?” Riley asked, pushing off from the wall and sitting beside me on the swing.

I slid over a touch. He was too close, and based on the way he was looking at me, I could tell he knew I’d thought of something funny but held it back.



“Um, nothing. Just a silly story.”

“Aubree, I *love* silly stories. Tell me. Please?”

“Are you battin’ your lashes at me right now?”

He screwed up his face and looked around. “I’d never admit to doin’ that if Everett was around. He already calls me ‘pretty boy’ enough as it is.”

Grinning, I tucked my legs against my chest and decided to tell him the story. “All right, so it’s about Jackson and Adam bein’ so close in age.”

“I’m ready.”

“Well, one night when Kota was in nursin’ school, we were all sittin’ around the table havin’ supper, and she just straight up called out Georgie and Judd for bein’ rebels.”

“Rebels, huh?”

I nodded. “Guess she learned in class that day that new moms should wait six weeks after givin’ birth for any—direct quote here—‘funny business,’ and obviously they didn’t wait that long. Momma spit sweet tea across the room like a geyser, and the whole table fell out of their chairs, they were laughin’ so hard.”

Riley laughed right along with me since I couldn’t get the story out without cracking up as I pictured it, and I really hoped his laughter was real. It was a gorgeous, glorious laugh, and the idea he was doin’ it after I’d told a story I wasn’t even sure was all that funny had my insides feeling a little like melted chocolate.

“And what about your childhood partner-in-crime?” he asked, his eyes still sparkling and his lips still curved into a smile.

My smile, however, fell into my lap with a thud. “Um, guess I didn’t really have one.”

It was a lot slower, but Riley’s smile disappeared too. Only his seemed to slide off like an egg thrown at a window.

It made me wanna squirm, but since doing so would jostle the swing we were both sitting on, I settled for wrapping my arms tighter around my bent knees and tugging my lower lip between my teeth.

“Lemme guess,” Riley said in a soothing tone, shocking me by reaching over and using his thumb to free my lip, “while the rest of the Cole and Wilson kids were pairin’ up for one reason or another, you were under a tree with a book. And that was just how you liked it. Most of the time, anyway.”

I felt my chin graze my knees as my jaw dropped, so I lowered my head and leaned on my chin to act like resting it there was what I’d meant to do. “In a nutshell, yeah.”

He bumped my shin with his elbow, and while it shouldn’t have had an effect on me at all, it somehow wound up feeling a lot like a hug. “Let you in on a little secret?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“I was alone under a lot of trees growin’ up too. Still am, come to think of it. Only, instead of a book...” He jerked his chin toward the guitar case still leaning against the wall. “I had that old thing right there.”

“Oh.” It was all I could think to say.

What else did I need to say? He’d just reached into my brain and pulled something out that shouldn’t have been so easily read by him, and it was because he apparently spoke the right language to read it.

It was too much.

He *saw* so much.

He was perfect, and he’d felt sparks...

But I felt a forest fire, and my silly little heart was burning alive where we sat.

“What are you doin’, Riley?” I asked quietly, tilting my face so it was my cheek resting on my knee instead of my chin.

“Sittin’ on a porch swing with a pretty girl.”

His voice was just as soft as mine, but that hint of teasing rang through me like a foghorn. “No, I mean, why did you come to the porch? Were you lookin’ for someone?”

He nodded, then shook his head. “I dunno. I was bored. Paisley’s workin’ and I’m done writin’ for the day, so I figured I’d see what y’all were up to on this side.”

“Oh, well, everyone’s inside, but I was just leavin’. Um, library. Gotta pick up some holds before they reshelve them. I hate it when that happens.”

“All right,” he said with a smile that looked way too disappointed for my liking. “Guess I’ll see you at supper? Travis is here, so Georgie’s probably makin’ a big meal for everyone, right?”

“Right.”

“And then don’t forget—we leave tomorrow for our first concert trip.”

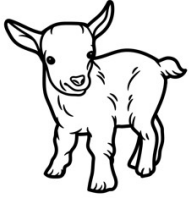
“Yep. Can’t wait! Okay, bye.”

And then I gracefully got off the porch swing and floated down the steps, leaving him to find his own way into my house.

*Oh, come on, you know I scrambled away like a bumbling fool.*

But even so, when I peeked over my shoulder before I got in my car, I caught sight of him watching me. And then, of course, I found myself on the receiving end of one of his too-charming winks, and it charmed me enough that I hit my head on the top of my car when I ducked in.

*Smooth, Aubree. Real smooth.*



## **aubree**

Later, while my entire household was gathered in the Wilsons' living room watching reruns of a medical romance show and hanging out with Travis, I decided it was a good time for a Friday-evening walk.

No, I wasn't avoiding Riley. Sure, he was in the house I intended to power walk away from, but he wasn't the reason. I just wasn't big on TV.

Though, it was kinda cool that the boys' cousin, Hunter Wilson, knew Paige Walker—the star of the show—since she was married to one of his old Marine buddies.

But that wasn't enough of a reason for me to risk being sandwiched between Riley and, well, it didn't really matter who else, on the couch while we watched the show.

Besides, I'd see him at supper in a few.

I'd just slipped out my front door and was passing Dakota's car in the driveway when my phone dinged, and I sent up a silent prayer that it wasn't my momma calling me out for not going over there with them with Travis being in town.

*Yes, Momma, I know we never get to see Travis.*

*Yes, Momma, it is good when we can have all seven of us in the same place at the same time.*

*No, Momma, I wouldn't want to miss the chance to reenact one of our childhood photos for the millionth time at varyin' stages throughout our lives.*

But... it wasn't my momma, so I wouldn't have to type out any of those not-brave-at-all statements before slumping into the Wilson house with my figurative tail between my legs.

Instead, it was so much worse.

*Riley.*

I had it in my settings to hide the full message and only show the sender's name. The grapevine in this town was a well-oiled and nuclear-powered machine, and it'd only taken one time of setting my phone on the counter at the creamery while I fished out some cash to learn that lesson.

No one was safe. Not even high schoolers since everyone's momma knew everyone else's momma, and the grandmommas were even worse. News of Dakota's stalker-level crush on her ninth-grade lab partner had reached his ears that day before Laney and I had even finished our bowls of chocolate chip cookie dough with extra sprinkles.

But even without seeing the message itself, seeing Riley's name on the screen had my heart sprinting down the sidewalk and waving goodbye as it left me in its pavement-pounding dust.

This man was plumb *bad* for me. The kind of bad that was on par with eating last night's leftovers from a cheap hotel's mini fridge that I suspected wasn't as cold as the circular dial promised it was.

And yet, I still slid my thumb over the screen to open the text.

Riley: What's cookin, good lookin?

I bit back a sigh, trying in vain to stop my tummy from flipping. It was pointless to try, though, since my tummy didn't just flip, it did a dang cartwheel.

Riley wasn't just a flirt.

He was a total cheeseball of a flirt, and it was my Kryptonite.

Other guys simply weren't like him when they flirted. Not the ones who happened to flirt with me, anyway. I lived half my life floating from one hotel to another, so I'd been hit on at the lobby bar more times than I could count.

So many of those traveling businessmen did the *I'm super dark and mysterious, wanna come up to my room for a nightcap?* thing that it had me wondering if there was a how-to manual in their bedside tables. Or maybe a pamphlet attached to their room keys?

Riley's flirting style, on the other hand, spoke to my soul in a low, teasing whisper. It was part goofy lines that made me laugh, and part seductive promises because I knew without a doubt that this man was the exact opposite of the probably married, one-night-stand sleazeballs I was accustomed to.

*No, no, no.*

He was my boss now, and even though he'd made a horrible joke about firing me to remove that particular barrier, he'd seemed to understand the risk of me losing this job and him losing the only family he had if we dated and things went awry.

So, for better or worse, he needed to treat me like any other person whose paychecks he signed.

"Really?" I muttered to the empty street as an image of his strong hand gripping a pen and signing a paycheck flashed through my mind.

I'd never seen Riley sign one of those before, but I had seen him sign plenty of autographs, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't help but watch the tantalizing dance play over his strong forearms as his muscles flexed and rolled.

Plus, the guitar case he carried around with him wherever he went—whether he planned to play or not—had a pocket on the inside where he kept a classic black-and-white composition book. He'd pull it out right in the middle of conversations sometimes, as if he had to get the lyrics down when the inspiration struck or it'd be lost forever.

And when that happened, I'd sit there on the other side of the table, staring at that strong hand and forearm while he scribbled away next to a plate of Momma's famous shepherd's pie.

"Get a grip, Aubree," I mumbled, furiously texting him back as I began my not-so-relaxing stroll down the sidewalk.

Me: Is that how you talk to all your employees?

Riley: Just the good lookin ones.

There was no winking emoji, but there might as well have been.

Before I could even think of a reply that was witty while also pointing out how absolutely not okay that was on behalf of women everywhere, another text came through.

Riley: I'm teasing. I speak to my employees with complete professionalism. A lil charm goes a long way though. Catch more bees with honey and all that.

Me: Is that what you're trying to do right now?  
Catch a bee?

Riley: Walked right into that one, didn't I?

Me: You sure did.

Riley: Well, darlin, you can rest easy there. I'm not tryin to catch any bees at the moment, but if I was...

I held my breath as I ambled along, only to nearly choke when the next message came through.

Riley: You'd know it.

My feet stuttered to a stop.

Okay, they didn't exactly *stutter* to a stop. I tripped over an uneven lip in the sidewalk and then simply couldn't manage to take another step.



But again, he sent another text before I had a chance to respond, and thank goodness, too, because what was I supposed to say to something like that?

*Good to know?*

*I'll keep that in mind?*

*I wish I could tell you to start tryin' because I'd love to see that?*

Riley: Back to my original question. What are you up to right now?

Me: I'm taking a walk.

Riley: Mind some company? I'm not really into this show. Not that any of them know how to quit yapping long enough for me to go what's going on in it anyway. I came up to my room to get away, but now I feel all cooped up. Set me free?

Snorting, I shook my head. Again, no emojis, but I didn't need them. It was okay that Riley wasn't a man of many emojis because his teasing tone came through the texts just fine on their own.

I looked over my shoulder at the Wilson house that sat right next to mine. I hadn't made it very far down the block thanks to Riley's distracting text-flirting, and my eyes traveled to the window on the second story.

To the room I knew he was currently cooped up in, asking to hang out with *me* instead.

The Wilsons had stopped allowing Riley to stay at the Charlotte Oaks B&B right after it was explained that his relationship with Laney was all for show. Once there wouldn't be the risk of Everett clocking Riley upside the head in a jealous fit of rage over his history with Laney, they'd all but forced him to make himself comfy in their guest room whenever he came to town.

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth while I thought over the response I should send him.

*Oh, sure. Come take a walk with me. And hey—maybe you can pull out that notebook of yours and force me to stare at your forearms while you write, even though I should be treating you like you're my boss.*

But the lines were so blurry... and even though most of the reasons I didn't want to be with Riley felt like excuses now, he'd been welcomed into our family, and that made him important.

Just like that, I felt my walls crumble. This didn't have to be weird. I didn't have to avoid him now that we'd cleared the air and we both knew what really stood between us.

Now, we could just be... friends. Family. Framily.

*Ew, no. Gross.* But we could take a dang walk.

Texting him back, I made my way toward the house.

Me: Sure. I'll meet you out front.

The curtain moved as I grew near, and Riley appeared, lifting a hand in a not-actually-waving sort of guy-wave before letting it fall to his side.

I returned the wave with an awkwardly shaky one of my own, but he frowned and suddenly dipped his head and seemed to be doing something on his phone.

Two seconds later, my phone buzzed again.

Riley: What'd I tell you bout bitin that lip?

Immediately releasing *that lip* from the death grip my teeth had on it, I gaped at the message. Then my gaze flew back up to look at him, only to find the gap in the curtains had closed and I was staring at nothing more than a square filled with an old-fashioned—yet oddly trendy—floral pattern.

He was already gone.

Already headed my way.

Squaring my shoulders, I waited for Riley to come outside so we could take the little stroll that I knew wouldn't be as

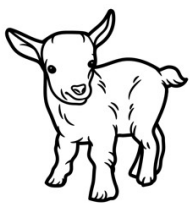
head-clearing as I'd originally hoped it would be. In fact, I wouldn't put it past me to lose my marbles over one of his stupid winks and trip over the sidewalk again even though I normally wasn't clumsy in the least.

Do you know how much balance and coordination it took to stay on my feet during surprise turbulence rather than flopping like a dead fish into the lap of a stranger?

A lot, that's how much.

But even so, with Riley? Off-kilter didn't even begin to describe the way that man made me feel. I could deny it all I wanted out loud, but some part of me knew that missing a step around him was inevitable.

All I could do was hope it didn't hurt too much when I fell.



**12 /**

Aubree's brown hair was piled into a messy bun on top of her head today, and when I'd first seen her on the porch earlier, I'd known it was a good idea to spend so much time in Charlotte Oaks between shows.

This look was the exact opposite of the sleek, braided bun she'd worn while in uniform the day I met her, not to mention the professional twist she'd pretzeled it into when I'd seen her crying at the airport last week. The mass of dark waves on top of her head looked effortless and casual, and in my mind, I called this style part of her "Charlotte Oaks uniform."

Her clothes were part of that, too. Today, she wore a black tank top tucked into high-waisted jeans shorts. And even though she was a petite little thing, she had strong legs—likely thanks to hustling through airports in heels and long walks like these. And those strong legs seemed to go on for miles before they reached simple black sandals that didn't give her a single inch of extra height.

Was she an absolute take-my-breath-away knockout anytime? Sure. I'd fallen for her in her Air Force uniform first, after all. And if she came home from a trip while I happened to be hanging at the Cole residence, and I caught sight of her in her flight attendant uniform...

*Yeah.* Let's just say, the girl had a way with a pencil skirt that made my pulse jump every time.

But this "I'm home and get to wear whatever I want" look was the best. It was when she seemed the most at peace and

confident, even if to an outsider she appeared confident all the time.

She was a good faker, my Aubree, but not many people seemed to see what I saw.

And after our chat on the porch, I was convinced I was so attuned to her because like called to like that day under the stage, and the performer in me could see the performer in her.

I didn't think her true calling was to sing or act or anything like that, but it was more that she usually acted a lot more social than she really was.

I always wondered why that was, too. Like when I could tell she wanted to slink off at the end of a meal and curl up with a book. She'd eye the living room like it was a treasure trove of blissful, bookwormy solace, and yet she'd keep her butt in the seat until someone else suggested we call it a night.

Then she'd shoot up and heel-toe it to her favorite chair in the corner and shove her nose into a paperback so hard I was surprised she didn't have ink on her face.

And yes—I was often the one to suggest ending the night just so I could test that theory. Sure enough—ten times out of ten, it happened just like that.

Maybe now that we were out of the six-year ice age, I'd suck it up and just ask her why she did that. If she had a good enough reason for it, fine. But no part of me wanted this brilliant, soft-spoken woman—a woman who was witty when she wanted to be and tight-lipped when she didn't—to be anyone other than herself.

“So, where we headin’?” I asked, slipping my free hand into the pocket of my jeans and adjusting my grip on my guitar case with the other.

Aubree slid her gaze to the case and then to my face before looking straight ahead again. “Did you really need to take your guitar for a walk?”

“It's not a dog, darlin'. I ain't takin' it for a walk.”

“You shouldn’t call me darlin’. And since we’re on a walk, and it’s in your hand, that kinda means you *are* takin’ it for a walk, doesn’t it?”

I shot her a quick smile. “Guess it does.”

She seemed nervous.

Then again, she’d never really been at ease around me. Now that I knew why, I felt better about it, but it still bugged me that I spent all that time not pursuing something with her because I’d misread her standoffishness. Dakota had certainly hit the nail on the head. It was eye-roll worthy in the extreme.

Though, maybe I should’ve spotted this sooner because her standoffishness was unique to her.

I’d always liked that Aubree had never had the same starry-eyed, I-want-to-kidnap-you-and-never-let-you-go vibe many of my female fans had when they came around. Those were the kinds of fans that made a bodyguard and security team necessary when I went anywhere outside this homey little town. If I wanted to keep my shirt, that is.

And Aubree’s nervous behavior also differed from the shy ones who asked for autographs by stabbing me in the stomach with their pens as they thrust their photos at me without meeting my eyes.

Not in a malicious, murderous way, of course. In a nervous way that always had me giving them an extra wink or smile, even if they never looked up to see it.

Yep. Aubree’s nerves were something else entirely.

It was almost an... *awareness* of me that seemed to set her on edge, and maybe I recognized it because as different as we were in personality... in terms of awareness?

We were one and the same.

I loved that this woman could *see* me. As long we were talking about things that had nothing to do with how we felt about each other, she seemed to pick up on things no one else did, and I couldn’t help but think I saw her pretty clearly, too.

“You look like you’re thinkin’ pretty hard over there,” she all but whispered as we walked along the sidewalk.

“I am. Why can’t I call you darlin’?” It might not have been what I was thinking so hard about, but if she was under the impression I’d let that one go, she was dead wrong.

“Because I’m not your darlin’. I’m your employee. It’s not professional. Besides, you wouldn’t want anyone you bring on your jet to hear that and think somethin’ was goin’ on between us, would you?”

I smirked. “I call other women darlin’ all the time. Doubt anyone would think much of it.”

“Well, save it for the other women, then. I don’t like it.”

Something about her face had me wondering how much truth there was to that statement, but I brushed it off. Whether she was lying or not, I’d respect her wishes.

“Noted. But if it slips, don’t be too hard on me. Old habits die hard, you’re the most darlin’ woman I’ve ever called darlin’.”

She let out a laugh that was so light and brief it was carried away like *Forrest Gump’s* little white feather. “You’re too much sometimes.”

“Too much for some people, not enough for others,” I said with a long, drawn-out sigh. “I’ll never win.”

I’d been hoping for another laugh, but she looked surprised by my statement. She looked like she wanted to call me out for something, but I wasn’t sure exactly what it was.

What? Did she think I could possibly be *everybody’s* cup of tea? No one was. Famous or not.

Then she shook it off like it didn’t matter and circled back. “But you’ll try not to?”

“Scout’s Honor.”

This time, her look was playful and dubious. “You were never a Boy Scout, were you?”



I sighed. “No, I was not. I’d take a dusty ranch loaded with horses over earnin’ badges on wilderness hikes any day of the week. Though, we did host a troop of Boy Scouts at our family’s ranch one year when I was about eight. They got some kinda badge for learnin’ how to ride. My dad had way too much fun tellin’ them boys what it was really like to be a cowboy.”

“So your dad was a professional cowboy, then? It was a workin’ ranch?”

“Sure was.”

My gut tightened as I pictured my old man’s face that day as he showed the group of preteens our way of life. One that existed solely on that ranch except for when we went into town on the weekends for the odd errand or to help with my momma’s booth at the farmer’s market.

That ranch was supposed to get passed on to me after I’d spent the next twenty or thirty years shadowing my dad, and now... Well, it just hadn’t happened that way.

“Wow. That must’ve been a fun way to grow—” Her words cut off, and her eyes went wide as she reached out and touched my arm. “Shoot, Riley, I’m sorry.”

I gave her a soft smile and tried not to get carried away by her there-and-gone-in-a-blink touch. “Don’t apologize. It was a fun way to spend my childhood, and it would’ve been a fun way to grow up if I’d gotten the chance.”

Her eyes held so much sadness as they drifted over and locked back onto mine. It wasn’t pity, though. It was almost like she mourned for the twelve-year-old version of me in a way most never took the time to think about.

But Aubree did.

Of course she did. Once again, the woman freaking *saw* me.

I was more than fortunate, and I lived the kind of life plenty of people could only dream of. Why would anyone mourn for me, considering how I lived now? What little they saw of it, anyway, from their TV screens and magazines.

They had no idea how lonely I'd been after my parents had died and my uncle had taken custody of me. They had no idea how lonely it still was since there was always a reason I needed to separate myself from everyone else.

I couldn't even go out on a Saturday night in any town but this one, let alone get a gym membership or join a dating app—all the rage, from what I hear.

It was pure curiosity that had me wondering what the digital-dating fuss was about, of course. But since creating a fake profile just to satisfy that curiosity would be a major no-no—thanks to what I'd learned watching a show called *Catfish* from various hotel rooms—I'd never find out.

Realizing the downward spiral of my thoughts had me one step away from ruining what would otherwise be a nice walk under the early-evening sun, I rolled my shoulders and neck, determined to brighten things up again.

“Anyway, things have a habit of workin’ out for the best,” I said, surprised when she flared her eyes and did a double-take at me for reasons I didn't understand.

“Right. Of course. If you'd grown up on your family's ranch, you'd be a cowboy who sang to his sheep instead of millions of adoring fans.”

I snorted. “Cattle. Not sheep.”

“Ah, yes, yes. Texas.”

Laughing, I gave her a stern look. “Now, don't you go talkin' smack about Texas. I promise that's a fight you won't win.”

We both chuckled, but before we could slip into silence or another topic, I cleared my throat. I wasn't done. I wasn't ready for anything that would make that smile run off and hide like it was so prone to doing.

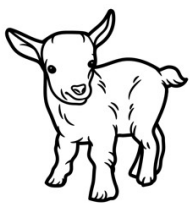
“I wasn't talkin' 'bout my job when I said things work out for the best, you know.”

“You weren't?”

“Nope.” I bumped her arm with my elbow. “I was gonna say if I’d stayed on that ranch, I wouldn’t be takin’ this walk with you.”

It was slow. Torturously slow. But when Aubree’s lips finally spread into a brilliant—and somehow still shy—smile, it felt a lot like when the sun tiptoed its way through the clouds, one ray at a time. A promise that there was more sunshine where that came from, if you only had the patience to wait for it.

And as I’d already told her, I was a patient man.



We reached the end of the long street where the Wilson and Cole houses sat, and I turned right.

“Where are we goin’?” she asked as her small form jogged to catch up with my long strides.

“Well, since you didn’t answer me when I asked you that earlier, I figured I’d take the lead.”

“Uh-huh. It’s those cattle rancher roots comin’ out, huh?”

I cut her a look. “You’re pretty funny, you know that?”

“When I wanna be.”

“What else don’t I know about you, Miss Aubree Cole—*not* darlin’?”

She rolled her eyes and hummed, looking up like she was really giving it some good thought. “I’m a bookworm?”

I sighed. “Nah. Next. I knew that one. I’ve seen you with your nose buried in a book a time or twenty.”

“Good point. Um... Chicken nuggets freak me out?”

“Nope. That ain’t news either.”

She gaped at me. “What?”

“I heard you tell your momma to get you a burger from the drive-thru that time Dakota burned your daddy’s birthday ham and he named the fast food joint he’d rather have instead.”

“That was years ago! I don’t remember sayin’ a word about chicken nuggets freakin’ me out. Just that I wanted a burger.”

I looked over at her with narrowed eyes, challenging her to remember that day a little better.

She faced front again and furrowed her brow. “Wait, did I? What did I say?”

“You said—and I’ll never forget this—‘Momma, get me a burger. Chickens don’t have nuggets and just because Kota burned the ham doesn’t mean I’m havin’ nuggets for Daddy’s birthday supper.’”

Aubree gasped and swatted my arm, apparently not enjoying the high-pitched tone I’d used to quote her words from that night. “I do *not* sound like that.”

“Oh, I know. I just like rufflin’ those feathers of yours. You got a problem with chicken fingers, too, or just the nuggets?”

“Just the nuggets,” she said with a casual shrug, causing me to stop walking and jut my guitar case into her path so I could bring her to a halt right beside me. She turned and looked up at me with a lifted brow. “Uh, yes?”

“Aubree. Chickens don’t have fingers any more than they have nuggets.”

Her head fell back, and she let out a loud cackle. As witchy as that should’ve sounded given the name, it was music to my ears. “I know that. Oh my goodness.”

I watched with a wide grin as she put a hand on her chest and took deep breaths to settle herself. She got even prettier when she laughed like that. It was a no-one’s-watching kinda laugh, and I loved it.

“Then why’re fingers all right with you, but nuggets aren’t?” I pressed.

“Because fingers are just sliced-up strips of breast meat, you goof. They’re not mashed up and shaped into dinosaurs or stars or circles—or heck, *popcorn*—for cryin’ out loud!”

I pulled a face and started walking again. “Ugh. Okay, new topic. I was about to ask about tenders, but I reckon you’re

gonna ruin them for me like you ruined nuggets if we keep this up.”

Once again, she had to jog to reach me. “Wait, wait. You actually *like* nuggets?”

“Well, I used to.”

“Darn it. That’s just another thing to add to my list.”

Slowly, I stopped her progress with my guitar case again and peered down at her. “Oh, I see, now we’re makin’ jokes about the list of reasons we can’t be together. Is that it?”

“Guess so,” she replied with a giggle.

Holy moly. That sparkle in her eyes and the sound she almost couldn’t help making had just made it clear as day that somewhere between her street and this one, we’d turned another corner.

And not just literally, because we’d done that too.

“I see,” I mused. Then I leaned down until my face was level with hers, our lips just an inch or two apart, but I didn’t plan to kiss her. I just needed to know she was focused on my next words. “You can add the nuggets to your list, *darlin’*, but let’s get one thing straight. It might take some time, and I might have to sacrifice my favorite childhood meal, but I plan to scratch every one of those non-reasons off that list until there’s nothin’ left. You hear me?”

As I waited for her response, I was hooked on her gaze so hard I felt like a poor old trout caught by a badge-wearing Boy Scout. But peripheral vision was a well-honed skill after so many years of keeping an eye out for stalkerish superfans ready to jump out of the bushes.

And just then? Even though I desperately wanted to know what Aubree thought of my promise, a woman with bright blonde hair was doing just that.

Did she really think I couldn’t see her crouching behind a bush across the street, watching us over the top with narrowed eyes? It was the light pole all over again. I knew it was the same girl because the hat was gone, and her hair was so bright

against the sea of foliage around her she might as well have been one of the tiki torches the Wilson family's neighbor used in their tropically-themed backyard. I'd seen it from the upstairs deck, and it was essentially Margaritaville.

"Shoot," I muttered, trying my best to straighten up in the most casual way possible.

But the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I snagged a firm grip on Aubree's hand without giving a thought about what I'd do if she made a big show out of trying to get free.

"What— Riley," she started, tugging on her hand as I pulled her down the sidewalk.

"Quit your squirmin' and act natural," I said as gently as I could, even though my protective instincts had just gotten a swift kick into high gear. "There's someone—a fan, maybe— watchin' us from the bushes back there, and the look on her face told me she didn't much like what she was seein'."

I felt more than saw Aubree shift to look over her shoulder, and I knew from experience that it was better to move along without giving these people the time of day.

You get called by the same person a hundred times and pick up on the hundred-and-first? That sent the message that you'd respond as long as they kept trying. No response at all was a *much* better response in my book.

I gave Aubree's hand a quick squeeze to stop her from looking back, and when she looked up at me, I tossed her a wink. Not a flirty one, and not the ones I put a little extra kick behind just to watch her cheeks flush pink.

This was a reassuring one because there was no way I'd let the probably jealous, delusional fan hiding in the bushes start up a catfight with the woman whose hand fit so perfectly in mine.

"It's all right, darlin'. I ain't gonna let anythin' happen to ya. Just keep walkin' and don't look back."

Instead of pointing out that was now the second time I'd used that endearment after saying I wouldn't—*whoops*—she



gave me a small smile and a nod, then sighed and shook out her shoulders like she believed me.

It was a good thing, too, because I meant every word.

And yes, it gave me more than a little bit of a thrill that she didn't remove her hand from mine even after we'd turned yet another corner.

A few minutes later, once we'd put a decent amount of distance between us and the girl who was probably the worst spy in the history of spies, Aubree finally released my hand.

If she hadn't admitted having feelings for me, I likely would've taken offense at the way she shook it out before rubbing it on the edge of her jeans. Instead, I smiled as I tucked mine into my pocket, knowing she probably felt the same spark of heat in her palm as I did, and simply didn't know what to do about it.

Aubree looked over her shoulder. "Why don't you have a security detail when you're here in town? You know, in case somethin' happens like with that fan."

"She's probably harmless. Like I said, I don't deal with much in terms of my fame in Charlotte Oaks, so havin' security guards followin' me around feels like overkill."

At least, I hoped the girl with the lightbulb-bright hair was harmless. But I had to admit, the fact that I'd now seen her watching me without approaching me for an autograph twice in one week had me a little on edge. It was like there was something else she was after, and I couldn't wrap my head around what that could be.

"Are you sure that fan wasn't just Paisley?" Aubree asked in a teasing tone.

I whipped my head back toward her. I'd been looking over my shoulder—again—because I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that we were still being watched. "Am I sure what?"

"Maybe it's Paisley playin' bodyguard or somethin'."

"Oh, right. Well, first, Paisley is a dang good manager, and she has a way with words that's made grown men cry—I've

seen it—but she ain't no bodyguard. She's five-feet-tall on a good day.”

“Hey. I'm not much taller than that.”

I looked away so I wouldn't let my gaze scan over the length of her as if her words were an invitation to do so. Even if the thought of taking my eyes on a long and leisurely stroll of their own was more than tempting.

Not that I hadn't already checked her out in small bites ever since our chat on the porch.

“All right, well, don't take this the wrong way, but without a blackbelt or experience as a stunt double for Lara Croft, I wouldn't hire either one of you as my bodyguard.”

She rolled her eyes, but since the glare she shot me had to be aimed upward if she wanted to do it to my face, it only made my point.

“So, what you're sayin' is, if I got myself a black belt and wanted a new career as your bodyguard now that my flight attendant one is... Um, you know. You'd hire me?”

I wanted to ask why she needed a new career, but something about the way her eyes had shuttered like the dark blue wooden slats that bracketed the windows at her house had me nodding instead. “Sure thing. Why wouldn't I?”

“How 'bout because I'm a woman?”

“*Pfft*, I'm no sexist. If you can whoop some bad guy booty, who am I to hold you bein' a woman against ya? Besides, hirin' you as my bodyguard would mean you'd have to stick to me like glue. I'd rather it be you than any of the guys on my current team.”

She laughed at that, but then her gaze wandered again and she looked contemplative. I was sure she didn't have a sudden hankering for a black belt and a career as a bodyguard, but she was definitely weighing options about *something*.

“Next question,” I said, switching hands with my guitar to give her a little space in case she needed it. “If you weren't a flight attendant, what would you be?”

“You first.”

“I’m not a flight attendant.” When she only scowled in response, I laughed. “Fine, that’s easy. I’d be a rancher.”

“You’re right, that was too easy.”

“I showed you mine...”

Her blush had me biting back a groan, but thankfully she spoke before I had to dwell on it for long. “A pilot.”

My steps faltered and I looked her over, and if I wasn’t mistaken, it almost looked like she’d shocked the heck out of herself by saying that out loud. “No kiddin’?”

“No kiddin’.”

I pictured her in yet another uniform, and I had to admit, it fit her just right. In the looks department, sure, but also because she was smart and detail-oriented and from what I’d seen over the years, calm under pressure. All admirable traits for a pilot.

The job would probably suit her just as well as she suited it, too. She wasn’t big on chatting for chatting’s sake, so I’d always wondered why she was in a customer-facing field.

But if she were a pilot? No problem there. The only person she’d have to talk to for most of her workday was her copilot—if she had one—and since Aubree always seemed to shine one-on-one, that’d likely be a great choice for her.

“I know a guy who runs a flight school in Nashville if you want me to hook you up,” I offered automatically. But then I wanted to rewind the clock and take it back when she flinched at the suggestion. “Or not. No pressure. Just figured I’d offer.”

“Thanks. That’s really sweet, but I’m good.”

Sensing the conversation was over, I flipped it back to the mystery woman. It was a rough transition since we’d strayed so far, but I was at a loss and scrambling to patch up the sadness I’d put in her expression.

“Anyway, I also know the bush girl isn’t Paisley because Paisley’s hair is dark as night and short, and the bush girl

had... Well, let's just say her hair was a little different."

The shift—awkward as it felt—had Aubree's eyes momentarily shutting when I'd said "bush girl," and she'd tucked her lips in like she was fighting a laugh. "What do you mean? Was it blonde or somethin'?"

"Yeah, but not like Laney's kinda blonde. It was bright as a flashlight."

It was a good thing we'd come back to this, though. I wanted Aubree to know what the woman looked like so she could keep an eye out for her. Sure, the bush girl was a tiny little thing and likely wouldn't be able to hurt a fly, let alone me.

But... no one said her weapon of choice would be her fists, and I wasn't bulletproof, knife proof, or heck, meat cleaver proof if she was a Kathy Bates kinda lady, and neither was Aubree.

She frowned a little. "I bet it can get pretty scary when people mob you in public."

I eyed her carefully and adjusted my grip on my guitar case. "You bein' sarcastic right now?"

"No, why?"

"Most people laugh about my need for bodyguards considerin' it's usually a mob of starry-eyed women tryin' to tear my clothes off and not an angry mob of men with pitchforks or somethin'. Not much of a scary thing in comparison."

She shrugged. "A mob is still a mob. That sounds pretty terrifyin' to me."

"Yeah, well, maybe if it was you tryin' to tear my clothes off I wouldn't mind it so much," I teased, laughing when she swatted me in the chest with the back of her hand.

"Oh, yeah? Even if it was a hundred of me instead of just one?"

"You might be right. I'd settle for just *one* of you tryin' to tear my clothes off."

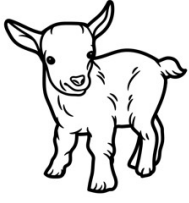
The wink I sent her got her just as exasperated as I'd hoped, but she waved it off instead of firing back with anything. "Seriously, though, have you talked to Paisley? You have a concert in Atlanta tomorrow, right? The first one of the USO tour?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you know what time we're leavin'?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, a squad car pulled up beside us.

*Now what?*



Charlotte Oaks Police Department was spelled out over the door of the black and white vehicle. Other cities with long names used acronyms on their cars, but no one around here loved *this* acronym. They'd rather say a mouthful like the full name than hope COPD would come around and save them in their time of need.

Did I think them callin' the department by its acronym would somehow jinx them into getting the disease in some kind of answered prayer gone awry? No.

Was I surprised the people of Charlotte Oaks would act as a united better-safe-than-sorry vibe about this? Also no.

Did I join in, and avoid the acronym because for all I knew they were onto something? Yes. Yes, indeed.

"What are y'all doin'?" Adam Wilson asked, pinching the bridge of his nose as he rolled slowly beside us as we continued walking down the street.

"Just takin' a little stroll," I replied for us.

"You about done?" he asked.

Aubree frowned up at me in confusion, and I shrugged. "We were headed back to the house, makin' a loop from back that way. Why?"

Adam looked in his rearview in the direction I'd gestured to, then back at us. Before he could say whatever he'd started to say, though, Aubree came to a stop and crossed her arms. Adam stopped the squad car and I turned toward her.

"What's up?" I asked.

Aubree kept her eyes on Adam. “Did you just happen to be patrollin’ over here?”

“Nope.”

I didn’t miss the guilty expression he wore, so I lifted a brow. “So... you were lookin’ for us, and knew we’d be here?”

“Yep.”

“How? And why?” Aubree asked.

“Oh, you know how these things go. Mrs. McClusky saw you out her window and called Carol Ford, who called Angela Huckleberry, and I’m pretty sure she’s the one who activated the Wine Club phone tree. Then Momma Cole called me.”

When I’d taken the lead on this little walk of ours, I’d intended to head toward the lake that was one of my favorite places in all of Charlotte Oaks.

Laney had shown me the peaceful dock near her family’s house when I’d come for her high school reunion one fateful fall. I was having trouble writing at the B&B, and she suggested it might be the perfect space to get some inspiration.

She’d been right. So, while she was busy pretending she wasn’t falling even more in love with the man who was now her husband, I was sitting alone on that dock, happy as a clam, words flowing like rain.

I’d hoped to sit there with Aubree and it might inspire a new song, but after seeing the girl in the bushes, I’d decided it’d be better for us to get back to the houses and stay inside until I figured out what Blondie’s deal was.

Aubree peered at Adam through the open window. “And why did she call you?”

“Oh, ya know, to arrest y’all for skippin’ out on family time with Travis in town.”

I chuckled. “Is that your plan, Wilson? Gotta say, it’s been a minute since I spent a night in lockup.”



“You’ve been to jail?” Aubree asked, swinging toward me so fast that the bun of curls on her head probably got whiplash.

“In a music video.”

She chuckled.

Adam shook his head at me, amusement in his eyes even though he wasn’t smiling in the slightest. “I’m not here to arrest you, but I figured there was no harm in rollin’ by to warn you about the world of hurt you’ll be in if you’re late for supper.”

“We won’t be,” Aubree said through gritted teeth.

I nudged her with my elbow. “Hey, can you give me a second with our friendly neighborhood policeman? Somethin’ I gotta talk with him about.”

She looked puzzled, but she nodded and waved goodbye to Adam, then stepped back onto the sidewalk and moved down the way a little bit.

“What’s on your mind?” Adam asked when she was out of earshot.

All signs of his earlier amusement had morphed into what his brothers called his “cop face.” Interested, serious, and ready for battle.

I leaned in, resting one forearm on the open window while propping my guitar case against his vehicle. “Last weekend, when I was headed to meet Aubree at The Broken Oak, I saw this blonde girl watchin’ me. She had on dark shades and a ball cap like she was tryin’ to be all incognito, and she even tried to hide behind a lamp post like I wouldn’t be able to see her.”

“Aren’t you used to that kinda thing?”

I sighed. “No, this was different. I tried to say hey to her, thinkin’ she might want me to sign somethin’, but she took off. Then, when we were walkin’ just now, I saw the same girl hidin’ in the bushes. She was watchin’ me again, but this time she didn’t have the hat and sunglasses, and she was scowlin’ like someone just ate the last donut right out from under her.”

He glowered at me. “Is that a cop joke?”

I only blinked at him in response, hoping to show him he was missing the point.

“Fine. And I might as well tell you I’ve already gotten a few calls about the woman you’re describin’.”

“You have?”

“Yep. Seems our fellow Charlotte Oakians don’t much care for the way she seems so interested in you.”

Just like at the diner with Norma, I felt a swift rush of love for this town.

“You want me to swing that way and see if she’s still around?” Adam asked.

“I’d appreciate it if you would. It was just down that street, a block back that way.” I jerked my chin in that direction. “Maybe keep an eye out around town for her, too?”

He nodded. “Trust me, the eyes are out. It’d be nice if they’d just mind their business and let me do my job, but not in this town.”

I chuckled.

He looked in his rearview, then sighed. “Can you give me more of a description than just ‘blonde?’ I’ve heard everythin’ from supermodel-tall to knee-high to a grasshopper from the folks who’ve called it in, and no one can agree on what she was wearin’. One even said it was a prom dress.”

Yeah, I loved this town, but really? A prom dress?

“It’s so light it’s almost white, her hair. Both times I saw her she was wearin’ all black—pants and a hoodie, not a prom dress, and she’s probably about Aubree’s size. Age-wise... Oh, I dunno, not a teenager but not older than me,” I said, looking over my shoulder at Aubree and giving her a reassuring smile before turning back to Adam.

“So somewhere in her twenties or early thirties?” he asked, nodding when I did. “Anythin’ else?”

“Not sure I can do better than that, but I guess I’d just be grateful if you could help me figure out what her deal is. I have a weird feelin’ I can’t shake that she’s not just some starstruck fan.”

“You think she might be dangerous?”

I shrugged. “No idea.”

“I’ll see what I can see.”

“Thanks,” I said, straightening and giving the top of the car a solid thump as I picked up my guitar.

“Y’all want a ride back to the Cole’s?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Temptin’ as it might be to ride through this neighborhood full of gossips in the back of your squad car, we’ll walk.”

“Suit yourself.”

“See you at supper?”

He smirked. “Yeah, unless somethin’ comes up and I get stuck at work.”

Nodding, I waved goodbye as he flipped his car around to go hunt Blondie down. Hopefully, he’d make it to supper with good news. And if he did get stuck at work, I sure hoped it wouldn’t have anything to do with him finding out my mystery stalker wasn’t harmless after all.



Adam made it in time to eat with us, but he didn’t bring any news with him, unfortunately. I hadn’t let my concerns ruin my meal, though, and now, I was way more interested in the woman currently trying to sneak a bite of my dessert—peach cobbler, courtesy of Mrs. McClusky.

She’d been waiting for us on the porch when we returned from our walk, and the cobbler wasn’t the only thing she’d brought with her. Unlike Adam, Mrs. McClusky *had* brought news of the bush girl.

According to the old woman who might know more about the goings-on in this town than the police department did, Blondie had been asking anyone and everyone for info about me ever since she'd arrived last weekend.

At first they hadn't thought much of it, but now? Their backs were up, thinking she was up to no good.

I wasn't sure what to make of that, but I thanked Mrs. McClusky for letting me know and sent a text to Paisley, filling her in. And then because privacy violations weren't new to me but whatever was happening between Aubree and me sure was, I pushed the whole thing out of my mind and enjoyed the night.

As usual at the end of a meal with this crowd, I felt nothing but fat and happy. I leaned back in my chair, balancing it on two legs while I stretched and patted my full belly.

Man, I loved nights like these. Conversations flowed around the table like mountain rapids, usually at least three or four different ones all going at the same time.

It was a wonder it didn't make my head spin considering I'd been eating most of my meals in front of the TV alone since I was twelve. But, it didn't. Instead, the chaotic symphony of laughter and stories between these two families filled me up the same way Momma Cole's or Georgie's cooking did.

As Phoebe delighted her side of the table with a long tale about a short girl she'd made friends with in her class this year, my eyes caught on movement outside the bay window behind Aubree's head.

It was just a flash—so quick, that if I hadn't been eager to set my eyes on the gorgeous woman across from me, I would've missed it. But there was no mistaking the figure that stepped away from the window with her white-blonde hair trailing down her back as she went.

Shock tore through me, and it hit me so hard that I fell backward, crashing to the ground with a pained *oomph*.

All conversation around me stopped. I looked up, finding those on my side of the table twisting in their chairs to stare down at me with wide eyes and open mouths. Those on Aubree's side—her included—were on their feet doing the same thing.

I shot up with a shaky grin, swatting at the air. “Don't mind me. I think I started to slip into a food coma. Oh, shoot, phone's ringin'. Be right back.”

I bolted from the room and out the front door without giving anyone a chance to respond—also without righting my chair—and laughter followed me outside before the door slammed shut behind me.

My embarrassing tumble was completely forgotten the second I came out here, and I let my eyes scan the dark street in front of the house. When they locked on their target, I stilled for a moment, then launched towards her.

“Hey,” I called to Blondie's back as she hustled down the sidewalk.

She didn't turn.

“Ma'am? Excuse me! Hold up a sec.” I jogged to catch up, and when I reached her, I tapped her on the shoulder. “What were you doin' back there, lookin' through the win—”

My words cut off as she spun to face me. Her light blue eyes swam with tears, and her bottom lip quivered.

Instinctively, I took a step back and held out my hands, palms out and placating. “Sorry, I don't mean you any harm.”

She took a step back, but she didn't book it like she'd done the last time I'd tried to talk to her.

I swallowed and held my hands out wider. “Do you want an autograph or somethin'? I'm happy to give you one, but I gotta say, seein' you watchin' me every time I turn around is startin' to freak me out a little.”

She winced. “Sorry.”

“Ah, she speaks.” I tried to make my tone light, but I'll be darned if it didn't come out a little snarkier than I intended.

She covered her face with her hands, and I couldn't tell if her narrow shoulders were shaking with laughter or tears. "This is not how this was supposed to go."

Her words were muffled by her hands, and even though I was pretty sure I'd heard her right, I didn't understand what she meant. "Sorry, uh, did you want me to sign somethin'?"

"Um—"

"It's okay if you've just been workin' up the nerve to ask... It happens all the time and I don't mind. If that's the deal, I'll sign somethin' right now and we can both go on our way."

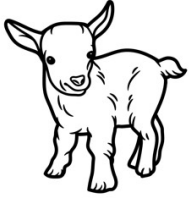
It felt like it took her an eternity to answer me, but when she finally gave a hesitant nod, I let out a sigh of relief.

"All right, then," I said with a short nod. I hooked my thumb over my shoulder toward the Wilson house. "I can go grab somethin' to sign if you don't have anythin' on you."

She looked toward the house, then back at me. Another nod.

"Great. Be right back."

I hustled into the house next to the one where the families were probably still making fun of me for my tumble to the floor. But when I snagged one of the photos I'd brought with me to the event in LA and then made my way back outside, Blondie was gone.



## aubree

I stepped out of the galley and smoothed my hands over my new uniform. The blue pencil skirt was soft and stretchy, unlike the scratchy one I used to wear, and the top portion had a white, short-sleeved blouse under a maroon vest and a blue tie.

Flushing, I remembered Riley's eyes sparkling as he told me how well the tie complimented my eyes. But besides that, I had to admit every part of this uniform I'd first seen on Jordan was a lot more comfortable than the one I'd worn for the airline-that-shall-not-be-named.

"Y'all need anythin' before we take off?" I asked Riley and Paisley, clasping my hands in front of me and hoping there was something I could do for the latter since she always did so much for everyone else.

"I'm good, but thank you," Paisley replied without looking up from her tablet. But her lips were pulled up into a smile, and when Paisley was in work mode, that was about as good as it got.

I turned to Riley. "How 'bout you, Mr. Conrad?"

He let his head fall back adorably on the butter-soft seat. "Oh, no ya don't. Just because this is your first official flight as a member of the crew, doesn't mean you start callin' me *Mr. Conrad*. It's too formal for two people who shared a peach cobbler made by a busybody neighbor the night before."

I chuckled, hands on my hips. I was glad to see him looking a little less tense after the way he'd acted last night after he'd fallen out of his chair. I wasn't sure if it was



embarrassment or if he was still worried about the stalker fan, but I hadn't liked it.

Surely he'd thought asking me to step away so he could talk to Adam would keep me from knowing what he was doing, but it'd been beyond obvious that he wanted Adam to look into the girl. And whether or not she was trouble, I already kinda hated her for making Riley concerned enough to have to do that.

"Fine, *Mr. Pain in my Butt*, do you need anythin' before takeoff or not?" I asked with a too-wide smile.

"That's better. Though, if you've got a pain in your butt, you're better off sittin' here in one of these soft chairs than in that uncomfortable jump seat up there."

"Nice try," I deadpanned.

"I'm serious. It's just Paisley and me back here, but there's plenty of seating to choose from that would be more comfy." He patted the chair next to him. "I'm partial to this one right here, of course."

"Thanks for the offer, but sittin' closer to the pain in my butt wouldn't help much."

Paisley let out a soft snort from her seat across the aisle from him, but before he could reply, I heard what I'd always referred to in my head as the Bat Phone chiming delicately from the galley.

"I'll be back in a bit," I said, making my way to the phone and lifting it off the cradle. And yep, I managed to sound totally professional and not at all like a teenage girl with a crush on a celebrity when I spoke with the pilot.

*Gold star for me.*

We were airborne only a few minutes later, and a sense of peace flowed through me. There was nothing I loved more than being in the air. It was the reason I became a flight attendant in the first place. It was the next best thing to the dream I'd quietly had since I was a kid, and even when the bad outweighed the good, the feeling of being high above the clouds was the true reason I stayed.

What would it be like to *be* the pilot, though? I'd chatted with John, who was currently navigating us to our flying altitude with the steady grace that came with ample experience, and I'd almost asked him. He was friendly enough that I bet he'd hold nothing back if I was curious about his profession.

But of course, I'd chickened out. Wouldn't be very professional to start peppering the pilot for the scoop on his job when I was supposed to be gearing up to do mine.

But *oh*, when I'd seen the cockpit behind him? When I'd nodded and smiled as he'd introduced himself and told me about his family and his years as Riley's pilot? My heart fluttered so hard in my chest it might as well have had wings of its own.

This cockpit was so different from the massive commercial airliners I was used to, but also familiar. The entire time we spoke, I couldn't help but think about what it would be like to sit up there with nothing but blue skies in front of me, no need to make polite conversation or provide puke bags to the same kids who'd made a game out of pressing their call button an hour earlier.

And that was the moment I decided to put all the research I'd been doing under the cover of darkness into good use. The second we landed, I was going to send in that application for flight school.

Confessing to Riley had been me picking up the straw, and then seeing that cockpit only to turn around and plant my butt in another jump seat? That was when I'd taken that straw and broken the camel's back with it. And suddenly, something that had always felt like the pipiest pipe dream of all pipe dreams didn't make me feel like I had my head in the clouds.

Still high on the excitement of my big decision, I opened the latest romance novel from one of my favorite authors, relaxed into my not-that-uncomfortable jump seat, and tried to enjoy the moment.

Right now, *this* was my job, and being in the air was a perk worth focusing on.

Plus, thanks to the salary that Riley had proven was fair even though it'd made me swallow my tongue when he'd first told me the amount, this job was going to fund my dreams. *Silent, internal happy dance!*

It was a good thing most of it was online at first, and when it came to the flight hours, I'd just have to hope Riley's schedule would allow me enough time off to get them done.

"Are we dropping Aubree in Charlotte Oaks and then heading back to Nashville tonight?" Paisley asked Riley from their chairs in the main cabin.

I stilled, my eyes fixed on the pages of my book. It was a small enough plane that their conversation was easily heard from my position, but since I knew Riley could see me, I didn't want to make it obvious I was listening.

"Nah, I already let Georgie know I'd be back later. We've got the one in Alabama tomorrow anyway, so we might as well hang in Charlotte Oaks instead of goin' back and forth between there and Nashville."

I flicked my gaze to the compartment that held my roller bag. I'd packed just in case they'd changed their mind and decided to stay in Atlanta, but it sounded pretty set in stone that we wouldn't.

Seemed like a heck of a waste of fuel if you asked me.

Then again, when you owned your own plane and the tour stops were all in the same region of the country, making quick hops instead of living in hotels wasn't a horrible plan.

"I feel like you should just buy the Charlotte Oaks B&B at this point," Paisley told Riley with a short laugh. "You're their best customer. Well, I'm the guest, but you're paying for it."

"You should just stay at the Cole's or Wilson's like they keep tellin' you to. Save me some money."

I kept my eyes on my book, but couldn't miss the smile in Paisley's voice. "Right, like it's bankrupting you. And as I keep saying, I appreciate their offers, but I know for a fact they'd try to make me relax more and work less. They don't get that working *is* relaxing to me."

Riley made a noise of agreement. “Yeah, I’ve seen when you try to relax the way most people do. It ain’t pretty.”

I glanced up in time to see Paisley stick her tongue out at him before turning back to her tablet with a grin. “At least we’ll get another home-cooked meal out of the deal. Last night’s casserole was amazing.”

“I think I’m still full from it,” Riley agreed. “Speaking of home-cooked meals, I’ve got a quick trip home planned toward the end of the tour.”

I looked up again at that, seeing Paisley tear her eyes away from the tablet with just as much curiosity on her face as was probably on mine. “Trip home, huh?”

He nodded, looking meaningfully at her.

Home, as in Nashville?

Understanding washed over Paisley’s expression as Riley kept silently-communicating with her, but dang it, I was still lost in the dark.

“Right,” she said, drawing out the word. “So, I suppose you’ll need Aubree to go with you and I’ll make sure the jet’s ready?”

“Yep.”

*Yep? What does he mean ‘yep?’*

Paisley’s smile was sneaky as she turned away once again, and Riley pulled out his trusty black-and-white composition book. Guess that meant the conversation was over, but I was still staring at them like I could somehow will them to keep talking.

Or, heck, I’d settle for one of them breaking the fourth wall and acting as a narrator to fill in the crowd.

As Riley opened his notebook to whatever song he was currently working on, I managed to send up a quick word of thanks that I was close enough to eavesdrop but not close enough to be overwhelmingly distracted by those forearms of his while he wrote.

“Hey, Aubree,” Riley said, not looking up from his work.

“Um, yeah?”

“Since you heard all that anyway, guess I don’t have to tell you to plan on accompanyin’ me on a special trip toward the end of the tour?”

I swallowed, nodding even though he still wasn’t looking at me.

But since not looking at me meant he didn’t see the nod, he glanced up with a lifted brow. “Right?”

This time, when I nodded again, it caused a half-smile to tug one side of his lips up. “Good. It’ll be fun.”

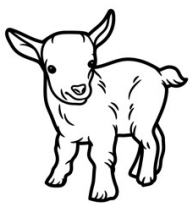
“And we’re... Um, we’re goin’ to Nashville?” I asked.

He tapped his pen on the notebook, seeming to choose his words carefully. “Nope. But I think I’ll let the destination be a surprise.”

I wanted to say something about how easily I could find out the destination considering I was part of the flight crew, but I couldn’t get my mouth to work properly.

Riley wanted to go to a mystery location he referred to as *home*, and he wanted it to be a surprise to me?

*Why?*



# aubree

Two weeks later, as we walked from the plane toward the black limo waiting on the tarmac, I tripped over a wrinkle in the literal red carpet they'd rolled out for Riley's arrival.

He reached out from behind me and grabbed my arm to steady me, but since I hadn't known he was even there, I let out a soft—though still embarrassingly shrill—scream.

Unfortunately, the way he'd leaned down to prevent me from falling meant that scream left my lips and assaulted his eardrum like a well-aimed torpedo.

“Shoot, woman,” he hissed as he jerked back.

“I'm so sorry,” I said, cringing so hard my eyes were practically closed.

But even though he'd straightened and shook his head as if he could shake the punctured eardrum back to its original state, he didn't let go of my arm as we kept walking.

In fact, instead of gripping it as he'd done before, he somehow managed to loop it around his bare forearm in a move so smooth I hadn't realized it happened until the fine hairs there tickled my palm.

Why were my knees weak?

The near-fall. Yep. Definitely that. Adrenaline or something. It absolutely wasn't due to something so simple as freaking *arm hair* tickling my palm.

Even if said arm hair belonged on the world's sexiest forearms that ever forearmed.

“It’s fine. That’s what I get for sneakin’ up on ya,” he replied with a wink. *Dang him.* “How are you enjoyin’ bein’ a member of the team? That jump-seat treatin’ you all right?”

I swallowed hard, gripping the handle of my rolling suitcase so tight I was nervous it’d break off. Unlike the last two weekends, tonight’s concert was close enough to tomorrow’s that we were actually spending the night.

At a hotel.

Under the same roof.

Unless I got lucky, and we were in separate buildings. That would be better. Because over the last two weeks whatever was brewing between Riley and me had nearly reached a boiling point, and unless I wanted to throw away all of my reasons for keeping my distance from this man, going on a weekend getaway where there was no escaping him was a very bad idea.

*Chill out, Aubree! For once in your life, be cute and flirty instead of awkward. You can doooo thisssss.*

“Oh, the jump-seat is great,” I replied. Then I wrinkled my nose, employing the fake it til you make it vibe and trying to wrestle up my inner Dakota. “But, there is one tiny thing I could use your help with.”

Riley immediately looked concerned. “What’s that?”

*It’s working! Keep your cool, Not Awkward Aubree.*

I took a deep breath and then let it out in a dramatic sigh. “Some of the regular passengers are a little too flirty.”

He glanced down at me, grinning wide when he saw the slight, teasing smile I made sure to wear so he didn’t think I’d really complain about such a cushy job. It had been a fantastic trip, short as it was.

And Riley could joke about the jump seat being uncomfortable all he wanted—and yeah, maybe it was compared to the plush leather under his pampered and perfectly rounded butt—but it was a heck of a lot more



comfortable than the hard ones I'd sat on while flying for my old airline.

"Flirty, huh? That Paisley, man, I tell ya. Can't take her anywhere," he replied with a mockingly stern tone. "I'll have a word with her. Don't you worry."

Pride filled me from my comfy black pumps all the way to my ears. *It worked! I'm flirting!*

Not that I should be, considering I was the one stopping us from taking whatever this thing was between us and trying to make a go of it, but man it felt good to give back a little of the teasing he always doled out. It made me feel a little less off-balance. It made me feel fun and free instead of constantly batting away his words because I didn't know how to react to them without looking like a fool.

I lifted my chin, feeling more confident than I had in a while. "See that you do. I can't possibly work under such conditions."

The laugh that floated out of him was as warm and bright as the sun over our heads, and whether or not flirting with Riley for even a few seconds was a smart idea, that laugh made it worth it.

"Noted."

We walked in silence for a few steps, and thanks to the replay of his laugh that looped through my mind like a broken record, I didn't even realize I still had my arm tucked around his until he looked down at it.

I followed his gaze, then looked up at his face. His expression was gentle like he liked what he saw. And I did too.

But... *Uh oh*. What if someone got a photo of us like this?

Some of the headlines I'd seen over the last few weeks zipped past me in a ghostly whirlwind of dramatic words in big bold letters, so I pulled my hand free and ran it over my skirt. Then I pretended to scratch an itch on the side of my neck. I guess I should've done that first, though, if I was trying to use that as my excuse to pull my arm away. *My bad*.

I didn't necessarily want him to think I didn't like that contact.

Because I did. So much. *Too* much.

It was more that I wouldn't like what came of it—and neither would he—if there were paparazzi nearby. Or opportunistic jerks with cell phones looking for a payday. I knew from Laney that those people weren't as easy to spot and could be lurking anywhere.

Sure, Paisley had done a great job convincing the media there was nothing to see here—going all the way back to some highly unflattering (for me) images of us at the airport that Riley joked he was going to frame—but with each day that passed, I was afraid the day was coming that her words would be a lie.

“So, uh, did that happen to you a lot at your last job?” he asked, clearing his throat and switching hands with his guitar case so it hung between us.

I looked up at him in confusion, shaking my head slightly.

“Gettin' flirted with by passengers,” he clarified.

Understanding now, I shook my head. “Not really, no.”

“Really? Not that I'd want you to deal with that, but I have to admit I'm surprised.”

“Why?”

He slid his eyes to the side, looking down at me with a smirk that said I should know *exactly* why. But when I didn't say anything, he rolled his eyes and huffed out a breath. “Uh, 'cause you're gorgeous, obviously. You had to make me say it?”

I opened my mouth to apologize or disagree or *something* because I hadn't meant to “make him say it,” and I was beyond embarrassed that he thought that.

*So much for Not Awkward Aubree.*

Before I could say anything, we reached the limo, and the driver opened the door. Riley handed his guitar case to another

man in a black suit, then gestured to my roller.

“It’s okay, I can—”

As usual, my words were cut off by the man’s polite, “It’s my pleasure, ma’am,” as he picked it up by the lower handle and I had no choice but to let go of the extended one.

Riley jerked his chin toward the limo. “Need me to slide so you don’t have to?”

“Slide?”

Yes, Awkward Aubree was back in full force, and I was dazed and confused and still totally unused to getting the star treatment after working a flight.

Why didn’t these people ever realize I was part of the crew, not a celebrity’s guest who deserved the same treatment he got? No matter where we went, it was always the same, and it blew my mind.

Riley shook his head with a short laugh and folded his long form into the dark interior of the limo, sliding across the back seat.

Paisley came up behind me and gestured to my legs. “He meant because of your skirt.”

“Ah.”

I watched in stunned silence as she got in after him, but instead of taking the seat next to his, she turned right and sat on one of the bench seats that faced the middle.

“You comin’?” Riley asked, leaning his broad-shouldered self toward the opening of the car.

Snapping out of my haze, I nodded and took the seat next to him. I crossed my legs at the ankles, smoothed my skirt, tugged on my vest, then patted the back of my hair because, *dang it*, I had no idea what to do with my hands.

And through all my fidgeting, I could feel Riley’s gaze on me.

“What?” I asked, not looking at him.

Paisley had slid as far away as she could—in all her sleek, pantsuited glory—and immediately got on the phone, so I stared at the side of her face and watched her lips move as she spoke.

It felt a little like the technique Phoebe told me all the toe-dancing professional ballerinas used, choosing a spot on the wall so they didn't fall down while spinning around and around.

“Back to our discussion.”

“What discussion?”

“The one about you not gettin' flirted with even though you're gorgeous.”

I finally glanced his way. He looked so at home in this limo with his long legs stretched out in front of him, one of them bent at the knee with his wrist resting on it. The other arm came up to drape along the back of our seat, and he angled his body toward me. He looked so darn comfy he might as well be on a couch in his own house rather than in the car that was now making its way out of the airport.

“What about it?” I asked.

“Why do you s'pose that is? You think maybe they *were* flirtin', and you just couldn't tell?”

“No.”

“Then, why?”

“Um... Well, I've been told I look a little intimidatin' at first glance.”

Riley scoffed. “That is completely untrue. And it says a whole lot more about whoever told you that than it does about you, I'll tell ya that right now. In fact, a cop-out is what it is.”

I shrugged. “Well, it'd be a good reason since the guys who hit on me at the hotel bars usually have had a drink or two before they do it, like maybe they need the alcohol to make them brave or somethin'.”

He hung his head, then gave me a look. “You just proved my point. You don’t look intimidatin’. They’re just scared to get shut down by such a beautiful woman. And any man who needs a little liquid courage to approach you, ain’t no man at all.”

My mouth parted when he punctuated that statement with another one of those makes-me-wanna-wring-his-neck winks.

How long would it take for this man to man-enough himself right through all of my carefully constructed walls? Five days? Ten? Fifty? Did it even matter when it felt like an inevitability that I had no control over?

And *that* thought right there was like a bucket of ice water considering my past relationships, and I looked away before he could see the splotchy, embarrassing redness I was sure I wore on my cheeks.

“Hey, sorry to butt in,” Paisley said as she slid her way toward us in her crisp black pantsuit. “We’ll be there soon, and we need to go over the set list one more time.”

“Sure thing,” Riley replied.

And while they did that, I stared out the window and thanked my lucky stars for Paisley and her need to butt in.

But then my phone buzzed in my purse, and I pulled it out, almost afraid to open it when I saw it was the group text I shared with my sisters. I didn’t have a good reason for the apprehension that sliced through me, but since I’d just be sitting here dwelling on all these feelings I wasn’t sure what to do with, I slid my thumb across the screen.

Dakota: What’s with that girl still asking about Riley all over town? Everybody’s talking about it.

Laney: Bernice said she’s his ex, but I don’t think she is.

I snuck a glance at Riley, who looked up at the same time and gave me a half-smile before turning back to Paisley.

Me: He thinks she's a fan or something. Pretty sure he asked Adam to look into her that first weekend. Paisley too, I bet. But I haven't heard anything.

Laney: Maybe he should reconsider not having a security team when he comes to town. What if she's dangerous? It's been weeks.

Me: What kind of questions is she asking about him?

Dakota: I heard she wants to know what he's 'really like.'

Me: Doesn't sound like an ex to me. She'd know what he was really like if she'd dated him, wouldn't she?

Laney: You'd think. Well, at least the whole town is onto her, but she doesn't seem to be getting the hint. She will though. We take care of our own around here.

“You all right, over there?” Riley asked.

I bit my lip, releasing it as soon as I saw the telltale spark in his eyes. “Um, yeah, my sisters were just textin’ me about the, um... bush girl. I guess she’s askin’ around town about you still, wantin’ to know what you’re really like or somethin’.”

Riley looked at Paisley, who gave him a short nod.

Then he turned back to me. “This is kinda par for the course with me, Aubree. But don’t give it another thought. It’s rarely as big a deal as it might seem.”

His words should have freaked me out. Maybe I should have felt the need to add another item to my list of reasons we shouldn’t act on our feelings.

But, *nope*.

All I felt was a surge of protectiveness for the man casually sprawled in the seat next to me, looking totally worth the effort it would take to stalk someone from behind a bush.

I'd creepily watched him from behind a book more than a few times, so I knew firsthand.

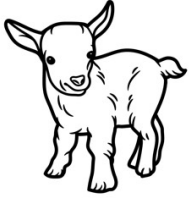
"Maybe you should rethink the whole bodyguard thing while you're in Charlotte Oaks," I said, grateful there was an SUV full of them at the front and the rear of this limo at the moment.

He cocked his head. "You worried about me, pretty girl?"

I blinked slowly at him, keeping my face blank. "Maybe."

He grinned, then lifted a hand in an almost unconscious move, laying it over his chest and rubbing it in a slow circle like he was trying to relieve some kind of pressure.

Then he shook his head and turned back to Paisley, and for the first time ever, Riley Conrad didn't have to have the Olympics-level-flirting last-word.





Five concerts down, five to go. Even though I knew I'd hired Aubree thinking it was a permanent position, only to be surprised by her insistence it needed to be temporary, there was a knot in my stomach as I realized we were halfway done with this USO tour.

She hadn't said anything about leaving once this tour was over, but why did it feel like she was slipping through my fingers?

"Great show," Paisley said as I came off stage.

"Thanks." My eyes continued to scan the faces in the backstage area as I wiped the sweat from my brow and headed toward my dressing room. "Hey, have you seen—"

"She's at the hotel," Paisley cut in. The woman was always a step ahead. "Riley, is there anything you wanna tell me about you and Aubree?"

*Uh, that I'm in love with her, and I'm pretty sure I have been since I first watched her lug folding tables around a metal stage in a foreign desert?*

"Like what?" I asked.

"Anything you want me to prepare for. Get in front of. You know I'm not a fan of surprises."

I chuckled, opening the door to my dressing room and stepping inside. Then I braced one arm on the doorjamb and hung my head. "Pais?"

"Yeah?"

I looked up, holding her gaze. “Someday, I hope you get a good surprise that makes you quit hatin’ them. You deserve good things.”

She quirked a brow. “Uh. Thanks? What the heck, Ri?”

“What? You take great care of me, and you took great care of Laney before me. Don’t even get me started on all the stuff you do for certain people who don’t deserve to share the same air you breathe.” I paused there to give her a pointed look. But when that look was met with a way-too-scary one from her, I held up my hand. “All right, I’ll shut up. I’m just sayin’ you deserve good things, and since you won’t go lookin’ for it, I’m thinkin’ it’ll be a surprise.”

“Well, thanks. Are you gonna tell me what’s up with you and Aubs, or not?”

“Trust me, Miss Paisley, if there was somethin’ to fess up about, I’d be more than eager to let you in on it. I’d be runnin’ through these halls and screamin’ my head off about it. But there isn’t.”

She smirked, shaking her head. “You are so dramatic. Fine.”

“Great.” She turned to leave, but just when I was about to close the door so I could change, she pivoted back around and lifted her chin. “Riley?”

“Yeah, Pais?”

“There’s nothing for you to fess up about... *yet*, right?”

I grinned. “Right.”



When I walked through the back entrance of the hotel an hour later, the only thing I wanted to do was take a shower, collapse into bed, and keep my dang mouth shut for the rest of the night.

And yet, as I stepped into the elevator with Paisley and my security team, I found myself wiggling my fingers and shifting my feet like my body knew there was somewhere I had to be, and it wouldn't involve any of those things.

As usual, Paisley was one step ahead of me.

“Lobby bar.”

“Huh?”

She slid her eyes up to meet mine, shaking her short dark hair off her face as she craned her neck. “She’s in the lobby bar. Don’t even pretend you weren’t wondering.”

“I wasn’t wondering.” I was trying not to wonder, anyway.

Paisley’s snort told me she didn’t buy what I was selling, but that made sense because she wasn’t a dang fool.

“I don’t suppose...”

“Riley, please don’t ask me to clear out the lobby bar. It’s packed, and it’s a Saturday night. Have some pity on the people.”

I made a face at her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

*Man*, I was a lucky guy. Paisley was an excellent manager, and even though my former one was my father’s brother, Paisley did his job fifty million times better and also felt like the little sister I never had.

As both a manager and a person, she was one of the best things that’d ever happened to me. I was in a dark place when she took over my career—mentally. But little by little, she’d brought me to a place where I could be *me*, and I had a feeling some of that confidence Aubree insisted I had when it came to what we had was thanks to Paisley getting me into therapy and doing her part to undo the damage Uncle Jim had done.

Paisley didn’t make me feel small while at the same time trying to convince the world I was made of gold, she made me feel normal.

She didn’t treat me like garbage and then demand everyone else treat me like a king, she made me feel like a

person.

And when I was considering stepping over the line into Grade A celebrity jerk territory? She reeled me back in.

Apparently, this was one of those times.

No, I wouldn't ask her to shut down the lobby bar just so I could have a drink with the woman I'd sung every love song to on that stage tonight, whether she was there to hear it or not.

But...

"There's a rooftop bar," she said, rolling her eyes when she caught the pleading look in mine. "I'm not gonna shut it down, but it's more secure, and the team can bring you up there if you wanna hang out with her."

"You're a gem, Pais."

"I'm a diamond."

"That too. I'll text her." But when the service elevator stopped on our floor and the doors opened, my phone nearly fell out of my hand. "What in the..."

Aubree stood in the hallway in a towel, shaking like a leaf, while hotel security officers and police moved in and out of her room. I wasn't breathing as I took in the scene, and my feet carried me to her side before I even realized I'd taken a step.

She was in my arms before I even blinked.

"Hey," she said against my chest as I automatically tugged her against me. "Everythin' is fine."

"Don't look very fine," I said through gritted teeth, eyes fixed on her open door.

Her room was a mess. Like someone had tossed it.

But... why? How? Who?

"Mr. Conrad," my head of security whispered from behind me. "We need to get you to your room. We don't know what \_\_\_"

“I’m not leavin’,” I growled, tightening my hold on my girl.

*My girl.*

Yeah, I was a patient man, and not taking any steps to rush this woman over the last few weeks had been nothing short of torture, but even if she didn’t know it, I’d already claimed her as mine inside my own head.

And right now? My head of security was about to find out what the bottom of my boot tasted like if he thought I’d go anywhere without Aubree.

“Find out what happened,” I told him, jerking my chin toward the police hovering in the doorway.

He nodded and stepped away, so I put my hands on the tops of Aubree’s arms and brought her back just far enough that I could look at her. “Are you hurt?”

“Not at all. I was at the lobby bar, then I came up here to go to bed. Everythin’ was normal. I got in the shower, and when I came out, this is what I found. I called the front desk, and they called the police, and I didn’t get dressed because I probably read too many romantic suspense novels, but I didn’t think it would be a good idea to touch anythin’ and now all these words are fallin’ out of my mouth and I can’t make them stop. Please make them stop.”

I yanked her against my chest and pressed my lips to the top of her head, inhaling deeply through my nose. Her rambling had stopped, but it wasn’t what I wished I could’ve done to stop them. But kissing her right now wasn’t a good idea, and we couldn’t have our first kiss for that reason.

“It’s all right,” I murmured against her still-damp hair. Her scent, combined with how her hands fisted in my shirt, almost had me on my knees. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

“Mr. Conrad.”

My head of security was back, and as Paisley stepped up beside him—looking ready to kill someone for scaring Aubree like this—I realized I’d forgotten about everyone else as I’d focused on the woman in my arms.

“Please tell me someone has answers,” I said.

“Security footage led them right to the guy. He’s an employee of the hotel. That’s how he got in.”

Aubree shuddered in my arms, and I squeezed her tighter, rubbing her back in soothing circles.

“Why’d he go in? Did he rob her?” It wasn’t lost on me that he’d tossed the place but—thankfully—hadn’t gone into the bathroom where she was taking a shower.

“Apparently, he’s going through a nasty divorce and has a drinking problem. He was intoxicated tonight, and Aubree looks a lot like his estranged wife. He convinced himself she was staying at the hotel with another man and went in there looking for evidence that would help him out in the divorce, but when he realized it wasn’t her room, he fled.”

“If he works at the hotel, why didn’t he see the name on the reservation wasn’t hers?” Aubree asked quietly.

It was a good question. She really did read a lot of romantic suspense novels.

Paisley gave her a soothing look. “Your room is registered under Riley’s alias, so if he thought she was here with another man...”

Aubree nodded. “I see.”

“They just finished with the room,” Paisley said to me. “She’s free to go in and get dressed. Unfortunately, I already asked them for another room, but they’re fully booked between Riley’s show and a few other events tonight.”

Aubree’s head snapped up, and her eyes latched onto mine. “I can’t stay in there tonight.”

“You’re not. You’re stayin’ with me.”

I held my breath, waiting for her to say no. Waiting for her to say she wanted to stay with Paisley instead or have someone on my team switch with her.

But she didn’t.

To my utter shock, she simply nodded.

“Do you want me to gather your stuff so you don’t have to go in there?” Paisley asked, placing a hand on Aubree’s shoulder.

“Yes, please.”

“I’m on it. I’ll meet you guys at Riley’s room in a few.”

And since I knew my team would take care of speaking with hotel security and the police, I turned Aubree around and tucked her under my arm, heading for the suite at the end of the hall.

Sure, she was fine. The guy wasn’t there for her, and she didn’t appear to have been in actual danger. But when I’d first come up on that scene and saw how scared she’d looked, I’d never felt fear like that strong in all my life.

Not even after my parents died.

We slipped into my room, leaving two security guards outside the door, and I walked her over to the sitting area. “Have a seat, I’ll get you some water.”

She sat, but then she tugged on my hand until I sat beside her. Then she curled up against me and tucked her legs up, carefully adjusting her towel as she did. “I’m not thirsty. Just stay.”

My throat was too tight to speak, so I kissed the top of her head again.

“Riley?” she said after a minute.

“Yeah, darlin’?”

The couch faced the king bed, and I felt her turn her cheek slightly as if she were looking right at it. “Do you think we can pretend there’s nothin’ between us that would make it weird for you to hold me tonight?”

I let out a shaky exhale, then used my finger to lift her chin until she met my gaze. “It’s *because* there’s somethin’ between us that I’m gonna hold you tonight.”

“But—”

“But—just hold you. Nothin’ else.”

A faint smile touched her lips, and then she nuzzled back down into my chest. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Minutes later, Paisley knocked on the door, and I hollered for her to come in. She gave Aubree her things and told us to let her know if we needed anything, then left with one last sympathetic look at me.

And then, before I knew it, I had a pajama-clad Aubree curled up with her back to my chest and her head using my arm as a pillow.

I’d never been more comfortable in my entire life, but Aubree? She was so rigid I wondered if she was made of stone.

“Aubree, *breathe*, darlin’,” I whispered into the dark.

I wasn’t sure what I thought she’d do—take a breath, maybe?

But, no.

Instead, she let out a snort-laugh that stabbed through the quiet, then clamped a hand over her mouth and shook with the force of her nervous giggles.

“Uh, I tell you to breathe, and you turn into a barn animal? Was that a snort?” I teased, pinching her side.

Her giggles turned into shrieks as she bucked against me. “Stop it! I’m ticklish!”

“You don’t say?” I poked her in the ribs, and she swatted at me, flipping to her other side so her chest was pressed against mine.

I stilled, pushing the hair back from her face. Was there a small part of me that wanted to kiss her? Of course there was. It was a small part of me, but it was loud as heck, practically running around inside my head and banging a gong to get my attention.

But more importantly, our first kiss—our first *anything*—couldn’t be attached to this night, and I flicked the thought



away with ease.

“I can’t believe you just tickled me,” she murmured.

“Why?”

“When I was little, and I had a bad dream, I used to crawl into bed with my parents,” she said, a wistful smile on her full lips. “I’d lay between them, and they’d cuddle me while they held hands. I used to hold my breath because it was so nice, and I was afraid that if I moved or breathed, it would somehow ruin it. Like they’d roll over in their sleep and stop holdin’ me or somethin’.”

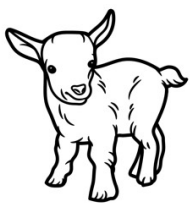
She paused, closing her eyes with a short laugh. I ran my thumb along her temple, silently begging her to keep talking because I was hooked on every word.

“Then, of course, one of them would realize I wasn’t breathin’, and they’d tickle me or do somethin’ else to make me laugh, like pretend to sleep and then yell ‘boo!’”

I grinned as she giggled softly at the memory. “Does that mean you were holdin’ your breath because you were afraid to move just now with me?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

I used my fingertip to pull it from between her teeth, then traced the line of it. “Well, you can breathe easy, then, ’cause there’s nothin’ in this world that would make me stop holdin’ you tonight.”



I set my guitar aside and tipped my face up to the sun. All in all, it'd been a great day off in Charlotte Oaks. I'd just written the last line of a brand new song on that dock that hadn't let me down yet, and not only that, but I'd gotten to hang out with some of my favorite people while doing it.

Thankfully, in the six days since Aubree's hotel room had been trashed, I hadn't noticed any kind of lingering fear or signs that she was having a hard time. I was sure it was because the man's intentions hadn't been nearly as bad as they could've been, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't hope that night we'd spent together hadn't helped a little, too.

And as we prepared to leave tomorrow for another weekend of shows—another weekend closer to the end of the USO tour—that feeling I had that she was slipping through my fingers had almost completely gone away.

She'd been different this week. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was, but it was a sense of lightness. Pride, too. She was proud of herself for something, and I knew that because her usual way of walking—like she was trying to blend in so she wouldn't be noticed—had been replaced by a subtle, mind-numbingly sexy hip sway and a raised chin.

*I loved it. In fact, I loved her.*

Closing my notebook, I glanced around to find her. But as my eyes scanned the lakefront park, the familiar feeling of wholeness settled deep into my bones. Jackson and Bailey were cuddled up on a blanket with his hand on her still-flat

belly as they watched little Phoebe rehearse her dance moves in the grass.

Travis—who was oddly back for yet another visit even though he'd never been home so much in all the time I'd been coming around—sat beside his brother.

To my surprise, Travis didn't look the least bit bored despite his overall appearance making him seem like the last kind of guy who'd voluntarily watch an eight-year-old ballerina practice for her recital.

Paisley was watching too, and that tablet that was forever glued to her hand? It was nowhere in sight. It was a rare and beautiful thing when my manager was present instead of staring down at the electronic device she used to plan out every detail of my life, and I was happy to see her doing it.

But the best sight of all was Aubree, reading under a tree.

Sure, maybe it'd be nice for her to be right there with the rest of them, watching Phoebe dance. Maybe they wondered why she wasn't.

But the thing was... Aubree spent a lot of time with Phoebe. I knew for a fact she'd seen this dance performed a hundred times already since, apparently, that girl couldn't breathe if she wasn't dancing.

So if Aubree wanted to spend her time under a tree, alone, except for the characters in her book?

I was all for it.

There wasn't a thing about that woman I wanted to change. And to me, there was nothing wrong with her need for solitude to balance out the constant chatter of her large extended family.

That said, I'd been wrapped up in my music for who-knew-how-long, and I was about ready for an Aubree fix. I wouldn't ruin her alone time for *too* long, but I could sneak over and steal a few minutes.

Five, tops.

All right, maybe seven to ten, if she'd let me.

But as I slipped my notebook of songs into the pocket of my guitar case, something told me to look up.

*You've got to be kiddin' me.*

It was Blondie. Again.

Only, this time, she wasn't hiding behind anything with her blue eyes fixed on me in that unnerving way. She wasn't looking at me at all, actually. She was simply walking down the sidewalk along the row of houses that faced the lake, wearing her signature all-black clothes like the stalker I was convinced she was. She just didn't seem to be doing any stalking at the moment.

*Interesting.*

But it'd been nearly a month since that first time I'd laid eyes on her. Maybe I had her all wrong. I mean, who wore black clothes in broad daylight to stalk someone? Wasn't the point of that getup to blend into the night? Maybe she just liked to wear black.

And her being new in town would account for why she appeared more starstruck in my presence than any other Charlotte Oakian.

That name was official, now, by the way. Bailey started saying it months ago in an effort to get under Jackson's skin, I suspect, but once the mayor of Charlotte Oaks caught wind?

Well, shoot. It was on.

Jackson's face was pure gold when he brought home one of the flyers that'd gone up all over town declaring that from that day forward, residents would be known as *Charlotte Oakians*.

And as for Blondie? If she was nothing more than a newly-minted Charlotte Oakian who didn't quite know how to handle herself around a big-time celebrity? I guessed that made me a big-time jerk for thinking so poorly of her.

I rose from my seat on the dock, crossing my arms over my chest as I watched her continue on her walk without so much as a glance in my direction.

Did she live in this neighborhood? Maybe it was her own house she'd been standing in front of that day. Heck, maybe the poor thing had been trimming the hedges, not using them for cover while she spied on us. So what if she'd asked about me around town? Who wouldn't?

No doubt about it, I was a jerk.

And if I ever crossed paths with Blondie again, I'd admit to it, apologize, and give her a free concert ticket or something.

"Is that her?" Aubree asked, suddenly right beside me. "Her hair's that bright blonde you were talkin' about."

I nodded, sighing heavily. "Maybe I overreacted."

She frowned, glancing back and forth between the girl's retreating form and me. "What makes you think that?"

"I dunno. Maybe I was a little too quick to worry."

"It makes sense you'd be quick to worry since this town is pretty much your safe haven, right?"

I looked down at her, a smile pulling my lips up without me even having to think about it. "Right."

"Well, whether you're wrong about her or not, it's okay for you to want this town to keep feelin' safe. Everyone deserves peace and quiet when they need it."

It was so much like the thoughts I'd had about Aubree herself that it made me smile again, but my only response was a humming noise as I turned back toward Blondie just in time to see her disappear around a corner.

Guilt prickled at my skin. Had I been rude to her when she showed up at the house that night?

She could've been taking a walk just like this one, and then when she'd seen me in the window, she'd stopped to stare because... well, people tended to do that. After all, I was sitting at a table with *the* Laney Cole, so really, she could've been doubly starstruck, for all I knew.

And then I'd run out there like a brute and scared her silly. She'd looked so sad before I left to get her something to sign, and then she'd disappeared. And even though I'd been thinking she was a potentially catfight-starting super stalker, she was probably just a girl with hurt feelings.

I'd be handing out at least a concert ticket, if not two.

"Did you get some writin' done?" Aubree asked.

I turned to look at her as she stared down at my open guitar case on the dock. She had her finger wedged between the pages of her book, and her hair was piled on top of her head in that messy way I loved to see it.

She looked so darn casual and at peace out here, it made me wish we had days and days before the next tour stop instead of less than one.

"Sure did. In fact, I'll have you know I managed to write an entire song," I replied. "Well, it's a cover of an old song, but still. Should be a fun one to sing."

She grinned. "That's great. Good job."

"Thanks. But don't even think about askin' me to hear it 'cause you can't."

Aubree huffed out a laugh. "Is that so?"

"Sure is."

"Well, it's a good thing I wasn't gonna ask then."

I frowned. "You don't wanna hear it?"

"I do. But that doesn't mean I'd ask you to play it for me. I'll wait until I hear it on a stage or through my speakers, just like everybody else."

"Ah, but Miss Cole, you're *not* everybody else."

She rolled her ocean-blue eyes, then squared up with me with her hands on her hips. Well, one hand on her hips. The hand that still held her book with her page saved by her finger was bent at the wrist.

“If you wanna play me the song so bad, go ahead and do it,” she exclaimed.

“I don’t. I’m just hurt you don’t seem to wanna hear it.” I pushed out my lower lip, and she let out a frustrated chuckle. It was official. Messing with this woman was probably my favorite pastime in all the world. “All right, I’ll stop. But if you ever *do* wanna hear it, you just let me know.”

“Why? So you can tell me I can’t?”

I backed up a step and put my hand on my chest. “Ooph, the hurts just keep on comin’ with you today. You really think I have the power to deny you anythin’? That’s just plain mean.”

This time, she didn’t chuckle—unfortunately for her book. Because when that pocket-sized paperback flew right out of her hand as she jerked it in the air with an exasperated groan, I swore I could hear it screaming in fear before it plunked into the water with a delicate splash.

Aubree’s mouth hung open as she stared at the spot in the lake that had swallowed her latest read.

I stared at her.

I couldn’t look away, in fact. Doing so would mean using muscles that were currently vibrating with the force I was using not to keel over in a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

But then her eyes started to well up with tears, and all thoughts of laughing sunk right out of me and landed at the bottom of the lake with her book.

I stepped forward, glad the sight of one lone tear slipping down her cheek hadn’t made me keel over for a different reason.

Just like the first time I’d ever seen this woman, the sight of her crying never failed to bring me nearly to my knees.

Wait, nearly? That wasn’t right.

It actually *had* brought me to my knees under that stage and then again at the airport a month ago. And if she’d been



sitting and not standing at this moment? It would've happened all over again.

“Hey, now,” I said, reaching up and using my thumb to brush away that tear and the streak it'd left in its wake. “No use cryin' over a swimmin' book. They usually print more than one of them things, don't they? Gimme the name of it, and I'll have a replacement here within the hour.”

She looked down. “Hush.”

“You don't think I will? Don't make me call Paisley over here so she can prove it to you.”

That got her attention. She immediately met my gaze and shook her head. “No, don't bug Paisley. She's not workin' for once.”

“It's probably slowly killin' her on the inside. Bet she'd be happy to do it.”

Aubree shook her head and sighed. “It's not the book. I don't need another one. It wasn't even that good.”

“Wait, what? Why in the world would you cry over it if it wasn't that good?”

“I wasn't cryin' over the book, Riley. I was cryin' over... Ugh, never mind. It's stupid.”

Her words had my back straightening like someone had poked me in the spine with a cattle prod, and this time, when I lifted my hand toward her face, I used it to cup her chin and force her to look up at me.

“Hey—you don't get to talk about my Aubree like that. She ain't stupid, and neither are any of the thoughts that go through that pretty little head of hers.”

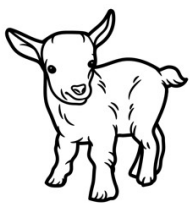
She rewarded me with a whisper of a laugh, but since she couldn't get her chin free from my grasp, she closed her eyes to block me out instead. “What is with you and always bein' there to make me feel better when I'm upset?”

As much as I wanted to drop her chin and wrap my arms around her, I knew her words weren't an invitation for that. Instead, I settled for dropping her chin so I could give her

shoulder a quick squeeze. “I don’t know the answer to that, but the good news is, if I’m always there to make you feel better when you’re upset, that means you’ve only been upset a few times in your whole life. I’d say that’s a win, wouldn’t you?”

Her eyes flew back to mine, and I could see the life coming back to them. Whatever it was that was upsetting her that she thought was too stupid to say didn’t need to be said if she didn’t want to. As long as she quit fretting about it, that was a-okay with me.

For now.



“Hey, y’all all right over here?” Jackson asked as he came up behind us on the dock.

I turned to face him and gave him a short nod. “Oh, ya know, just wonderin’ how cold that water is and if it’s worth jumpin’ in to save Aubree’s book. I accidentally kicked it overboard.”

I had no idea why I lied and acted like Aubree herself hadn’t thrown the dang book into the water, but it came out on instinct, and it was too late to take it back because Jackson was already laughing.

“Unless it’s waterproof, I’d say it’s a lost cause, man.” He shook his head at me and then looked at the sky. “Anyway, we’re takin’ off. Phoebe has school in the mornin’, and we promised we’d let her cook dinner all by herself.”

Despite the tears from moments ago, Aubree’s grin was bright and wide at Jackson’s words. “Y’all better hurry home, then. Last time she made dinner at our house, she refused our help with anythin’ that wouldn’t burn her, and I’m pretty sure we didn’t eat until around midnight.”

“Exactly,” Jackson said with a glance over her shoulder. “And can I just say I had no idea that bouncy, little thing could do anythin’ as slow as she cooks? That kid morphs into a sloth the second she puts an apron on.”

“Ah, she’s just tryin’ to do a good job,” I said. Then I looked down at Aubree and shot her a half-smile. “A little patience never hurt anyone, right?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, and my chest tightened, knowing she was quick as a whip and hadn't missed that beat.

"I'm takin' off too," Paisley called, already backing toward the street with her eyes on her tablet. "No rest for the weary."

"Only restin' makes you weary, ma'am," I called, not bothering to wave since she wouldn't see it anyway.

But I did, however, wave to Bailey as she chased after Phoebe.

That girl might be a sloth once she put on her apron, but apparently, she was so eager to get home and get cooking that she forgot all about saying goodbye before she half-danced, half-sprinted away.

"See y'all back at the house later?" Travis asked as he picked up the picnic basket we'd used for our lunch today and ambled onto the dock. "I'm leavin' again tomorrow, so my momma's makin' fried chicken. I think she thinks if she makes all my favorite foods and folds my underwear in just the right way, I'll get out of the Marines and move home."

"Oh, but won't you? I know you love it when she folds your tighy-whities in just the right way," Jackson teased, punching his brother in the arm and then ducking when Travis swung back.

"I don't wear tighy-whities," Travis gritted out.

Jackson smirked. "No one cares what kinda undies you wear. I'm just glad you bein' home means they're finally gettin' clean, thanks to Momma."

Travis lunged, and again Jackson dodged him. I wondered if they'd scuffle right into the chilly water. Hey, maybe they could grab Aubree's book while they were down there.

But no. Jackson just narrowly escaped another attempt of Travis's before waving to us and jogging after his wife and kid, and Travis looked like he was about to flip him the bird before he thought better of it.

As the stories went, the four Wilson brothers were the kind of brothers I'd always wished for when I sat alone under my

uncle's roof without my parents or even the horses to keep me company. They were the brothers I'd watch on TV, and even now, as a man in my early thirties, seeing them act that way still tugged at some lonely part of me.

"So, supper?" Travis asked as he turned back to us.

"Wouldn't miss it," I replied automatically.

Then I looked down at Aubree and bumped her shoulder with my elbow. She met my gaze, and I didn't want to ask her out loud if she'd be okay to face the family tonight after whatever she'd been so upset about, but I hoped she could read the question in my eyes.

Thankfully, she nodded. "Yeah, we'll be there."

"Good. See ya." He started to walk away, then turned back, angling his chin at me so I'd come closer. When I reached his side, he looped an arm around my shoulders, leading me far enough away from Aubree so she wouldn't hear us. Then he gave me a quick pat before releasing me. "You know that thing my oldest and grumpiest brother told you the night the of Jackson's housewarmin' party?"

I had a feeling I knew which *thing* he meant, despite how vague he was being, so I gave him a wary nod.

"Forget all about that. Jackson, Adam, and I had a little talk with him about that, and we set him straight. We had to spend the rest of the afternoon repairin' Momma's porch railin', but it was worth it. Green light, buddy."

I opened my mouth to thank him, but the words wouldn't come out. I'd just been wishing I'd had brothers like these, and now here he was, making me feel like I already did.

I cleared my throat, and since Travis wasn't the kind of guy who made a habit out of talking about his feelings, he gave me a light punch on the arm and walked away without another word.

When I returned to the dock, Aubree and I stood in silence until Travis disappeared around a corner, then I turned to face her head-on. "Guess it's just us two, now."

“Guess it is.”

“You gonna tell me why you were cryin’?” I asked, sighing when she recoiled from the idea. “All right, how ’bout an easier question? If that whole thing about time healin’ all wounds is true, anyway.”

“Okay.”

“What were you cryin’ about when we met?”

Her eyes widened, and then she looked away and sighed, shaking her head. “Tell me the truth—how snotty was I?”

“Snotty? You weren’t snotty, you were sweet as a peach. A super sad peach, but not snotty at all.”

She chuckled. “Not that kinda snotty. *Literally* snotty. From my nose. I was a mess.”

“You were a snot-free, adorable mess. I swear.”

Her face showed me she wasn’t sure if she believed me, but then she shrugged. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good. Now, what had you cryin’?”

“I’d just gotten dumped,” she said so quietly I could barely hear her. “And also found out he’d cheated on me.”

Rage rippled through me, and I nearly cursed out loud. “You’re kiddin’ me, right?”

“Nope.”

“His loss. Branson’s too, and every other guy who’s ever done you wrong. But hopefully... all their losses are leadin’ up my gain.”

She bit her bottom lip, and I couldn’t stop my hand from raising to cup her cheek. I used my thumb to tug it free, then traced the swell of it.

She stayed stock-still and let me enjoy the silky feel of her mouth under my thumb, and I knew I had to kiss her.

Why now?

I wasn’t sure.

Maybe it was the fact that we were alone in the place where I'd just finished writing a great song about a great girl who'd probably give me a heck of a hard time as soon as she heard it.

Maybe it was because our feelings were out in the open now, and after years of that not being the case, some baser part of me couldn't hold it in any longer.

It *wasn't* because I'd just gotten the green light from her honorary brothers, though. It helped, sure, but I'd have done it either way.

I was all in, and my resolve to finally make this woman mine was stronger than ever.

"Riley," she whispered, her breath tickling my thumb as I continued to gently trail it over her bottom lip. "How are you so sure of yourself all the time?"

"I'm not sure of myself, Aubree. That ain't what this is."

Our mouths were a breath apart now, but I didn't even remember leaning down to close that distance. It'd been like a gravitational pull that was so smooth and subtle that I hadn't realized it was happening.

"Then what is it?"

"I'm not sure of myself. I'm sure of this. I'm sure of *us*."

I held her gaze, then tipped her head back and wrapped my other arm behind her back. Moving slowly enough that she had plenty of time to move away if she wanted to, I leaned in, brushing my lips over hers.

She didn't pull back, but her lips hardly moved beneath mine. Whether it was shock or because she didn't want me to kiss her, I didn't know, but her stillness had me leaning back and searching her gaze.

And then, before I could say a word—before I could ask if she was okay or if I should let her go—she shot up to her toes and locked her lips onto mine with such a force that it knocked me back a step.



But I didn't let us fall. I steadied us just in time, and her arms wound around my waist, pulling me closer and hanging on for dear life.

In a flash, both of my hands cupped her face, and I took control of the kiss I'd spent six solid years looking forward to. And it was everything I'd dreamed it would be. It was everything I'd written songs about with her mind—little did she know—and as I broke the kiss only so I could look into her eyes and make sure she was still there, she was the one who tipped forward and claimed my mouth again.

*Am I dreaming? Is this real?*

It had to be real, because there was no way her soft curves pressed against my long lines were a figment of my imagination. It felt too good. Too right.

As I angled my head to deepen the kiss, Aubree's lips were still as soft and plush as they'd been before, but now they were dancing with mine. Greedy and eager and with a flavor so sweet I almost groaned.

But something told me that if I did, it'd spook her. And the last thing I wanted was to do anything that would cause her to back away now that I finally had the taste of her on my lips.

Unfortunately for me, the sound that ripped Aubree from my embrace wasn't the low groan of pleasure I'd kept a tight lid on.

It was a *bleat*.

"What?" she exclaimed as she tore her lips from mine and looked down. "Gertie?"

Now, I did groan.

Because *seriously?* Of all the times for this too-all-knowing-for-my-comfort goat to show up where she didn't belong, it had to be *now?*

"What are you doin' out here?" Aubree asked as she dropped into a crouch—as if the pygmy goat would actually part her furry lips and give her an answer in English.

I looked at the sky and brought my hands to my hips. *Oh, isn't it obvious? She's here to ruin my day like a big fat raincloud drownin' out a Fourth of July parade.*

“We should get her back,” Aubree said to me, and I looked down to find her not meeting my gaze as she picked up the goat. “I don’t know if anyone knows she got out, but I don’t want them to worry.”

I nodded, but I didn’t tell her I had a sneaking suspicion someone had sent her out here to hunt us down. Maybe they’d even given her a whiff of our clothes so she could catch our scent like the crafty little bloodhound she looked like at the moment.

And let the record show—the look in her beady goat eyes when they fixed on me all but confirmed that suspicion. She looked pleased as all get out and a mighty bit smug, too.

I glared back at her, and not even kidding, she chomped the air between us.

“Um, you ready?” Aubree asked, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot as I continued my hostile staredown with Gertie the Gonna-Get-Her-Butt-Kicked Goat.

“Ready to kiss you again the next chance I get?” I fired back with a grin that was all teeth. “Without the interruptin’ goat, of course. Yeah, I sure am.”

Her jaw dropped, and she shook her head. “No, um. Actually, it’s a good thing Gertie showed up when she did. We got carried away, but you know why it’s not a good idea for this to happen.”

My heart sank. “Right. The list.”

Her eye twitched, but she nodded.

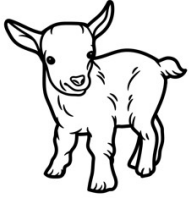
Turning on my heel so she couldn’t see my scowl, I stalked over to my still-open guitar case on the edge of the dock and closed it, flicking down the gold latches along the edges a lot harder than necessary.

When I joined her again, she was biting that dang lip.

“Tell you what,” I started, reaching out and using my thumb to tug it free again. “You quit doin’ that lip thing that makes me wanna kiss you, and I’ll stop tryin’ to convince you to toss that list of yours so I can kiss you whether you’re bitin’ your lip or not.”

She laughed, but it came out strangled, like she hadn’t wanted to do it. “Maybe if you quit makin’ me so nervous all the time, I wouldn’t bite my lip so much.”

“Well, looks like we’re at an impasse.” I stepped around her, heading back toward the road. Then, because I knew it would make her nervous, I tossed over my shoulder, “Buckle up, then, darlin’. ’Cause I’m just gettin’ started.”



# **aubree**

*Okay, but why does he have to shake his dang hips like that? Doesn't he know it's not fair to stand up there makin' girls feel like it's 100 degrees in the shade?*

A stagehand gave me a knowing look as he crossed in front of me, and I winced, warmth shooting into my cheeks.

Oh, well. My cheeks were probably already red from Riley's egg-frying hotness on the stage in front of me, so what was a little more color in them?

That stagehand hadn't looked at me like that because I'd said any of that stuff out loud, right? Hopefully, I'd just thought it, and my fire-engine-red face had given me away.

Wouldn't be the first time.

I'd thought about that kiss on the dock all through supper last night.

I'd thought about his strong arms bracketing my body as he held my face in a way that was both tender and fierce at the same time.

I'd thought about that first, testing kiss he'd given me that had sent a bolt of lightning through my very soul.

My lips and cheeks and chest had burned with the memories, and it was so bad that at one point, my momma had pulled me into the kitchen to stick a thermometer under my tongue because she was convinced I had a fever.

*Bless her heart.*

And bless Riley's too. Momma had told him she was worried I was coming down with something due to my flushed face, and his concern was oh-so-kind of him as he'd stepped into the kitchen and asked if there was anything he could get me to help with "whatever was ailin' me."

*Ailin' me!*

I wanted to smack that barely-concealed amusement right off his big, twitchy lips. But then thinking about smacking his lips had me thinking about lip-smackingly delicious kisses, and I was blushing all over again.

Covering my face with my hands, I groaned into my palms and told myself to snap out of it and focus on his seventh USO concert.

Was I a coward for pushing Riley away after quite possibly the best kiss of my life? Yes.

Though, technically, I didn't push him away. Gertie snapped us back to reality, and then I'd come to my senses after losing myself in his light blue eyes.

Eyes that, up close, had noticeable flecks of gray and denim blue mixed in with the kind of blue that spoke of sunny skies and ice cream and...

*See?* That is exactly what I meant when I said I'd lost myself.

I wasn't the kind of person who likened eye color to sunny skies and ice cream. If a guy had brown eyes? They were brown. Big deal.

Branson's eyes were poop brown, but I'd be lying if I said I'd thought of them that way until this very moment while trying to come up with something to liken them to. Before this? I would've said they were plain ol' brown. In those moments when he was about to kiss me? They'd just been eyes.

Not skies, not ice cream.

Brown. Eyes.

And now, as I stood in the wings while Riley sang to a crowd full of active duty service members and veterans in Beaufort, South Carolina, all I could do was stare at the giant closeup of his face on the big screen behind him.

You could tell his eyes were light blue in a very basic way, but the details I'd seen right before we kissed? Not a single cowboy-hat-and-boots-wearing person in front of him knew those details like I did.

And like the coward I really wished I wasn't, after Gertie's interruption—one I still couldn't decide was well-timed or horribly-timed—I'd told him we couldn't do it again.

Because we *couldn't* do it again, because what if it blew up in our faces?

Keeping things professional was the smart thing to do—despite feeling warmer, safer, and happier than ever before during those brief moments in Riley's arms.

As a kid, I never thought I had a choice about being on my own, so I became content with it. And then I was used to it, and it was only every so often a twinge of loneliness would sneak up on me.

But while Riley had held me against him yesterday and framed my face with those beautiful, callused hands... that loneliness became a gaping hole in my chest, and each stroke of his lips was an expertly placed stitch, closing it up with tender loving care.

The man kissed like he sang—warmly, deeply, and with more swagger than should be legal.

His lips were just like his voice, too, whether speaking or singing. Buttery smooth and highly addictive.

And just like how each word he wrote in his songs was designed for maximum impact, each breath he'd taken against my lips was designed to steal mine.

After the longest five-minute walk home of my life, when we'd returned from the lake and left Gertie with my bouncing-off-the-walls-with-worry mother, Riley had gone next door to the Wilson house without even coming inside. I'd see him

soon for supper, of course, but until then? He'd seemed all-too-eager to get far, far away.

At first, I'd worried he was upset, but then he'd winked when he left me standing on the porch. His lips had been turned up into a wicked half-grin that spoke of mischief, causing his words from earlier about him just getting started to spring loudly into my mind.

Then, after supper, as I sat alone in the living room with a book that was about a hundred times better than the one I'd dropped in the lake, I'd been highly annoyed to find myself continuously needing to read the same paragraph over and over again because I couldn't stop thinking about that dang kiss.

And finally, as if summoned from her room by my restless soul like a pygmy *ghost* who sensed turmoil in her human roomies, Gertie had trounced into the room and made herself at home in my lap.

Was it an apology for her earlier interruption or solidarity since she knew she'd done me a favor?

Maybe both.

Okay, it was probably neither because she was a goat, not an all-sensing ghost or an all-knowing human. *Shrug.*

I was pulled from my memories when a song started up that sounded both nostalgically familiar and totally new.

Frowning, I leaned toward Paisley, who'd been flitting back and forth between the wings and backstage, taking care of business. "What song is this?"

She chuckled. "It's a new one he's testing out."

"Is it—"

"A country version of 'Come Fly with Me?'" she finished for me with a wry smile. "Sure is."

My jaw dropped. I turned back to look at Riley just as he angled his body toward my side of the wings, strumming his guitar and singing into the microphone with a smirk on his just-as-soft-as-I'd-always-imagined lips.



And the lyrics to this country version of the famous Frank Sinatra song?

Well, instead of mentioning exotic booze at a bar in far Bombay, he spoke of dreaming of a sky so blue it would take our breath away.

Instead of crooning about llamas in Peru, he'd changed the words to going home and riding off into the sunset, where *"we'll stop, and I'll play a song for you."*

And instead of Acapulco Bay being mentioned as a honeymoon spot, he'd changed the verse to something that had my heart trying to claw its way out of my chest.

*"Baby, get up there, take that chair, and fly us wherever you may. Do what you gotta do, 'cause I'd fly with you. Come on, let's fly away."*

"He did not just say that," I breathed, and this time I was sure I'd said it out loud because Paisley quirked a brow at me.

"Say what?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

I forced myself to ignore those words that were very clearly meant for my ears and instead gave the man some serious credit.

He'd taken a song I never imagined would sound good in a bluesy, country style and paired it with his twangy accent and downhome lyrics, and the result managed to pay homage to the original songwriter while also feeling like an original.

Like it was made for this country-loving audience to begin with, and that audience was eating out of the palm of his hand.

"Is this even legal?" I asked Paisley, unable to look away from the man who'd just finished his version of the chorus, which mentioned flying over the ocean with a woman who had eyes just as blue, *dang him*.

Guess I wasn't the only one assigning metaphors to eye colors these days.

Then again, Riley was no stranger to doing that kinda thing. How many songs did he have that mentioned eye or hair color in a poetic way? Plenty, that was how many. Everything from cornsilk hair to eyes the color of honey.

Paisley good-naturedly scoffed at my question. “Is it *legal*? What do you think I am, an amateur?”

“But you said he just wrote it.”

“He did. Yesterday.”

“No way. And the band already learned it?”

She shrugged. “Well enough for now, anyway. But it’ll improve with practice.”

“But how did you have time to get permission for him to sing it or whatever? Isn’t it a copyright violation or somethin’?”

I didn’t know a ton about the subject, but I did know Laney had to jump through about a dozen hoops when she wanted to sing a cover of “Landslide” one year.

Paisley blinked slowly at me, one side of her dark brown bob hanging straight down as she tilted her head. “Have you met me?”

I narrowed my eyes at the manager, who apparently wore a spandex superhero costume under her perfectly tailored pantsuits, then crossed my arms over my chest with a huff and faced the stage again.

Riley finished the last line of his song and grinned at the thunderously applauding crowd. And then a timer started in my head, knowing exactly what would happen next.

He lifted his impressively sculpted arm in a show of thanks to the crowd, and then *three, two, one...*

He turned my way and winked.

*Yep.* I could predict his winks now. I could even parse out the subtle differences in their meanings.

First, there were your average, lighthearted, flirty winks that he gave to every woman, no matter her age or marital

status.

Then there was the wink he'd sent my way after we'd seen the girl in the bushes. I could tell it was meant to reassure me. It was a promise that the often goofy and sometimes startlingly protective man beside me would just as soon smash someone upside the head with his guitar than let anything happen to me.

And finally, worst of all, there were the winks like the one I'd just seen. It was one of his just-for-me winks that, while still flirty, were also brimming with heat.

Those winks reminded me of the shots they gave out at my commanding officer's retirement party when I was in the Air Force. It was called the Flaming B52, made of coffee liqueur, Irish Cream, and Gran Marnier in equal parts—topped with actual fire.

That was exactly how those winks of his made me feel. Warm from the inside out, energized, and... Well, topped with fire.

And you'd think my being able to predict—and then read—those winks so clearly would make them less special or less swoon-worthy, but no. My ability to hear unspoken words based on the way this man winked only served to make me fall even harder for him.

“How many more songs does he have in his set today?” I asked Paisley as the crowd went wild over the opening notes of one of his most popular hits.

“This one, then the encore. Why?”

“I'm gonna head back to the limo and read my book.”

I almost added that I had a headache and needed to escape the noise, but that would be a lie, and I didn't feel the need to justify my escape. Not with Paisley. I had a feeling she'd fully support my need to escape Riley at that moment.

It might not have been obvious to the crowd that his new song was for me, but she knew it, and I knew it. And the way she squeezed my arm before simply nodding in reply told me she also knew that anything romantic between Riley and me would be a bad idea.

I wasn't sure which item on my list would be the reason she felt that way, but *shoot*, did it matter?

At some point, shouldn't I just accept that I had a list as long as my arm of reasons it wouldn't be smart to get mixed up with Riley, and maybe that meant the individual reasons didn't need to hold up on their own?

Especially not when the only thing in the pros column was the unexplainable connection we shared. Dakota was the one who'd likened our story to a romance novel, and right now, it felt a lot like those cheesy insta-love ones where the reader has no idea why the couple suddenly loves each other out of the blue.

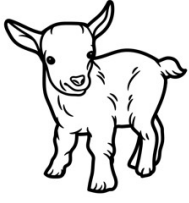
I backed up a step, taking one last look at the crowd. Bright blonde hair caught my eye, and I blinked a few times as if she'd disappear if I stared long enough.

Sure, I still hadn't gotten a good enough look at Riley's stalker fan to know if the girl in the third row was the same one he was worried about, but unease trickled down my spine.

*No*. It can't be the same girl. What were the odds she'd be obsessive enough to follow him to a different state to watch his concert? Talk about things that were made for the plots of books.

The concern in his eyes when he'd seen her that day, paired with the town still being in a tizzy over her a month later, must've simply put me on edge.

Banishing my paranoia as much as I could, I glanced at Riley before turning for the stairs. Unfortunately, I didn't miss the slight furrow in his brow before I did.



# aubree

Shortly after we'd reached our flying altitude on the way home from the concert—no more hotel stays, thank goodness, I took a deep breath and stepped into the main cabin from the galley.

Normally, I hustled in there the second it was safe to do so, eager to see if my only two passengers needed anything. But not this time. Not after the way the limo ride from the venue to the tarmac had overflowed with a mix of awkward silence and, oddly, a near-stifling amount of sexual tension.

I mean, truly, that kiss had been completely PG-ish. And yet, if I was within arm's reach of Riley, I could still feel the press of his lips on mine, his rough palms against my cheeks, and his back muscles flexing beneath his flannel while I held him close.

How was that even possible? It was just a kiss. In broad daylight. And there was a goat!

"There she is," he said, glancing up from his notebook when I entered the cabin.

I flicked my gaze around the lavish space, then frowned. "Where's Pais?"

"In the bedroom."

I gasped. "In the what?"

"The bedroom."

"This plane has a bedroom?"

He chuckled, lifting his leg to cross his booted ankle over his other knee. "Of course it does. What would a famous

musician's private jet be without a bedroom?"

I scowled at the images that statement conjured up in my mind, and Riley slapped his bent knee as he burst out laughing.

This, obviously, only deepened my scowl.

"Darlin', ain't no woman has ever reached the mile-high club on this jet, rest assured. But hey, I hear they're takin' new members if you're ever interested in joinin' up."

I stabbed the air between us with my finger. "That is *not* funny."

He held up his finger and thumb about a half-inch apart. "It's a little funny."

"No, it isn't." When he only laughed again, I rolled my shoulders and decided a subject change was in order. "What's she doin' in there anyway? Paisley doesn't nap, and it's way too early for her to be in bed."

"I'm not even sure she sleeps."

"Exactly. Besides, the flight isn't that long."

"She's on a personal call," he said quietly, scrubbing a hand over his jaw.

The more time I spent around him, the more I seemed to know about him without him needing to spell it out. And it was more than just the meaning behind his buffet of winks. And right now, at the mention of Paisley's mysterious personal call, Riley's eyes had darkened almost two full shades.

Whatever was going on with his manager appeared to both anger and worry Riley, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him what was going on.

But I didn't. It wasn't my business, and I was a flight attendant, not the third leg of their Riley Conrad tripod of a team. Even though it certainly felt that way over the course of the last seven shows we'd flown around the Southeast to get to.

He hadn't let me separate from the two of them when we hit the ground like I assumed Jordan used to do, and as much as my desire to keep clear boundaries told me I should insist on doing whatever she did while not in the air, I couldn't.

Turned out, my desire to be in his orbit outweighed the rest, try as I might to fight it.

"So, what'd you think of the new song?" he asked. His tone was so light it was almost like he was asking me about the weather.

I tilted my head. He wanted to play?

Well, it was his lucky day because I was just enough at the end of my wits to play without overthinking it for once.

"You mean the one about the tractor that wouldn't start?"

He looked at the ceiling.

"I thought it was funny," I went on. "You did a good job with the storytellin' and all. But did you ever wonder if the big date the guy was lookin' forward to despite his rough day just wasn't meant to be, and all those calamities were signs of it?"

Amusement danced in his eyes as he propped his chin on his knuckles and stared up at me. "Not *that* song. The Sinatra cover."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Neither did you."

*Cue the stare-off.*

To my utter shock and delight, Riley broke first with a heavy sigh. But I didn't clap my hands with glee on the outside because Not Awkward Aubree had a firm grip on the wheel at the moment. *You go, girl.*

"Fine," he allowed. "No, I don't think all the stuff that went wrong were signs the date wasn't meant to be. He made it to her front door in the end, remember?"

"Yeah, but he was late."

"So?"



“Those flowers he bought her were a mess after flyin’ off the dash and into the street thanks to him havin’ his window down.”

“Again, so?”

“Not to mention the mud he stepped in when he got out of his truck or the sling on his sprained wrist. Worst day ever. Poor guy. How good of a date could it have been?”

“I like to think it was the first of many excellent dates, and they lived happily ever after like they were meant to.”

“How do you figure?”

Riley returned his boot to the floor and stood.

As he approached, Awkward Aubree was shouting from the rear that we needed to back the heck up before he closed the distance.

But of course, that wasn’t what happened, and suddenly a very intensely-staring Riley Conrad was close enough for our chests to brush when we breathed.

“Because, just like the chorus said, that girl knew nothin’ on this earth would keep him from her. Come hell or high water, he’d be there. He might show up late. He might be bruised and battered from the fight. But at the end of the day, she’d know he would never let her down. If that don’t say happily ever after, I don’t know what does.”

Both versions of myself let out a very loud and dramatically long groan—but not out loud, of course.

Just in case there would be an echo, and it’d be obvious I was like two people rolled into one at the moment. That would be bad because I couldn’t let Riley find out about the internal battle between the woman I’ve always been and this brave newbie trying to push her way out. Surely, that would raise his eyebrows. And probably not in a good way.

*But dang him.* He had me, and he knew it.

“Your turn to answer my question.”

I shook my head to clear it. “What question?”

He leaned down until I felt his breath on my ear. “Did you like my *other* new song?”

Taking a deep breath as he pulled back—which, as it turned out, was a terrible idea because *man* he smelled good—I narrowed my eyes at him as he pulled back to meet my gaze.

“Riley, it was freaking amazing, and you know it,” I huffed.

Then, because I was weak and he smelled delicious enough to make me wanna bottle him up and turn him into a room spray, body lotion, and maybe even a fizzy Riley-shaped bath bomb, I turned on my heel and stomped back into the galley.

A moment later, as I leaned my forehead against a cabinet so I could replace that yummy smell with the disinfectant still lingering on the sand-colored surface, I heard the tell-tale rustle of him nestling into his plush leather chair.

Probably looking a lot like the cat that caught the canary, too.

“Hey, get me some peanuts when you get a chance, will ya?” he called, and I grinned when I heard the teasing laughter in his tone.

Still ready to play—*Who am I?*—I reached into the basket on the counter and angled my body just enough to send a packet of peanuts flying in his direction.

I heard a satisfying *smack*, and I winced, not sure if it’d be hilarious or mortifying for the snack to have hit him squarely in his smug face.

“Oh, *very* professional,” he drawled. “Now come apologize to Paisley for beanin’ her with those nuts.”

I gasped, shooting into the doorway of the main cabin with my ears, neck, and cheeks absolutely flaming with embarrassment.

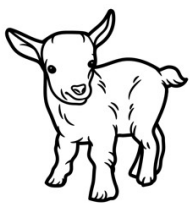
But when it was only Riley in the main cabin, tossing a peanut into the air and catching it with his mouth, I let out the breath I’d been holding.

He grinned as he chewed. “Gotcha.”

As I turned away from him and back out of sight, his laughter floated through me and sunk deep into my bones.

Sure, playing with Riley had its moments. And yes, it made me feel brave and alive and like a whole new woman.

But one thing was for sure: Riley Conrad didn't play fair.



I couldn't focus. Usually, I did my best writing on my jet, but not today. Our last set of USO shows was coming up this weekend, so today was finally the day I was taking Aubree somewhere no one else in my current life had ever been.

Somewhere no one but Paisley knew about, in fact.

And I'd be sharing things with her that had my stomach tied in a hot mess of intricate knots, and even though she was part of the problem, I knew seeing her was the only thing that would provide some relief.

Unfortunately, the stubborn woman still refused to hang out with me in the main cabin of this plane and was currently reading a book in the galley while I sat here scribbling terrible lyrics in my notebook.

"Hey, Aubree, can you come out here for a sec?" I hollered in the general direction of the galley.

Though she tried her hardest to get out of coming with me on our mystery adventure today, she'd quickly lost the battle. Gracefully, of course, but quickly, nonetheless.

I could feel the distance between us closing inch by inch over the last six weeks or so, and I wasn't about to let up until there was nothing left.

She might've avoided me like the plague for the rest of the short flight to Charlotte Oaks after we'd talked about my song, and we might've had supper at our separate houses that shared one big yard every night since, but that was all the space I was willing to let her have just yet.

It was clear now that Aubree's biggest enemy was herself.

When she wanted something and didn't go after it? When she'd had her heart broken in past relationships and felt helpless? It wasn't really whatever she told herself was the problem. It was her own fear. It was whatever made her lack the confidence in herself to take big leaps without worrying about the landing.

And little by little, I could *feel* that fear shifting inside her, ready to slink back to the dark cave it crawled out of. I could feel her growing bolder and freer with every passing day, and whether my presence in her life brought it about or not, I knew it was a sunrise of a transition that I was dying to watch.

Speaking of sunrises, that was what it felt like when she stepped into the main cabin of the jet with her petite body wrapped up like a present in her new uniform.

Her Charlotte Oaks clothes were still my favorite, but *wow*. If I'd known she'd be such a welcome sight in that uniform on this jet, I'd have made her an offer she couldn't refuse a long time ago.

Well, maybe not in the same creepy way I'd made it sound with *The Godfather* reference, but surely the pay increase would've been at least a little enticing a few years ago, right? Especially since she was still a brand new flight attendant back then.

"Need somethin'?" she asked, coming to a stop in front of me and clasping her delicate hands in front of her.

Delicate hands that had felt beautifully strong and dangerously needy as she ran them over my back that day at the lake.

But I probably shouldn't flash back to that moment for the millionth time if I wanted my next words to come out like I still had any air in my lungs.

"I do need somethin', actually," I said, tipping my chin at the empty seat next to me. "I need you to quit bein' so stubborn about the jump seat and sit out here by me. It's just

us two on this flight, and before we get where we're goin', we need to talk."

Her eyes widened, and even though I'd braced for an argument, she nodded and slid carefully into the chair.

I relaxed and gave her a grateful nod. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She paused, fidgeting a little before squaring her shoulders and perching on the edge of the seat so she could look at me. "What did you wanna talk about?"

"I have a suggestion."

She eyed me skeptically. "What's that?"

"How 'bout you let me worry about keepin' my spot as an honorary family member with the Coles and Wilsons? I've given it a lot of thought, and as much as it warms my heart that you care about me gettin' tossed out on my rear or punched by one of your honorary brothers if I hurt you, it really isn't necessary."

"Maybe it is since you clearly don't care enough about it," she shot back with a small smile and a lift of her chin.

"I care. You *know* I care 'cause you know me. But I'm not worried about it 'cause nothin' is gonna happen to make any of that come to pass."

"You can't know that," she said in a low tone. "And I'd feel terrible if I caused you to lose the only family you've got."

I reached out and took her hand, giving it a squeeze. "And I'd feel worse if I did somethin' that caused me to lose *you*, even if it also led to me losin' them."

Her face morphed into something like when a woman saw that old Sarah McLaughlin commercial with all those sad puppies, and I knew we were getting somewhere.

But then she shook her head and looked determined to fight me yet again. "It's not just the family."

I threw myself dramatically backward into my chair and covered my eyes with my forearm. "Ah, man, so close and yet

so far.”

Her soft giggle was a balm to my soul, and I peeked out from under my arm in time to see her trying to fight a smile so she could scowl instead. It made her look about five years old instead of around thirty, and I didn’t even try to fight my own smile.

I sat up, taking that hand again and lacing her fingers with mine. “All right, darlin’, let’s hear it. You stick a new item on the Stay Away from Riley Even Though his Kisses are the Best List, or are we playin’ one of the oldies this time?”

She stuck out her tongue. “You’re full of yourself, you know that, *darlin’*?”

I hung my head at her reference to my slip-up. How many times had I done that since she’d asked me not to? Hopefully not too many. “Well, I’m full of ways to get under your skin, if that’s what you mean.”

“It’s not.”

I shrugged.

“And that’s not what I call my list, by the way.”

Now *that* had me curious. “What do you call it then? Reasons Not to Fall for Riley Conrad? Reasons Riley Conrad Can’t Fall for Me?”

“Cons. It’s a cons list. And do you always talk about yourself in the third person with your full name like that?”

“Plenty of other people do, so if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.” I took a deep breath because this back-and-forth had me buzzing like a bee, and all I could think about was using the hand I still held to tug this layered cake of a woman right into my lap. “Cons list, huh? What about the pros? I think I’d like to hear a few of them—besides how great we are at kissin’. I already know that’s on there.”

She blushed and looked heavenward. “I don’t have a pros list.”

I tsked. “That’s probably a good thing, honestly.”



“Why’s that?”

“Well, ya see, I’m partial to these pretty little hands of yours,” I said, bringing the one still holding mine to my lips so I could kiss the back. “I’d hate to see one of ’em fall off ’cause of how many things you’d have to write on the pros side.”

This time, it was Aubree’s turn to fall backward with a dramatic groan. Only, she didn’t get far, thanks to the hold I had on her hand.

She did, however, manage to curse my name without losing the smile on her face, so all in all, I’d say this whole talk was a big win.

“Can I go into the galley to get away from you and your ridiculous commentary for a bit, please?”

“Will you come back?”

“Sure.”

I let go of her hand, and she hopped to her heeled feet, then smoothed her skirt and took off like a bat out of you-know-where.

“Hey,” I called after she disappeared.

Aubree poked her head into the open doorway with a lifted brow. “Yes?”

“I feel like playin’ catch. Got any pretzels you could lob my way?”

When she disappeared again, I thought I was out of luck. I thought I might have to sit here and starve since she’d very plainly asked for space, and I wasn’t about to make her think I wouldn’t respect that.

In small doses, at least. Avoiding this mystery trip was out of the question, but taking a minute to collect herself? We all needed that from time to time.

Something shiny and red brought me out of my thoughts as it arced through the air, and I grinned as I snatched it with one hand right before it hit me in the chest.

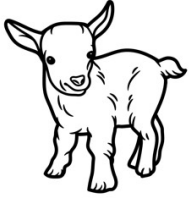
“Thank you!” I called, sitting deeper in my chair and pulling open the bag.

“You’re welcome,” she replied from the doorway, shocking the heck out of me by coming back into the cabin with a book in one hand and a pretzel bag of her own in the other.

Then, without a word, she kicked off her heels and folded herself into the chair beside mine with ladylike ease.

And because I wasn’t a darn fool, I popped a pretzel in my mouth and went back to the song I’d been writing before I’d called her in here, and she did the same as she opened her book.

As nothing but companionable silence filled the now-even-shorter distance between us, I took the first full breath I’d taken since this jet left the ground.



“Want some coffee?” Aubree asked, glancing up from her book.

We’d been sitting together for about thirty minutes, her reading and me writing. This was the first she’d spoken since she sat down, and it had something twinging in my chest that the first words she chose were to offer to get me something to drink.

I wasn’t sure why it rubbed me the wrong way. It was her job, after all. And she was darn good at it even though I kept making her do things like sit by me when I knew the professional thing to do would be to stay in the galley with her shoes on.

But maybe I felt like waiting on *her* instead.

Maybe I felt like she deserved to stay curled up with her book while I got *her* some coffee. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d served someone instead of the other way around.

“Do *you* want coffee?” I asked, arching a brow.

She gave me a bland look. “The pretzels are bad enough.”

“Nah, treat yourself. You just sit there and—”

She held up a finger. “If you say sit there and *look pretty*, Riley, I swear—”

“Sit there and *read your book*,” I cut in. “I’ll go fix us some.”

“Do you know how to work the machine in there?”

I snorted. “I’m sure I can figure it out. Hang tight.”

As I walked by, she snagged my hand.

My breath caught at the contact, but also because I was bracing for her to tell me to sit down and let her do her job.

Instead, she gave my hand a squeeze. “I like this.”

“You like... what, exactly?”

“Hangin’ out with you. Thanks for makin’ me.”

The buttons on my flannel shirt suddenly felt a little too tight when I inhaled. “I didn’t *make* you, darlin’. You’re here ‘cause you wanna be. Right?”

“Right.”

“Good. Quick question.”

“You and your questions.”

“I can’t help it. I wanna know everythin’ about you.”

A small crease formed between her brow, but then she dipped her chin in a single, hesitant nod.

“Does that mysterious thing on your list have anythin’ to do with the book you lost to Davey Jones?” It was a lake in Tennessee, not an ocean in the Caribbean, but still. I wasn’t sure what the pirate lore equivalent would be.

“Yes,” she admitted without even a moment’s pause. “I wanted to see how it ended. The heroine had all these big dreams, but she was about to give them all up so she could be with the hero.”

This had me crouching in front of her, still holding her hand. “And you didn’t like that.”

It wasn’t a question, but an observation. Still, she nodded.

“The pilot thing... Are you worried I’ll somehow try to keep you from doin’ that?”

“Not exactly.” She looked down at our hands. “But it’s happened before—and it’s my own fault it happened. I won’t blame the men I dated for my choices. I lost my nerve somewhere along the way, and I kept just... settling and not doing it. I don’t want that to happen again.”

I waited, hoping she'd say more without me having to ask for it. I wasn't sure what question to ask, and the last thing I wanted to do was scare her into shutting me out again.

She sighed and finally peered down at me from her seat. "It's like I said, I need this job to pay for what's next. Flight school. And if we start something and then can't work together, I don't want to derail my plans again."

"And waiting until you've saved up enough to afford school is out of the question because you're still worried about me losin' the family?"

She smirked. "You may have convinced me it's not my place to worry about the family on your behalf."

"Hallelujah," I muttered, lifting my free hand to the sky and smiling when she chuckled. "And uh, is it safe to say I'm not allowed to pay for your flight school so we can rush this thing along?"

The look she gave me spoke a thousand-and-one volumes.

I held up that hand again in surrender. "All right, all right. I won't bring it up again."

"Thank you."

"The day we met and I came off that stage, you were the first person I wanted to talk to," I said, my throat going dry the second her cheeks flushed. "But then I found out about the plan with Laney... and you wanna know what I thought?"

She wrinkled her nose like she was worried she wouldn't like it. "What?"

"I thought, well, that's all right."

Aubree's head jerked back like my words had just poked her in the forehead, and I couldn't help but laugh. That only made her eyes narrow into slits as her mind worked. "Huh. So you weren't as interested as you claimed to be? It was the snot, wasn't it? I knew there was snot."

"There was no snot," I said through a rough laugh. "I thought it was all right because somethin' inside me kept sayin'... *just wait. Be patient. It ain't over yet.* Sounds

ridiculous, I know, but when I saw you at your family's house the first time I went home with Laney and realized you were her sister and hadn't just disappeared off the face of the Earth?"

I paused to take in a shaky breath, then blew it out through my pursed lips—complete with a raspberry noise. "That was somethin' else. I'll never forget that day."

"Riley."

"But I will tell ya this—I don't care how long it takes, I'm never gonna lose my patience when it comes to you. I've played second fiddle more than a few times in the past, but this time? With *you*? I'm just happy it's your dream that has your heart and not another man. Shoot, darlin', I'll happily wait in the wings for a cause like that. I spend enough time on stage."

Her mouth parted, and for a long moment, she only stared at me.

"What? Did you think I was some kind of now-or-never guy who wouldn't support this dream of yours?"

She shook her head, quickly and firmly. "No. Well, maybe. I'm not sure. Riley, I spent six years thinkin' my crush on you was one-sided. I'm sorry if I'm slow to catch up that you feel the same way. Or that you'd wait for me to follow my dreams if it meant that much to me to keep it professional until then."

I searched her face. It stung to hear her call it a crush. It wasn't a crush. It was so much more in my mind, so I couldn't honestly say I felt the *same* way if that was all she felt.

"Well, I will wait. I've been waitin'. Like I said, somethin' told me to bide my time, and we'd get there eventually if we were meant to. I still believe that."

Once again, my words had her speechless. I would've been concerned if I didn't know better, but this was Aubree. Speechless wasn't a bad thing, and I had no desire to make her say more words just to fill the silence. Her eyes told me enough about her reaction to my own words, anyway.

"I'm gonna get us that coffee. Be right back."

She nodded, but she didn't drop my hand as I rose to my feet.

I stood there and held it for another heartbeat or two, then slowly leaned over her to brace my hand on the back of her chair.

“Aubree.”

“Yeah?”

I'd thought my own voice came out like a pack-a-day smoker even though I'd never picked up the habit, but hers was just as raspy—just as laced with need as my own.

“I know I just said I'd wait for more, and I will, but I'm dyin' to kiss you again.”

Her gaze went to my lips, then her ocean-blue eyes found mine.

She didn't tell me to do it, but she didn't tell me not to, either. I needed her to do one or the other because my control was two seconds away from snapping, and even though she'd been the one to turn up the heat on our kiss at the dock, hadn't we just established that we'd wait?

I breathed in, picking up a hint of salty pretzels underneath her sweet, sugary scent I loved so much. “May I?”

She nodded.

It wasn't enough. I wanted clarity. I wanted certainty.

So, I dipped toward her mouth, but stopped a breath away. “I need the words, darlin'.”

Had I used that word *again* to see some kind of spark that would lead me in the right direction? Sure had.

Did I get my answer? Sure did.

And not just from the fire that sparked behind her eyes, but from the whispered words she gifted my lips. “Yes. You can kiss me.”

Relief swept over me in waves, and I smiled as I did just that.



Our first kiss had been an explosion of light and color—once she got over whatever had her so hesitant when I’d first made my move.

But this kiss? It was like floating down a lazy river. It was all soft brushes and languid heat, and unlike at the lake when I held her flush against me, our still-clasped hands were the only place we touched besides our lips.

And yet, it was just as powerful. It was a slow burn instead of a wildfire, and I had the feeling I could die a happy man now that I’d gotten a chance to experience both kinds.

Then again, what if there was more where this came from?

What if we were laughing, then had a kiss so rushed and teasing that our teeth collided and made us laugh even harder?

What if the next time she found herself crying—not that I’d want her to, but if she did—and I could kiss those salty tears away before taking her mind off whatever had her so upset in the first place?

I wanted every kind of kiss with this woman.

But first, I needed to pull back so I didn’t make her think I wouldn’t go at her pace. I needed to be sure she was mine to keep because this kiss was proof positive that I was ruined for all other women now.

*As if I wasn’t already.*

I pulled back and gave her one last peck. “Coffee?”

“Coffee.”

With one final kiss—because I just couldn’t help myself—I shot her a wink and went to the galley.

And then the joke was on me the second I laid eyes on the way-too-fancy espresso machine. “Uh, Aubree?”

“Need some help?” she called with a laugh.

“I coulda sworn I’ve had regular coffee on this plane, but this thing has too many bells and whistles for somethin’ simple like that.”

“Be right there.”

I scratched my head, then busied myself with looking for the mugs. But as soon as I opened the cabinet door, the plane lurched so hard it almost had me flat on my butt. It was all I could do to slap the cabinet closed before everything came crashing down on my head.

I opened my mouth to call out to Aubree, but then the plane dropped like a rock for what felt like a full minute but was probably only a heartbeat.

A crash sounded from the main cabin at the same time, and a slice of actual fear cut me to the bone. The plane stopped dropping only to bump along like it was driving over a backroad instead of flying high, so I used the counters and walls for balance as I made my way out of the galley.

“Aubree!” I yelled as I slid to my knees in front of her like that head T-Bird during the bowling scene in *Grease 2*.

The pilot’s voice came over the loudspeaker apologizing for an unexpected rough patch and telling us it should be smooth sailing from here on out, but I barely registered his words as I reached for the woman on the floor in front of me.

“I’m fine,” Aubree said with a wince, like it hurt to speak. She wiggled her jaw, and that’s when I saw the bloody scrape framed with splotchy redness. “I’m bleedin’, aren’t I?”

I put my finger under her chin and gently tilted her head so I could get a better look at the damage. “Yeah, but it’s nothin’ a first aid kit can’t handle. You have got to stop scarin’ the daylights outta me.”

“Sorry.”

I shook my head. “I’m teasin’. How’d this happen?”

She huffed out a breath and used one finger to point to my guitar case on the ground next to her. “*That.*”

I almost laughed at the way she eyed it like it’d jumped out and bit her, but my concern for her still took priority even though she was clearly all right.

The worn black case had been lying on its side next to the leather chair I'd been sitting in, but judging by the way it was angled in the aisle now, I had a feeling the turbulence knocked it right into her path.

I cringed as I pictured the scene going down. "*That*, huh?"

She shook out her hands. "I was headed your way when we hit the rough air. I think I hit my jaw on the edge of the guitar case? Maybe the latching-thingy?"

Despite how awful I felt that she'd gotten hurt, a short laugh burst out of me. "Latching-thingy? You sure you didn't hit your noggin?"

"Hush."

"Sit tight. I'll grab the first aid kit, and we'll patch you up."

"Thanks."

I stood and headed for the galley, then spun back around. "Uh... Mind tellin' me where I can find the first aid kit?"

"First cabinet on the bottom left."

"I knew that."

"Uh-huh."

I retrieved the thankfully well-stocked kit, then returned to the floor in front of her, letting my lips stretch into a smile as I opened an antibacterial wipe to clean her wound. "We seem to have a habit of endin' up in this position."

"At least I'm not cryin' this time. Ten points for me."

"Pfft. Five points at the most. This is a wimpy little cut ya got here." I touched the wipe to her jaw, and she recoiled. "Sorry. This might sting."

"It does," she gritted out.

Next, I put some ointment on the inside of a bandage and delicately covered the wound. "Better?"

"Depends. How ridiculous do I look right now?"

“If you mean, ‘how ridiculously beautiful do you look,’ the answer is *very*.”

She smirked. “You and those smooth words.”

I tapped her nose. “You love my smooth words.”

She shook her head as if to deny it, but her eyes told me the truth. Then she scrunched up her face, looking guilty as sin. “Sorry you’re havin’ to play nurse for me.”

“Shoot, you know what? I’ll be right back.” I got up and hustled toward the bedroom but stopped and went back when she called my name. “Yeah?”

“Where are you goin’?”

“If I’m gonna play nurse for ya, darlin’, I’ll need one of those sexy little outfits.”

She gaped at me. “You know nurses have never worn anythin’ in their professional lives that even closely resembles those sexist costumes, right?”

“You’re just salty they don’t have sexy flight attendant costumes.”

“They do.”

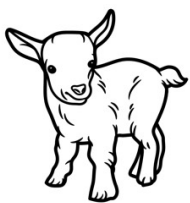
“Do they, now?” My brows went up, and I looked at the ceiling, making a show out of picturing her wearing one.

“*Riley*,” she said in a warning tone.

“I’m just kiddin’. But I’m a little concerned you were more worried about those outfits bein’ sexist than why I’d have one on my plane. And whether or not it’d be in my size.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re a man.”

I snorted. “Fair. I’m not gettin’ a costume, but I will be right back. Don’t move.”



## **aubree**

I gingerly touched the underside of my jaw, wincing when my fingers grazed the soft fabric Bandaid.

*Great.* What was with me and getting myself into situations where Riley had to swoop in and save the day while I was sitting on the floor looking like a hot mess?

I might be something of a loner, and I might have trouble standing up for myself or making small talk with strangers, but Kota was right that night in my room. I was a brave, independent woman, and I knew how to take care of myself.

So then, why did it feel like every time I turned around, I wound up feeling vulnerable when it came to men?

Why did I make a habit of losing my ability to control things or pick myself up when I'd fallen down?

*Wait, no.* Right now, I wasn't vulnerable in a bad way. I was hurt, and a sweet man wanted to tend to me—in a literal sense and a metaphorical sense, now that I thought about it.

I just needed to get out of my own way and let him.

“Did ya miss me?” Riley asked when he returned from the bedroom—one I still hadn't dared get within three feet of since he'd told me about it.

It felt... private. There would be no reason for Jordan to go in there, so why would I?

Besides, I had a feeling that if I laid eyes on a bed that had held Riley's gorgeous body as he slept, I might do something dumb... like remember how good it felt to be in the spot right next to him, and then ask if we could do that again.

Without a drunk dude breaking into my room due to his divorce drama, of course.

Though, as Riley knelt before me with something soft and floral in his hands and a face full of concern behind his outwardly teasing smile, I knew we were past the point of me thinking getting close to Riley would be dumb.

It was too late. We *were* close. I'd thought I had a crush on him before, but it was always more. And now I knew that feeling was mutual.

I knew this because of the way he'd handled my final reason. It was why I'd let him kiss me, and it was how I knew that my six-year crush had actually been a six-year walk toward a cliff. And then it'd only taken me about a month and a half to finally reach the edge of that cliff and fall right off.

I was totally, completely, mind-bogglingly in love with Riley Conrad, and I was pretty sure he loved me too.

Why else would he tell me he'd wait as long as he needed to?

He wouldn't.

And now I knew I wouldn't make him.

I just had to gather up the courage to tell *him* that.

"I'm gonna put this on your jaw, but fair warnin', it's gonna be cold."

I pushed away my *oh my gosh I love Riley and I think he loves me too* thoughts so I could focus on my injury, then braced myself for the cold. He lifted the rectangular object to my wound, and I hissed when it transformed into a handheld arctic tundra against my skin.

"What is that? And wait—" I sniffed the air, attempting to twist my nose to the side as if I could aim it like a short, fleshy straw. "Is that lavender I smell?"

"Good sniffer ya got there. Still can't believe it hasn't lost the scent yet, though. Dang thing is older than dirt."

"Riley, what the heck is on my face right now?"

He cracked up at the panic in my tone, throwing his head back in that should-be-donkeylike-guffaw I loved. “Relax, woman. It’s a rice bag.”

“A what?”

Sadness bled into his smile, and his eyes went to the thing currently freezer-burning my jawline. “When I was a kid, I was a bit of a wild child. Climbin’ trees, ridin’ bareback, jumpin’ off rocks into a too-shallow creek. Broke more bones than I can remember and may have bumped my head enough times to be the reason why.”

I made a small humming noise as I pictured the boy version of the man in front of me. I could just see him running wild and free on the ranch he’d grown up on, giving his momma gray hairs by the dozen.

“Momma got sick of wastin’ all the ice and baggies on my various bumps and bruises,” he went on, still not looking at me, “so one day, she brought out her sewin’ machine and started makin’ rice bags like this one. You can store ‘em in the freezer for times like this, or you can microwave ‘em if you have a sore spot and wanna put some heat on it.”

He continued to keep his eyes fixed on the bag as he spoke, and even though his tone was warm, I could hear the raw pain in his voice.

I reached up and cupped his hand with mine, shivering from the contradictory sensations. Cold under my fingertips where they touched the bag, warm under my palm where it rested on the back of his strong hand.

“And the lavender?” I asked.

His lips twitched, his eyes now fixed on my hand covering his. “None of the first ones had anythin’ but rice in ‘em. But then my daddy gave her the idea to sell ‘em at the local farmer’s market on Saturdays, and one of the ladies in town suggested she add different scents as upgrades. Lavender, peppermint, eucalyptus. Stuff like that.”

“It smells really good. It’s soothin’.”



His eyes finally came back to mine, and the amount of bittersweet sadness I found there was enough to crack my heart in two.

“I used to help her stuff ‘em. Got rice everywhere. Probably got more on the floor than in the bags.”

I chuckled. “I bet she was glad for your help. My momma always said she didn’t mind the messes ‘cause they meant we were makin’ memories.”

“Yeah, that about sums up what she said, too.” He looked at the bag again. At our layered hands. “This is the last one I have that she made. I keep it in the freezer in the bedroom ‘cause I do all my best writin’ on this jet when I’m on tour. And, I dunno, I guess sometimes all that writin’ makes my hand hurt, so it’s good to have.”

“And I bet it’s nice to bring a piece of her with you wherever you go.”

This time, when he looked at me again, it was as fast as lightning.

So much was said between us in that silent moment as we locked eyes. Without him having to say it out loud, I could tell that my words had made him feel seen.

I could tell because there were so many moments where he seemed to understand me in a way I was only starting to understand myself, and even though *Wuthering Heights* was not among my top one hundred books to read when craving a happy ending, one particular thing jumped out and hit me right in the face.

*“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.”*

This wasn’t a dumb insta-love plotline. It was fated mates, without the ability to turn into werewolves.

As far as I knew, anyway, but he was hot enough that I wouldn’t put it past him.

Either way, it was about time I stopped treating our story like a *rejected* mates story, and long past time to quit pushing

away this kind, funny, swoonier-than-I-can-handle-most-days man. I could trust him.

“Hey, Riley?” I asked in a whisper.

“Yeah?”

“I surrender.”

His eyes searched mine, and a bit of that familiar, teasing light returned to his face. “Before I let my imagination run wild... What exactly are you surrenderin’ to?”

“This. Us. Ya know, that thing you were so sure of.”

His throat bobbed as if it had taken a lot of effort to swallow, but he didn’t speak.

“And...” I sighed, letting one side of my mouth turn up. “You can call me darlin’. Not that you haven’t been doin’ it anyway, but still.”

That had him grinning. “Sorry. Tried to warn ya I wouldn’t be good at that. Mind tellin’ me why you didn’t want me to in the first place?”

I bit my bottom lip, and he reached up with the hand that wasn’t holding the rice bag and tugged it free without comment. Or a kiss, unfortunately, but I had a feeling he was a little too focused on this long-overdue conversation to risk a kissing delay.

“I didn’t like how it made me feel. I knew you used it with everyone, but I wanted it to be just for me. Sounds silly out loud.”

His smile was blinding as he took in my words, then he nodded as if he’d made a decision. “I’d much rather have a rule that it’s just for you than a rule about it bein’ for everyone *but* you. And as for the rest of what you said...”

He seemed like he needed to pause to collect himself, but whatever he’d been about to say was cut off by the chiming of the phone in the galley.

Riley let out a huff through flared nostrils and shook his head. “To be continued. Let’s get you up. How’s your jaw?”

I allowed him to help me off the floor, my face half-numb when he removed the rice bag. “Right now, I can’t feel a thing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I hurried into the galley to pick up the phone, but when I turned back to look at Riley while speaking to the pilot, my heart fractured once again.

He stood in the aisle, right where I’d left him, staring down at the last remaining one of his momma’s creations. His hand shook as he rubbed his thumb over the soft floral fabric, and there was a slight tremor in his chest.

I’d never seen him look so alone.

And I knew a lot about being alone, so at that moment, I vowed to spend the rest of my days making sure Riley Conrad never again felt as alone as he looked right now.

In fact, maybe neither of us would.



For once in my adult life, I couldn’t wait to get off a plane. But after that two-second turbulence that’d resulted in a two-inch scrape on my jaw, I was ready to zip down the stairs and kiss the tarmac.

We were about to touch down in Texas for Riley’s mystery trip *home*—even though, truly, I still had no idea how I’d missed that he considered Texas to be his home when he hadn’t lived here since he was twelve.

But I’d find out soon enough. And instead of sitting in the jump seat up front, I was right by his side, holding his hand as we landed.

We took off our seatbelts, and Riley stood, stretching his arms over his head. He was so tall he had to bend them and clasp each elbow to get a good stretch, and *yep*, it was a fine sight to see.

He caught me staring, and his face lit up. “Have you always looked at me like that, and I was totally oblivious to it?”

I shrugged. “Why do you think I avoided lookin’ at you?”

He shook his head, then bent to pick up the rice bag that he’d set in a cup holder instead of returning it to the bedroom. “Should we bring this with us in case your jaw starts hurtin’ again?”

“No, but thanks. I’m sure it’ll be all right.”

With a nod, he turned toward the room, then stopped. “Oh, and Paisley went shoppin’ for some stuff you’ll need for this trip. I had her stash it under the bed, so I’ll grab that while you do whatever you need to do in the galley before we take off.”

My eyes bulged as he turned his back on me. *She did what?*

But then, before I could think another thing about it, I heard a very familiar bleat, followed by a startled yet still manly scream.

I lurched toward the room as fast as my heels could carry me. Sure enough, Riley was on his knees in front of the suitcase he’d apparently retrieved from under the fit-for-an-*actual*-king-sized bed, and in front of him?

Was Gertie.

“Uh, Riley?”

“Yeah?” he croaked out, eyes locked on the goat.

“Did Paisley pack me a *goat* for this trip?”

The slight shaking of his shoulders was the only evidence of his silent laughter. Then he put his big hands on his thighs and looked back at me. “No, ma’am. She did not.”

“So... then... How did this happen?”

Riley got to his feet and looked from the goat to me and back again. “I don’t know, but when I pulled that suitcase out from under the bed, and Gertie shot out after it, I about had a

heart attack. What are the odds she hitched a ride in the limo with us this mornin'?"

"Slim. Right? Where would she have been, and why wouldn't the driver notice her if she hopped in the trunk?"

He snapped his fingers. "That's it."

"What's what?"

"Paisley doesn't have a car in Charlotte Oaks. She walks everywhere since it's so tiny and only hires a car if she has to run to Nashville for somethin'. You should see that girl's step tracker app. It'd blow your mind."

I shook my head to show him I still didn't get it, but at least I now had the answer as to how Paisley could eat every meal like it was her last and manage to rock the legs and butt that dreams were made of. *Goals.*

"The airfield is right by the B&B," he went on, making a slow circle with his hand as he tried to get me to connect the dots. "I bet Gertie followed Paisley to the plane last night when she put the suitcase in here."

"But Gertie was at Jackson and Bailey's house, havin' a sleepover with Phoebe last night."

"Uh-huh. And they have a doggy door, remember?"

"*Goaty* door."

He smirked. "Right."

"So, you're sayin' Miss Thing snuck out of Jackson's house, went to the B&B, then followed Paisley to the plane and hid under the bed?"

"I said she did a little shoppin', but I didn't tell you where she went." He paused for dramatic effect, and right before I clapped my hands and told him to spit it out, he said, "Bailey's the closest to your size, so Pais borrowed some stuff from her. It's just basic stuff that you probably already have, but we didn't want to go rifling through your room after what happened at the hotel."

My heart squeezed, loving him even more for thinking of that. But then the rest of what he'd said sunk in, and we both turned back to Gertie, expecting to find her right where we'd last seen her.

When she wasn't there, Riley and I flicked our gazes around the room in all different directions, then spotted her at the same time. She stood in the doorway of the bedroom, looking at us with a face that could only be described as bored and ready-to-go.

"Gertie," I said, crouching down in front of her. "Is Riley right? Did you sneak out of Jackson and Bailey's house and follow Paisley to the plane?"

I waited to see if she'd do anything that would signal a yes.

I wasn't sure what I thought she'd do, but if this was all true, I figured maybe she was smart enough to fess up to it.

Warm heat met my back as Riley folded his body around mine in the crouch. His long arms circled my torso, and his chin came to my shoulder. "Hey, darlin'?"

"Hmm?"

"Does she ever answer you back?"

"No."

"Just checkin'."

Gertie blinked at us.

"What do we do with her?" I asked.

"Well, we bring her with us."

I twisted in his arms so I could look at his face. "Does that mean wherever we're goin' is goat-friendly?"

"What, like this plane she's currently stowin' away on?" he teased, helping me to my feet. "But yeah, it's goat-friendly. Why don't you go do whatever end-of-flight stuff you have to do, then you can use this room to change into one of the outfits in the bag. I'll see if I can get Gertie here to take a potty break before we get her in the truck with us."

“Oh, man. I hope she didn’t go under the bed.”

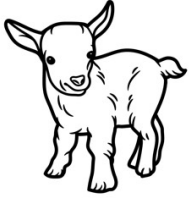
He sniffed the air. “You smell that?”

“No,” I said after taking a whiff.

All I smelled was *him*, and that scent of his that was amazingly rugged and fancy and clean and spicy. It spoke to all of his many sides, and I couldn’t get enough.

“Exactly. You know Gertie. If we don’t smell it, we’re in the clear.”

And with those wonderfully romantic words, he kissed the top of my head as he passed me, then scooped up Gertie like a football and tucked her under his arm.





“Here we are,” I said proudly, using one hand to make the right turn off the main road and the other to point at the gate up ahead.

I cut Aubree a glance as she sat in the passenger seat of my truck with Gertie in her lap. We’d only just arrived at our final destination for this overnight mystery trip, and I’d already had a ton of fun watching her get more and more curious.

First, when we’d walked up to my truck instead of a limo like usual, she’d frowned hard enough to make a somehow-still-pretty unibrow.

“An old pickup truck?” she’d asked, tilting her head as she stared at it.

“Yep.”

“Not a limo?”

“Doesn’t look like it.” I narrowed my eyes at her. “What? You only like me for the limo rides or somethin’?”

“*Please*. It’s just... Whose is it?”

I’d chuckled, poking her side as I passed her, then dropped her suitcase into the bed. “It’s mine. Don’t tell me you believe all that ‘pretty boy’ stuff Everett dishes out.”

“Well...”

Hoping she was kidding, I chose not to comment and simply opened her door. “Hop in.”

The look she’d shot me when I’d given her a hand up and then placed Gertie in her lap was pure bewilderment. It was

like she wondered if I'd been replaced by a shapeshifting alien on the flight over here. It had taken everything in me to keep a straight face.

Then, when we'd left paved roads and stop lights behind in favor of dirt roads and stop signs, she'd looked around with her eyes nearly bugging out of her head.

I kept thinking she was gonna figure me out, but nope.

It wasn't until this very moment—as we drove up to a high-tech, remote-controlled gate with our family's brand displayed atop the metal arch above us—that she finally started to get the picture.

“C.R.,” she whispered, staring at the letters as I drove under it. “Conrad Ranch?”

I chuckled. “Crossfire Ranch, but yeah, started by the Conrad family two generations ago.”

Her mouth dropped open as she swung her gaze my way, but then she looked around the sprawling landscape with a whole new kind of curiosity. “But... So, after your parents died, they left it to you?”

“I wish,” I said. It came out a little funny, thanks to how hard my jaw was clenched. I worked it back and forth, reminding myself that showing her this piece of me that nobody else got to see meant telling her things nobody else got to hear, too.

“They left it to my uncle,” I said after a minute. “But that guy never loved this place like my old man did. He didn't take the time to learn a thing about cattle ranchin' when he was growin' up, and if he were a better man, he would've hung onto it and then passed it on to me when I got old enough.”

“But he didn't?”

“Nope. Sold it not six months after they died.”

Aubree didn't comment on that, but she reached over and squeezed my forearm.

The words she didn't say landed like an arrow in my heart. Well, if it was an arrow made out of something *good* and

soothing. Or maybe dipped in some kind of highfalutin healing ointment.

I usually tried to push down the feelings this topic brought up, but talking to Aubree about it had a surprising effect. For once, I didn't want to keep shoveling all that pain and bitterness deep into my chest.

And since it felt a whole lot like indigestion when I did, it likely wasn't healthy.

Telling Aubree—soaking up her calming presence—made me want to lift those feelings up and send them on their way without having to lose a piece of my past, or my soul, in the process.

“It was owned by some other family for a little over a decade,” I went on after clearing my throat. “And then as soon as I had enough money to buy it back in a deal so big they woulda been fools to say no, it became mine.”

“Wow. I'm so glad you got it back.”

“Me too.”

Aubree stroked Gertie's back as she looked around, taking in the wide open spaces and rolling hills that had meant so much to my family. Then, she slowly turned back to me. “Can I ask why they didn't leave it to you in the first place?”

“Oversight,” I said. “They never thought anythin' would happen to them, and they didn't update their will after they— Shoot, uh, brace yourself.”

“For what?”

“This isn't somethin' I want known, and you know how invasive people can be.”

Taking my roundabout way of asking her to keep this between us, she nodded in encouragement.

Before I spoke, however, I peered down at the goat. “That goes for you too, Gertie.”

Aubree snorted. “She's not much of a gossip, considerin' she can't talk and all.”

“I swear I’ve seen you talkin’ to that goat more than you’ve talked to me over the years.”

She bit her lip, then when I raised my hand to do my part to free it, she made a move to bite it, so I jerked it back.

“You know why I didn’t talk to you,” she muttered.

“Yep, and it’s *so* eye-roll worthy.”

This earned me a smack to the chest, and we both cracked up.

Ever since she’d told me what Dakota had said about our six-year miscommunication, all I could think about was how much I wished it hadn’t happened.

If I’d only made a joke about her braided bun any time I’d seen it or mentioned that the Fourth of July took on a whole new significance once it became the day I’d met her, where would we be?

Where would we be if I’d done anything to give her a hint that I’d never forgotten that day?

But seeing the sparkle in those ocean eyes as we joked about it now? Feeling all this warmth and light right in the middle of a conversation that usually made me feel stone cold?

If you asked me, it was all just another bit of proof that life had a way of working out.

“Ready to tell me?” she asked once the laughter faded.

I nodded, adjusting my grip on the wheel as I turned right, heading toward the spot on my land that held the main house. A house I’d had to gut in order to renovate and restore it until it looked like a brand-new version of the one I’d shared with my parents.

“My folks couldn’t have kids. They’d all but given up by the time they got the phone call with the news about me.”

Her soft gasp had Gertie tilting her head back to investigate, and Aubree jumped when the goat’s nose connected with her eye. “You’re adopted?”

“Sure am. When I was two.”

“Oh.”

“And before you ask, I don’t know a thing about where I came from or even the name I was born with. My folks changed it because they always wanted their child to have a family name.”

She was quiet while she processed this, and it was on the tip of my tongue to rush into telling her it was no big deal. As far as I was concerned, my parents were my parents, regardless of biology. I’d never been a big fan of the subject, anyway.

But instead of trying to fill the silence, I settled in to wait for her response.

“So... Who was the other Riley?” she finally asked. “The one they wanted to name you after.”

Her question startled me. Instead of focusing on the family I didn’t know about, she asked about the family I did.

Instead of wondering where I might’ve come from, she’d been curious about whoever my new family wanted to honor when they gave me my name.

I pulled up to the main house and cut the engine, the warmth in my veins only intensifying when I realized she was looking at me, not the large house in front of us.

It was an impressive house, too, like something out of a movie. But she only had eyes for me, and she was waiting patiently for my answer.

“My dad’s dad,” I replied, refusing to get choked up.

“That’s really sweet.”

I reached over, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear and then cupping the side of her neck with my hand. “You’re really sweet.”

“Smooth talker.”

“You love it.”

I started to pull her in so I could kiss her over Gertie’s head, but Gertie wasn’t having it, and unfortunately, I was a bit

too distracted by Aubree's beautiful blue eyes to lean back before Gertie snout-punched me right on the mouth.

I'd call it a kiss I hadn't been expecting if it weren't so dang aggressive.

Aubree's bright bubble of laughter filled the truck, though, so instead of being able to hold the scowl I'd aimed at Gertie, I wound up laughing too.

"You ever feel like this girl is determined to get between us?" I asked.

"Considering she stowed away on your jet to play chaperone for this trip, yeah, I do."

"Why do you think that is?"

Aubree shrugged. "She's a busybody. Not much of a gossip, but a busybody, for sure."

"Mmm. She must only be half-Charlotte Oakian, then." I ruffled Gertie's head, then jerked my chin toward the house. "And trust me, there's plenty of chaperones in there. This place doesn't run itself."



We got out and reached the front door, Gertie standing expectantly between us like she couldn't wait to check out her digs for the night. But when I went for the door handle, Aubree grabbed my forearm.

"Wait."

I froze. "What?"

"Who's gonna be inside?"

I lowered my arm, then curled it around hers until I had her hand clasped in mine. "Why?"

She looked away, but I tugged on her hand in an effort to bring her back to me. When her gaze met mine again, she

sighed. “I’m not great at meetin’ new people. Whoa. *Wow*, I don’t think I’ve ever said that out loud before.”

“I know. I’ve always wondered why you were a flight attendant since it means small talk with strangers in a closed space, but now I get it. It wasn’t the job, but the plane, right? It was flyin’.”

She didn’t reply, just stared at me.

Unsurprisingly, I read her non-answer right away. It seemed to scream, “*How do you know all that?*”

I knew because that was what we did, and I couldn’t be happier she was finally catching on.

I hummed, bouncing from my toes to my heels for a minute as I carefully chose my words. “Tell you what? You promise me we can circle back to this conversation like we’ve done for so many other ones, and I’ll tell you who you’ll meet while we’re on the ranch. Deal?”

Flaring her eyes a bit, she nodded.

“Good.” I dropped her hand so I could rub both of mine together, pacing in a small section of the wraparound porch under our feet. “So, Crossfire Ranch is a big operation. I’ve got a world-class team of ranch managers, cowboys, ranch hands, groundskeepers, housekeepers, and even a round-the-clock kitchen staff to feed ‘em all.”

Her jaw dropped. “And they all live in *there?*”

I grinned at the wary look she gave the door, then shook my head. “Nah. Just a few of the unmarried staff members live in the house. I added a handful of rooms when I remodeled it. Most everyone lives off-site with their families.”

Was that her jaw on the floor, now? How’d she manage to make it drop even further than it already had?

“Are you kiddin’ me?”

“Nope.” I pointed behind her, and she turned to look. “The cowboys, on the other hand, are mostly unmarried. They live over there in that bunkhouse. The few who do have wives and kids live off-site, though.”

“Riley, this isn’t a big operation. It’s a *huge* operation. How do you manage to run all this on top of your music career?”

“I don’t run it, I own it. I’m happy to let the experts do what they do best, but I check in daily, no matter where I am. They know I care, but no part of me wants to micromanage ’em and tell ’em how I want things done. Best part is, it’s completely self-sustaining. Successful enough to handle the finances all on its own, without even touching my money from my music.”

She blinked. “Oh. *Oh.*”

I chuckled at the double realizations coursing through her, then the impressed expression she wore had me prouder than a peacock. “I do come out here whenever I can to learn from them and lend a hand, though. I’m just happy knowin’ Crossfire belongs to a Conrad again, and I trust that when the time comes, they’ll welcome me into the fold.”

“Wait, what? When?”

“When I retire from music someday.”

“*Retire* from music?”

Laughing again, I reached out and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “What? Did you think I was gonna keep goin’ until I kicked the bucket or somethin’?”

“I guess I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Well, I love what I do, and it’s nowhere close to quittin’ time. But I do think I’ll wanna settle down someday. When that happens, this is where I plan to do it.”

She bit her bottom lip, but this time, I didn’t pull my standard move on her. I could tell she was thinking way too hard about something, and instead of risking another distraction from Gertie the Stowaway, I decided to wait her out—without any sudden moves.

“So... When you retire from music...” She trailed off as she scanned the peaceful fields surrounding the house before



her eyes found mine again. “You’re gonna *literally* ride off into the sunset?”

I choked on a laugh. “Uh, yeah. I s’pose I am. Wanna join me?”

Whether or not I should’ve asked that question, I didn’t know. But the fact that I’d punctuated it with a teasing wink probably saved my rear because she gave me a rueful smile and shook her head.

And it wasn’t a *no-way* kinda head shake, but a *what am I gonna do with you* one.

I’d take it.

It was a heck of a lot better than the alternative. There could’ve been utter horror all over her features, and she probably would’ve been right to feel it. It was quite a question after only having spent a handful of hours in this new, unlabeled relationship after promising to wait until she was ready.

Was she ready now? What were we doing?

And yet...

If she’d shrugged and said, *Sure, Riley. Your horse or mine?* I would’ve done something I haven’t done since I was a kid and jumped off this porch with a cheesy heel-click on the way down.

I jammed my hands into my pockets and tilted my head toward the door. “So, now you know that some of the staff lives here. There are likely people workin’ in the kitchen because lunch’ll be comin’ up here pretty soon. You think you’re ready to go inside and meet whoever’s millin’ about?”

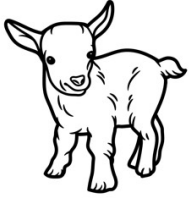
She let out a shaky breath, then looked down at Gertie. “What do you think, girlfriend? You ready to go inside?”

Why was I looking at the goat as if she’d respond? This girl was getting to me.

After a short pause, I leaned forward, bending at the waist with my hands still in my pockets. “Was that a yes?”

She giggled and gave me an awkwardly cute shrug. “How should I know? She’s a goat.”

I didn’t respond as I pushed the door open. But when Gertie zipped through our legs and hopped onto an armchair in the front room, making herself right at home, I peered down at Aubree. “Hmm. I think somebody oughta tell her that.”



## aubree

As it turned out, meeting new people was nowhere near as scary with larger-than-life Riley Conrad at my side. The second we closed the front door behind us, he was like a man on a mission.

His mission—one that he hadn't even considered not accepting—was to make me feel right at home. And, *surprise, surprise*, it only took about thirty seconds of warm introductions and hugs with the three people prepping a cowboy lunch buffet to accomplish it.

He didn't give me time to feel awkward and nervous under their watchful eyes because he commanded their focus like he did in every room full of people he entered.

I also didn't have to worry about tripping over my words because if he wasn't doing all the talking, he was so smiley and relaxed that it somehow relaxed me too. Like photosynthesis. Or was it osmosis? Some kind of *-sis*, for sure.

The best part? Realizing that it wasn't because I was leaning on him like a crutch or needed him to feel complete. It was that his presence made me happy right down to my marrow and that happiness brought out a side of me that didn't have such a hard time around people.

It wasn't that I was unhappy or incomplete before, but it was more that I allowed myself to feel less than, and he'd shown me I was wrong.

I'd allowed myself to play it safe, and his sweetness made me want to be brave.

And I'd allowed myself to carve a Riley-shaped hole in my own heart by staying away from him for the last six years, and now he'd winked his way right into it.

Either way, I'd never felt more comfortable meeting a bunch of total strangers. And I do mean a *bunch*. Right after Riley had finished introducing me to Beth, Annie, and Tina in the kitchen, it was time for us to bring the food to the buffet tables in the backyard.

If you could even call it a backyard since there were no fences or walls separating the trillion acres from whatever they'd claim as the yard. And now that I thought about it, that was probably why they'd said, "Everybody grab a dish, and let's get this lunch set up *out back* before the boys descend."

Lunch had been a whirlwind, too, which was also great for my nerves. It was like the family suppers I was used to with my family and the Wilsons, but on steroids, if our families were mostly comprised of sweaty cowboys on a lunch break chowing down so fast it was like they were back in boot camp.

That was another huge surprise of the day. I'd lost count of them by now, but this was a big one. Riley exclusively hired military veterans for his ranch hands and cowboys.

I. Was. Floored.

I almost made a joke asking if he was hiring since I was a veteran, but Not Awkward Aubree clawed the words back before they fell out.

*That girl is a life-saver, I tell ya.*

Flying across a ranch on horseback sounded like fun, but that wasn't the kind of flying I wanted to do. I'd already spent enough time doing whatever was closest to it without actually *being* it, and I hated the idea of switching to another career like that.

But I loved that it didn't seem like I'd have to, now that I'd already chosen a school, gotten accepted, and begun the initial online classes in a matter of weeks.

*Weeks.* After a lifetime of dragging my feet.

It was something I'd planned to tell Riley when I'd told him I surrendered, but of course, we'd been interrupted before I could.

"You sure Annie and them don't mind watchin' Gertie?" I asked Riley as I jogged after him.

"Yep," he called over his shoulder.

He seemed to be in quite a hurry to get to the stables, and I had to take three giant steps for every one of his. But I had to admit, I didn't hate the view from back here. That man could wear the heck out of some jeans.

In fact, I think he looked even better in this setting than he did on a stage. In general, of course, not just his butt.

And yes, women around the world just told me to bite my tongue for saying such a thing. But *really*. There had always been something about Riley in Riley-Conrad-the-Superstar mode that'd made him feel completely untouchable to me. Unattainable in the same way the stars in the sky felt too far to reach unless you were already up there with them.

But Riley, the third-generation ranch owner? He was right here.

He had the same smile, the same twinkle in his light blue eyes, and he wore the same kind of hat, flannel, jeans, and cowboy boots that he always did.

Why did it feel so different, then?

He looked over his shoulder, and when he realized how far behind him I'd fallen since the last time he'd turned to check, my only warning about his plan was the glint of mischief that flashed in his eyes. Half a breath later, I was airborne, thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Riley!" I squealed, hitting him in the back with the side of my clenched fist. He didn't seem fazed, but I felt like I'd hit a brick wall, dang it. "Put me down, you Neanderthal!"

"You were walkin' too slow."

"I was walking at a normal human speed walk," I argued. *And wow, his butt even looks good upside down.*

His phone started ringing from his back pocket, and I fished it out before even asking him if I could. Looked like being face-to-face with his backside tossed lots of other boundaries out the window.

“It’s Pais,” I said to him, then slid my thumb across the screen and brought the phone to my ear. “Riley Conrad’s phone, Sack of Potatoes speakin’. How can I help you?”

Riley’s laughter rumbled through my thighs and chest thanks to my position, and *It Was Glorious*.

“Hey, Aubs,” Paisley said, not a drop of humor in her tone. “Sorry to bug you guys while you’re at the ranch, but I need to speak with Riley. It’s important.”

I tapped Riley’s back. “Put me down.”

He did so instantly, and as much as I wish I could’ve enjoyed the sensation of sliding down his brick wall of a body as he lowered me to my borrowed-from-Bailey cowboy boots, Paisley’s tone had made me more than a little nervous.

As usual, he read my expression, and his jaw flexed when I handed him the phone. I half-expected him to pace away from me to take the call, but instead, he pressed the phone to his ear with one hand and slid the other around my waist, holding me to him.

“What’s up, Pais?” he said into the phone, eyes locked on mine.

I waited, searching his gaze. It was pure torture watching Riley’s expression turn from concern, to confusion, to anger, to pain.

“We’ll be right there.” His voice was clipped, and a lead weight dropped into my gut as I realized something so bad must have happened back home that he’d be willing to cut this trip short.

I barely heard the rest of whatever he’d said to Paisley because my mind was running through every worst-case scenario imaginable. What if something had happened to one of my sisters or my parents, and Paisley had wanted to tell

Riley instead of me so he could be the one to break the news in person?

What if it'd been one of the Wilson's?

What if—

“Hey, pretty girl,” Riley whispered, slipping his phone into his pocket and then sliding both hands to my jawline. His thumb brushed over the bandage in a gentle caress, and he kissed my forehead before dipping down so his eyes were level with mine. “Everyone's fine. It's not what you're thinkin'.”

“How do you know what I was thinkin'?” I whispered back.

His lips twitched. “I don't always know exactly what you're thinkin', but sometimes it's like I can feel what you're feelin', and right now, you don't need to be worried. But we do need to head back to Charlotte Oaks.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Shifty and Bernice pulled another one of them citizen's arrest deals and locked up the bush girl.”

I jumped out of his arms and slapped my hands to my face like the kid from *Home Alone*. “They *what?*”

Shifty and Bernice were quite possibly the kookiest residents of Charlotte Oaks, and their antics have been entertaining the town since before I was even born.

They liked to go antiquing, but it was actually more like dumpster diving. All of their spoils wound up in an organized mess in heaping piles and leaning towers all around their massive property, and my sisters and I used to love running around with the Wilson boys in the junkyard the couple called home when we were kids.

Even though they'd chase us out with sticks or sometimes literal pitchforks when they caught us snooping through their treasure, it managed to feel like it was all in good fun.

But a citizen's arrest on a potential stalker? What were they thinking?



This wasn't the first time they'd done something like this, though. But in Jackson and Bailey's case, it'd surprisingly worked out really well for them, so there'd been no charges filed—much to Adam's dismay, our poor Dudley Do-Right.

"I bet Adam's losin' his mind," I said with a sharp, humorless laugh.

I couldn't help it. Despite the seriousness of the situation and the fact that it meant we had to cut our trip short, picturing Adam storming onto Shifty and Bernice's property to retrieve their prisoner had me internally rolling.

"I guess they got a little nervous about the girl and impatient with Adam for not bringin' her in for questionin', so they decided to take matters into their own hands."

"How? And what had them so worried about her?"

He let out a shaky breath, then lifted his hat so he could run his fingers through his hair before replacing it. "They heard her on the phone with someone at the market, and I guess she was tellin' whoever it was some stuff she'd found out about me. They invited her over for coffee and promised to give her the full scoop on me, and when she got to their house, they had a trap set for her."

"Oh my goodness. Is she okay? They are unbelievable!"

"She's a little shaken up, I guess."

I swallowed. "Why do I feel like there's more to this girl than simply stalkin' you?"

He blew out a breath and reeled me in, then leaned his forehead against mine. "I don't wanna leave this place after just gettin' you here. I planned to take you out to my sunset spot and finish up that conversation we started on the plane."

"I feel like we're forever startin' and stoppin' conversations."

"That's just 'cause I'm never gonna press you to finish one until you're ready, so you better get used to it."

I pulled back, shaking my head. "No."

“No?”

I took a deep breath, almost electrified by the absence of that annoying internal battle between the confident side of myself and the awkward one. I just felt like... me.

A new me that could be both of those things, but in a friendly coexisting way and not a duke-it-out-to-see-who'd-win way.

“I don't wanna start and stop conversations with you anymore, and I don't care if the sun isn't settin' yet and we're not at that spot you wanted to take me to, like in your song. We're gonna finish this right now.”

His eyes sparkled, then he stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. “I'm all ears, *darlin'*.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “All right, well, buckle up then. Riley, I don't wanna overthink things or second-guess them or have any miscommunications for my sister to poke fun at me about. I don't wanna worry that lovin' you will somehow derail my dreams, and I don't wanna beat myself up for bein' scared in the past. It'll only keep me actin' out of fear in the future. I wanna move forward. Can I tell you why I wanted to be a flight attendant in the first place?”

I must have shocked him with my tone and using so many words all at once without taking a breath because Riley's jaw was slack the entire time I'd been speaking.

In fact, it looked like he couldn't even manage to nod or acknowledge my question.

That was fine with me, though. For the first time in my life, I was on a roll, and there was no stopping this bullet train now that it'd gotten started.

“I'll tell you why,” I went on, straightening my shoulders and feeling a little like a superhero. “I still wasn't brave enough to become a pilot—thanks to some dumb self-worth wounds that make me wanna kick myself now, but hey, at least you know I'm human, right? But I knew I needed to be in the air.”

I paused to take another breath, but Riley was still moonlighting as the Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum version of himself—which, by the way, is scarily handsome for a wax sculpture. I'd about drooled when I saw it in Vegas one year. Not that I'd ever admit that out loud.

Shaking out my hands, I pressed on. "When I'm in the air, it feels like I can breathe. Ever since I was little, I'd look up at the birds and the planes, and I'd think... I need to be up there. And now, when I am, nothin' seems as impossible or scary from that high up. No distance seems as far as the crow flies as it does when you're on the ground."

Taking yet another breath because, *wow, look at me go!*, I was relieved when Riley finally closed his jaw. At least that meant he was still alive, and he wasn't about to catch a fly in there.

I stepped closer, taking his hands in mine and looking right into his eyes. "That's how you make me feel, Riley. When I'm with you, nothin' seems as impossible or scary, and you hirin' me to work on that plane with you is what finally closed that distance between us. I'm already signed up for flight school, and I know this is all movin' really fast, but I have to tell you how sure I am that bein' with you isn't gonna derail my plans. I wanna follow my heart *and* my dreams, and that means bein' with you. Right now. Not someday."

He squeezed my hands, but he still didn't speak.

I shifted from foot to foot, totally freaking out. Maybe I'd broken him. "Um, I'm done. It's your turn now."

He leaned in and kissed my wrinkled nose. "Aw, man, do I have to? I was enjoyin' the heck outta that. I don't think I've ever heard you say so many words."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad, but you gotta say a bunch of your own words now because I'm not sure I have any more in me."

"I've got a better idea," he whispered. "How 'bout just one question?"

I grinned. "Perfect."

“Did I hear you say somethin’ in there about lovin’ me, Miss Cole?”

“Yes.”

He stepped closer until his chest brushed against mine. A shiver ran through me, and as my eyes locked on his and I noted the flames licking at all those sunny-sky and ice-cream swirls of blue, I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Good, ’cause I love you too, and it ain’t fast, it’s been a long time comin’,” he said. “So, instead of talkin’, how ’bout I just kiss you now?”

I could barely manage to nod, let alone give him a verbal response like he’d needed me to do on the plane. Hopefully, he wouldn’t ask for it this time because my whole body was screaming for him to put his lips on mine, and I didn’t want that *yes* to come out as an embarrassingly enthusiastic shout.

I knew this wouldn’t be a testing, tasting, exploratory kiss like the ones at the dock or on the plane. Riley was taking his time because he could feel what I was feeling, and right now, I felt like this kiss would change the world. It would be a promise and an oath, and it would seal the deal on us.

*For good.* No more reasons to stay away, no more fear or confusion or avoidance.

His arms tightened around me, and I leaned into him, ready to take that step. I slid my hands under his flannel, tracing the lines of his muscles through his tee, grinning when I felt him shudder beneath my palms.

He dipped his head and kissed a line from my collarbone to my neck, over my bandaged jaw, and then finally hovered right where I wanted him.

But he didn’t kiss me. Instead, he leaned in as if he were going to... only to gently nip at my lower lip.

I couldn’t fight the gasp that escaped, but then he quickly soothed the spot with a featherlight kiss and whispered against my lips. “Sorry, I’ve always wanted to do that.”

His tone was so husky that if my eyes weren't closed, I probably would've seen his shining like a knife blade, full of wicked mischief.

Just when I thought I'd have to launch myself at him or I'd never get what I wanted, I felt a smile against my lips as this sweet-as-sin man pressed his mouth to mine.

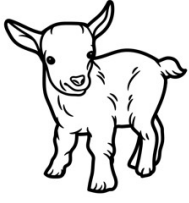
And for the record, this man was *all* man, regardless of how much cream and sugar he put in his coffee, *thankyouverymuch*. I could kick whatever random girl had made him feel otherwise. She clearly had *no* idea.

But I did, and I loved every second of this life-altering kiss. It was the kind of kiss that could set fire to an entire town, but in a way that would give them plenty of warning to get out safely because it moved with reverence and tenderness as it consumed everything in its path.

And right then? As Riley picked me up with what seemed like no effort at all and walked me toward the barn without breaking the kiss, I just hoped there was nothing in *his* path that would send us tumbling to the ground.

But it didn't matter. It wouldn't be a blazingly hot kiss with Riley Conrad without a loud *bleat* from a goat holding a metaphorical firehose, would it?

*Thanks a lot, Gertrude.*



Gertie used to be one of my favorite Charlotte Oakians, but now that old girl was starting to get on my nerves.

Though, it was for the best. We'd needed to get back here to deal with the aftermath of Shifty and Bernice's bright idea, and if it hadn't been for Gertie, we wouldn't be walking into the Charlotte Oaks Police Department right now to do just that.

Right after we'd dropped her butt off with Phoebe, telling Jackson and Bailey they needed to install some kind of escape-goat alarm system, of course.

But if you asked Aubree, as annoying as the constant interrupting was, maybe Gertie actually had our backs. Like a furry goatmother. There was no telling how long it would have taken us to shake off the haze that kiss brought on if it weren't for Gertie and her obnoxious bleats.

*Man*, I wished we hadn't needed to come back here so soon.

Especially after Aubree had poured a dump truck full of her truth all over me, told me she loved me, and then kissed me in a way that promised she'd be mine for the rest of our lives.

And yeah. I'd done it. I'd finally sunk my teeth into that bottom lip of hers like I'd been wanting to do for six whole years.

*No regrets.*

But if it was true that she'd always be mine, I supposed it didn't matter if we'd had to scoop up our interrupting goat and hop back onto the jet without getting to finish what we'd started. We always did, and we'd have plenty of time to do it after we handled this business with Blondie.

At least we'd gotten to make some use out of that bedroom on the plane. Not for any "funny business," as Aubree had called it when I'd first suggested we go lay down during the short flight home. Just to hold her, and to kiss her, and to love on her—all so I wouldn't have to think about the fact that we were headed to a police station to talk to a woman who was oddly determined to find out everything she could about me.

No doubt about it, my security would be tightened the second we could get a team to Charlotte Oaks. I wasn't worried about myself as much as I was worried about Aubree.

Now that I had her in my life, I'd do whatever I could to make sure nothing happened to her because of some misguided people who had nothing better to do than mess with me.

"Hey, you two," Paisley said as she met us at the front desk. "I'd ask how the trip was, but since I'm the one who had to interrupt it, I'm a little afraid to ask."

I shot Aubree a knowing smile and got a mirror image in return. "It wasn't the worst interruption of the day."

"Um, okay," Paisley said with a laugh. "Anyway, Adam's back here with the girl. She hasn't said a word since she came in."

"Still?" Aubree asked, looking dumbfounded as we followed Paisley down the hall. "It's been like five hours since you called."

"Yep. But you're here now, so hopefully she'll open up."

We rounded a corner and found a one-way mirror that gave us a view into the room where Blondie sat. Peering into it from our side were about a half-dozen guys from my security team, mixed in with every single officer at the Charlotte Oaks PD.



Which in this small town meant six officers in total, two being off-duty but nosy, and one being Adam, who was actually inside the room.

Someone knocked on the door to the interrogation room, and Adam came out to brief us. “I’m not kiddin’ when I say she hasn’t said a single word. Hopefully she’ll explain herself when you go in there.”

“I hope so, too,” I said quietly, giving Aubree a small smile when she squeezed my hand.

She’d been holding it since the minute we’d landed, and even though I wasn’t worried about getting hurt by the woman on the other side of that glass, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was so much more to this situation than met the eye. And after Aubree had shared that she felt the same way, that made it even more real to me.

“What happened to your face?” Adam asked, ducking so he could get a better look at the bandage on Aubree’s jaw.

She waved a hand. “Hazards of flyin’ with a man who never lets his guitar out of his sight.”

All three of us looked down at the hand that wasn’t holding Aubree’s, and I adjusted my grip on the guitar case with a shrug. “What? Women carry purses wherever they go.”

“That ain’t a purse,” Adam said dryly.

“No, it’s better. Don’t judge me, Wilson. I’m sure you’ve got a weird thing, too.”

Paisley snorted from beside me, and Adam shot her a glare before turning back to me. “You gonna have a talk with your stalker before I let the town give it a go? Norma from the diner has been callin’ all night for an update, and the Wine Club is holdin’ their meetin’ in the parkin’ lot tonight, so they’re close ‘in case we need them.’”

Aubree frowned. “Is that allowed? Isn’t that drinkin’ and drivin’ or somethin’?”

“They swear it’s grape juice,” he said from between clenched teeth. “And since they walked—and brought foldin’

chairs—the most I can pop ’em with is public intoxication if they’re lyin’.”

“Your *momma*,” I said slowly, chuckling when Adam cocked his head in confusion. “You’re gonna pop your *momma* with a public intoxication charge? Really?”

Adam mumbled something under his breath and hitched his thumb over his shoulder toward the door. We’d been stalling a little, I was man enough to admit it.

But it was time.

“You ready?” I asked Aubree, quirking a brow at Adam when he opened his mouth like he’d say something in protest.

Aubree looked between us. “You want me to come in with you?”

“Yeah, if you wanna.”

She nodded, ignoring Adam’s mumblings about this not being protocol. “Lead the way.”

I kissed her temple instead of saying thank you, and then I let go of Aubree’s hand to open the door and then shut it behind us. We crossed to the chairs, and I pulled hers out so she could sit, leaned my guitar against the wall, and then took the seat next to her.

All the while, Blondie watched us from the other side of the table. She had her chin in her palms, her fingers framing her face, and her cheeks pressed together like a child. It made her look ten years younger than I’d originally thought, but I was sure that couldn’t be right.

“Hi,” I said, shifting in the cold metal chair.

“I am so sorry,” she blurted, dropping her hands so she could rest her forehead on her arms. “This was such a bad idea. I knew it was, and I came anyway, and then I was creepy and weird and made the whole town think I was some kind of serial killer stalker or homicidal maniac or ex-girlfriend trying to chop you up into a million little pieces, and then I got myself kidnapped, and now I’m in a *police station*.”

Her head was down the entire time she went on that rant, and as she finished, Aubree and I slowly turned toward each other. I could tell we had all the same questions.

*What in the world is happening right now?*

*What does she mean it was a bad idea, but she came anyway?*

*Is she exaggerating, or is that what the town really thought of her?*

*Are any of these things true?*

But since neither of us had the answers, we shrugged in unison.

“Um, can we start with your name?” Aubree asked.

And it was a good thing, too, because I was at a loss for words. My, how the tables had turned.

“Aurora,” she said, lifting her head but keeping her eyes on the table. “But everyone calls me Rory.”

“All right, Rory,” Aubree said, leaning forward a bit. “Can you tell us what you meant when you said you knew it was a bad idea to come here but you came anyway? We’re just tryin’ to figure out what’s goin’ on. Neither one of us thinks you mean Riley any harm, so maybe just help us understand?”

I blinked at Aubree a few times, and she shrugged. *Good grief, this woman was solid gold.*

Rory sniffed, then let out a shaky laugh. “You’re gonna call me crazy if I tell you.”

I waved a hand. “Nah, mental health isn’t somethin’ I take lightly. I don’t make a habit of tossin’ that word around.”

She managed a small smile. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Noted.” I reached for Aubree’s hand under the table, needing her to ground me.

“Riley,” Rory started, sighing and scrubbing her hands over her face, “I’ve been lookin’ for you for a long time.”

I felt my left eye twitch, and I cocked my head to the side. “Hmm.”

“Yep. I can see it. You wanna call me crazy. Go ahead, I get it.”

Why did I suddenly have the urge to smile? I was sitting at a table with the woman I loved, having a conversation with a woman who’d practically admitted to being my stalker, and something deep in my chest was trying to claw its way out in the form of a genuine, honest-to-goodness, almost-affectionate *smile?*

One look at Aubree had me swallowing back a gasp. She felt the same way. I could see it all over her face.

“Riley, you’re my brother,” Rory whispered.

My head snapped back to her. “*What?*”

Aubree squeezed my hand.

“You’re my brother. I’m your sister,” Rory said, louder this time. “And I’ve been looking for you for pretty much my entire life.”

I shook my head, lips pulled down into a frown so deep I was sure I looked like an angry clown. “No. No way.”

“Yes. I swear it.”

Aubree jumped when I slammed my hand onto the shiny metal table, but I couldn’t do anything to stop the rage boiling my blood like the world’s most seasoned cast iron. Her hand in mine was the only thing that stopped me from fleeing the room and leaving a stream of curses in my wake.

“It ain’t true,” I seethed.

“Hear her out, Riley,” Aubree said, using her other hand to pet my forearm like I was a skittish dog.

It kinda helped, though, not gonna lie.

I nodded at the liar across from me. “Fine. Speak.”

“My—*our*—parents told me about you when I was little,” she began, her eyes turning apologetic when I winced. “They

didn't come from good homes, and when they had you—”

“I can't do this,” I said, shooting up from the table.

But as much as I wanted to hightail it out of there, my stupid hand had a mind of its own and couldn't seem to let go of Aubree's. And since I wasn't about to yank her from her chair and carry her out with me, and she didn't look like she was willing to follow me out on her own, it seemed I was stuck.

I met Aubree's gaze, and in a move that seemed a thousand percent calculated and purposeful, she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Really?” I deadpanned.

She only nodded, those ocean eyes seeming to sparkle in the cold fluorescent lighting.

“That's low,” I muttered, slowly easing myself back into my chair. I ran my free hand through my hair and rolled my shoulders, then gestured to Rory. “Fine. Go on. Apparently, I'm not goin' anywhere.”

Despite, well, everything about this situation, Rory looked between us with the kind of fondness in her gaze that one would expect from a sister. As much as I hated to admit it, she looked exactly like Lany or Dakota any time they'd seen Aubree and me flirt or ruffle each other's feathers over the last six weeks.

I didn't like it.

I didn't *hate* it, but I didn't like it.

Because she had to be full of bologna, didn't she? How could she have the same parents I had? How could I have parents out there who would have another kid after putting me up for adoption and making sure the records were sealed up so tight you'd need to be a CIA agent to bust them open? Why didn't they want me, but having her wasn't an issue?

“So, um, anyway,” Rory went on, twisting her hands in complicated knots, “our parents were teenagers when they got pregnant with you, and they both still lived at home, and

unfortunately... Well, they come from *bad* homes. Let's just say I've never met our grandparents on either side."

My heart cracked a little at that, but I stapled it back together with sheer will and grit. "Go on."

"They didn't have a choice when they put you up for adoption. It wouldn't have been a good environment for a baby."

I held up a hand. "You know what? Hang on. I've always known I was adopted, so it's not like that part of all this is breaking news, but it was a closed adoption. How did you find me?"

"DNA," she said, as if it should've been obvious.

"Did you take one of those tests, Riley?" Aubree asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

On the way home from the ranch, she'd asked if I'd ever gone looking for my birth parents, and I'd told her there was a brief time when I thought I wanted to, but I hadn't followed through with it. I hadn't given her the details, though, so it made sense she'd be confused.

I blew out a breath. "Uh, once, years ago. But then I realized I didn't want to know who they were. If they didn't want me, and if they sealed up my records so I could never find them, why would I wanna seek them out? I deleted the DNA app, and I unsubscribed from their emails, and last I heard, that company went out of business, so I put it out of my mind."

Rory nodded. "Well, like I said, I've been looking for you for a long time. I've taken like every DNA test there is because those things only work if both people have their DNA in the system, and a couple of months ago, I got a hit from a new company. Maybe they bought the lab or data from that one that went out of business?"

"That sounds shady," Aubree mumbled. "Can they do that?"

I shrugged. "Who knows."

“Shady or not, here I am.”

“I didn’t use my real name on that app,” I said, swallowing hard. “You some kind of hacker or somethin’?”

She grinned. “Nope. But our dad is.”

I tilted my head. “Come again?”

“He joined the Marines when he was eighteen, and he and Mom finally got away from their parents for good after that. He’s in Intelligence, and let’s just say he’s kind of the coolest keyboard wizard in the world.”

I rubbed my palm over my chest. “He’s a Marine?”

Aubree squeezed my hand, her eyes welling up with tears. “Wow, Riley.”

I swallowed back the lump in my throat, needing to look away. Unfortunately, that meant looking at Rory, and she had a look of such hope on her face that it caused a single tear to fall. I swiped it away with a muttered curse and a laugh.

A knock sounded at the door, and all three of us jumped when Adam walked in and slammed the door behind him.

“Uh, hey, Adam,” Aubree said slowly. “What’s up?”

He rested his hands on his gear belt and pursed his lips. “So, here’s the thing. There doesn’t appear to be any reason to lock up Miss Rory here, so do y’all wanna take this conversation back to the house?”

I frowned. “Uh…”

“See, there ain’t a dry eye in my hallway right now, and I need these fools to get back to work. I need the loiterers to go back to their lives. And I need the Wine Club to get their noses off my one-way mirror and take their ‘grape juice’ out of my station before I arrest them. I’m thinkin’ the only way for all that to happen is if the three of you take this family reunion to a more appropriate venue. We clear?”

All of us nodded woodenly, and when he raised his brows and pursed his lips like he was wondering what we were still

doing here, we shot out of our chairs and left the room in a hurry.

Once outside—surrounded by my security team since the whole town had already heard I was being stalked by my own long-lost sister—I waited for Rory to climb into the blacked-out SUV that would take us a few blocks to the neighborhood, then grabbed Aubree’s hand before she could get in.

I nodded at my security team as I shut the door on Rory, and they formed a wall around us so I could have a quick moment with my girl.

“Riley, what are you doin’? We should go. You and Rory have a lot to talk about.”

I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her hard on the mouth, then brought my forehead down to hers. “Yeah, we do. All three of us do. Because havin’ you in that room was the only reason I made it through that conversation, and I’m not gonna make it through another one without you by my side.”

She shook her head—as much as she could, anyway, considering the grip I had on her face—and grinned up at me. “That’s not true. You’re braver than you think. But I’m happy to be there for you whenever you want me to be just because I like bein’ near you.”

“You’re pretty brave yourself, you know that, right?”

“I do, actually. Kinda still lettin’ it sink in, but I do.”

“Good.”

“And Riley?”

I gave her a chaste kiss because I had to. “Yeah?”

“I’ve been keepin’ somethin’ from you.”

I chuckled. “What’s new?”

“Hush.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve already started my flight school classes. I’m really doin’ this.”



My heart pounded in my chest, it was so full of love and pride. “I’m happy to hear that, darlin’, because I happen to be in the market for a new pilot.”

She gasped. “You are not! Don’t you dare fire John! He’s amazin’!”

“He almost got you killed!”

“It was rough air!”

I kissed her again, finally releasing her jawline because the memory of that turbulence had me realizing her scrape might be sore. But I didn’t want to let her go, so I wrapped my arms around her waist instead, pulling her against me.

“I’m not gonna fire John. But he’s old, and he said he’s lookin’ to retire soon anyway. So once you have your wings, how ’bout you come fly with me?”

She rolled her eyes and groaned. “Oof, I see what you did there. That was smooth.”

“You love it.”

“I love *you*. And yes, I would love to fly you around. And for the record, now that I know how easy it is to fly between Crossfire Ranch and Charlotte Oaks, I’m thinkin’ someday we’re gonna have a really sweet life callin’ both of those places home.”

I hummed low in my throat and kissed her thoroughly before pulling back to take her in. “Like you said, nothin’ is as far as the crow flies as it seems from the ground, huh?”

“Exactly. Now, are you ready to go? People are starin’ and it’s freakin’ me out a little.”

“Let ’em stare. I’ll distract you.”

And so I did. Right there in the COPD parking lot—*ugh, yep, I hate that acronym*—I kissed the heck out of this quietly brave and fiercely sweet woman for all the world to see.

Because I could.

Because I’d missed out on six years of doing it thanks to both of us being eye-roll-worthy.

And because even though I was about to find out more about a family I never thought I'd find at a house belonging to the family who'd taken me in as one of their own, Aubree Cole was finally mine, and that meant I had everything I'd ever need.



*Thank you for reading Riley and Aubree's story! Don't worry, the next book picks up right where this one leaves off because Riley's sister is our next heroine!*

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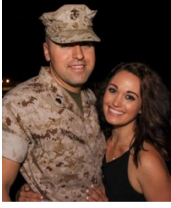
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# about the author

Jess Mastorakos writes clean military romance books that feature heroes with heart and the strong women they love. She is a proud Marine wife and mama of four. She loves her coffee in a glitter tumbler and planning with an erasable pen.



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