

PROLOGUE



The Louis Seize-style mirror in the bedroom of suite 409 at the Aquitaine Hotel reflected for little more than an instant a slim, fine-featured woman: wide blue eyes, clenched fists, dark hair streaming behind her as she ran.

Then AnnieLee Keyes vanished from the glass, as her bare feet took her racing into the suite's living room. She dodged the edge of the giltwood settee, flinging its throw pillow over her shoulder. A lamp fell with a crash behind her. She leaped over the coffee table, with its neat stack of *Las Vegas* magazines and tray of complimentary Debauve & Gallais truffles, her name written in chocolate ganache flecked with edible gold. She hadn't even tasted a single one.

Her foot caught the bouquet of Juliet roses and the vase tipped over, scattering pink blooms all over the carpet.

The balcony was up ahead of her, its doors open to the morning sun. In another instant, she'd reached it, and the hot air hit her in the face like a fist. She jumped onto the chaise longue and threw her right leg over the railing, struggling to push herself the rest of the way up.

Then, balanced on the thin rail between the hotel and the sky, she hesitated. Her heart beat so quickly she could hardly breathe. Every nerve ending sparked with adrenaline.

I can't, she thought. *I can't do it.*

But she had to. Her fingers clutched the rail for another split second before she willed them loose. Her lips moved in an instant of desperate prayer. Then she launched herself into the air. The sun flared, but her vision darkened and became a tunnel. She could see only below her—upturned faces, mouths open in screams she couldn't hear over her own.

Time slowed. She spread out her arms as if she were flying.

And weren't flying and falling the same?

Maybe, she thought, *except for the landing.*

Each millisecond stretched to an hour, these measures of time all she had left in this world. Life had been so damn hard, and she'd clawed her way up only to fling herself back down. She didn't want to die, but she was going to.

AnnieLee twisted in the air, trying to protect herself from what was coming. Trying to aim for the one thing that might save her.

ELEVEN
MONTHS EARLIER

CHAPTER

1

AnnieLee had been standing on the side of the road for an hour, thumbing a ride, when the rain started falling in earnest.

Wouldn't you know it? she thought as she tugged a gas station poncho out of her backpack. *It just figures.*

She pulled the poncho over her jacket and yanked the hood over her damp hair. The wind picked up, and fat raindrops began to beat a rhythm on the cheap plastic. But she kept that hopeful smile plastered on her face, and she tapped her foot on the gravel shoulder as a bit of a new song came into her head.

Is it easy? she sang to herself.

No it ain't

Can I fix it?

No I cain't

She'd been writing songs since she could talk and making melodies even before that. AnnieLee Keyes couldn't hear the call of a wood thrush, the *plink plink plink* of a leaky faucet,

or the rumbling rhythm of a freight train without turning it into a tune.

Crazy girl finds music in everything—that’s what her mother had said, right up until the day she died. And the song coming to AnnieLee now gave her something to think about besides the cars whizzing by, their warm, dry occupants not even slowing down to give her a second glance.

Not that she could blame them; she wouldn’t stop for herself, either. Not in this weather, and her probably looking no better than a drowned possum.

When she saw the white station wagon approaching, going at least twenty miles under the speed limit, she crossed her fingers that it would be some nice old grandpa pulling over to offer her a lift. She’d turned down two rides back when she thought she’d have her choice of them, the first from a chain-smoking lady with two snarling Rottweilers in the back seat, the second from a kid who’d looked higher than Mount Everest.

Now she could kick herself for being so picky. Either driver would have at least gotten her a few miles up the road, smelling like one kind of smoke or another.

The white wagon was fifty yards away, then twenty-five, and as it came at her she gave a friendly, graceful wave, as if she was some kind of celebrity on the shoulder of the Crosby Freeway and not some half-desperate nobody with all her worldly belongings in a backpack.

The old Buick crawled toward her in the slow lane, and AnnieLee’s waving grew nearly frantic. But she could have stood on her head and shot rainbows out of her Ropers and it wouldn’t have mattered. The car passed by and grew gradually smaller in the distance. She stomped her foot like a kid, splattering herself with mud.

Is it easy? she sang again.

No it ain't

Can I fix it?

No I cain't

But I sure ain't gonna take it lyin' down

It was catchy, all right, and AnnieLee wished for the twentieth time that she had her beloved guitar. But it wouldn't have fit in her pack, for one thing, and for another, it was already hanging on the wall at Jeb's Pawn.

If she had one wish—besides to get the hell out of Texas—it was that whoever bought Maybelle would take good care of her.

The distant lights of downtown Houston seemed to blur as AnnieLee blinked raindrops from her eyes. If she thought about her life back there for more than an instant, she'd probably stop wishing for a ride and just start running.

By now the rain was falling harder than she'd seen it in years. As if God had drawn up all the water in Buffalo Bayou just so He could pour it back down on her head.

She was shivering, her stomach ached with hunger, and suddenly she felt so lost and furious she could cry. She had nothing and nobody; she was broke and alone and night was coming on.

But there was that melody again; it was almost as if she could hear it inside the rain. *All right*, she thought, *I don't have nothing. I have music.*

And so she didn't cry. She sang instead.

Will I make it?

Maybe so

Closing her eyes, she could imagine herself on a stage somewhere, singing for a rapt audience.

Will I give up?

Oh no

She could feel the invisible crowd holding its breath.

I'll be fightin' til I'm six feet underground

Her eyes were squeezed shut and her face was tilted to the sky as the song swelled inside her. Then a horn blared, and AnnieLee Keyes nearly jumped out of her boots.

She was hoisting both her middle fingers high at the tractor trailer when she saw its brake lights flare.

CHAPTER

2

Was there ever a more beautiful color in the whole wide world? AnnieLee could write a damn ode to the dazzling red of those brake lights.

As she ran toward the truck, the cab's passenger door swung open. She wiped the rain from her eyes and looked at her rescuer. He was a gray-haired, soft-bellied man in his fifties, smiling down at her from six feet up. He tipped his baseball cap at her like a country gentleman.

"Come on in before you drown," he called.

A gust of wind blew the rain sideways, and without another second's hesitation, AnnieLee grabbed onto the door handle and hauled herself into the passenger seat, flinging water everywhere.

"Thank you," she said breathlessly. "I thought I was going to have to spend the night out there."

"That would've been rough," the man said. "It's a good thing I came along. Lot of people don't like to stop. Where you headed?"

“East,” she said as she pulled off her streaming poncho and then shrugged out of her heavy backpack. Her shoulders were killing her. Come to think of it, so were her feet.

“My name’s Eddie,” the man said. He thrust out a hand for her to shake.

“I’m... Ann,” she said, taking it.

He held her fingers for a moment before releasing them. “It’s real nice to meet you, Ann.” Then he put the truck into gear, looked over his shoulder, and pulled onto the highway.

He was quiet for a while, which was more than fine with AnnieLee, but then over the road noise she heard Eddie clear his throat. “You’re dripping all over my seat,” he said.

“Sorry.”

“Here, you can at least dry your face,” he said, tossing a red bandanna onto her lap. “Don’t worry, it’s clean,” he said when she hesitated. “My wife irons two dozen for me every time I head out on a run.”

Reassured by news of this wife, AnnieLee pressed the soft bandanna to her cheeks. It smelled like Downy. Once she’d wiped her face and neck, she wasn’t sure if she should give it back to him, so she just wadded it up in her hand.

“You hitchhike a lot?” Eddie asked.

AnnieLee shrugged because she didn’t see how it was any of his business.

“Look, I been driving longer than you been alive, I bet, and I’ve seen some things. *Bad* things. You don’t know who you can trust.”

Then she saw his big hand coming toward her, and she flinched.

Eddie laughed. “Relax. I’m just turning up the heat.” He twisted a knob, and hot air blasted in her face. “I’m one of the

good guys,” he said. “Husband, dad, all that white-picket-fence business. Shoot, I even got a dang *poodle*. That was my wife’s idea, though. I wanted a blue heeler.”

“How old are your kids?” AnnieLee asked.

“Fourteen and twelve,” he said. “Boys. One plays football, the other plays chess. Go figure.” He held out a battered thermos. “Got coffee if you want it. Just be careful, because it’s probably still hot as hellfire.”

AnnieLee thanked him, but she was too tired for coffee. Too tired to talk. She hadn’t even asked Eddie where he was going, but she hardly cared. She was in a warm, dry cab, putting her past behind her at seventy miles per hour. She wadded her poncho into a pillow and leaned her head against the window. Maybe everything was going to be okay.

She must have fallen asleep then, because when she opened her eyes she saw a sign for Lafayette, Louisiana. The truck’s headlights shone through slashing rain. A Kenny Chesney song was on the radio. And Eddie’s hand was on her thigh.

She stared down at his big knuckles as her mind came out of its dream fog. Then she looked over at him. “I think you better take your hand off me,” she said.

“I was wondering how long you were going to sleep,” Eddie said. “I was getting lonely.”

She tried to push his hand away, but he squeezed tighter.

“Relax,” he said. His fingers dug into her thigh. “Why don’t you move closer, Ann? We can have a little fun.”

AnnieLee gritted her teeth. “If you don’t take your hand off me, you’re going to be sorry.”

“Oh, girl, you are just precious,” he said. “You just relax and let me do what I like.” His hand slid farther up her thigh. “We’re all alone in here.”

AnnieLee's heart pounded in her chest, but she kept her voice low. "You don't want to do this."

"Sure I do."

"I'm warning you," she said.

Eddie practically giggled at her. "What are you going to do, girl, scream?"

"No," she said. She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out the gun. Then she pointed it at his chest. "I'm going to do *this*."

Eddie's hand shot off her leg so fast she would've laughed if she weren't so outraged.

But he got over his surprise quickly, and his eyes grew narrow and mean. "Hundred bucks says you can't even fire that thing," he said. "You better put that big gun away before you get hurt."

"*Me* get hurt?" AnnieLee said. "The barrel's not pointing at me, jackass. Now you apologize for touching me."

But Eddie was angry now. "You skinny little tramp, I wouldn't touch you with a tent pole! You're probably just another truck stop hoo—"

She pulled the trigger, and sound exploded in the cabin—first the shot, and then the scream of that dumb trucker.

The truck swerved, and somewhere behind them a horn blared. "What the hell're you doing, you crazy hobo bitch?"

"Pull over," she said.

"I'm not pull—"

She lifted the pistol again. "Pull over. I'm not kidding," she said.

Cursing, Eddie braked and pulled over onto the shoulder. When the truck came to a stop, AnnieLee said, "Now get out. Leave the keys in and the engine running."

He was sputtering and pleading, trying to reason with

her now, but she couldn't be bothered to listen to a word he said.

"Get out," she said. "Now."

She shook the gun at him and he opened the door. The way the rain was coming down, he was soaked before he hit the ground.

"You crazy, stupid, trashy—"

AnnieLee lifted the gun so it was pointing right at his mouth, so he shut it. "Looks like there's a rest stop a couple miles ahead," she said. "You can have yourself a nice walk and a cold shower at the same time. Pervert."

She slammed the door, but she could feel him beating on the side of the cab as she tried to figure out how to put the truck into gear. She fired another shot, out the window, and that made him quit until she found the clutch and the gas.

Then AnnieLee grabbed hold of the gearshift. Her stepdad might've been the world's biggest asshole, but he'd taught her to drive stick. She knew how to double-clutch and how to listen to the revs. And maybe songs weren't the only thing she had a natural talent for, because it didn't take her long at all to lurch that giant rig off the shoulder and pull out onto the highway, leaving Eddie screaming behind her.

I'm driving, she thought giddily. I'm driving!

She yanked on the horn and shot deeper into the darkness. And then she started singing.

Driven to insanity, driven to the edge

Driven to the point of almost no return

She beat out a rhythm on the steering wheel.

Driven, driven to be smarter

Driven to work harder

Driven to be better every day

That last line made her laugh out loud. Sure, she'd be better tomorrow—because tomorrow the sun would come out again, and tomorrow she had absolutely *no plans* to carjack an eighteen-wheeler.

CHAPTER

3

Ruthanna couldn't get the damn lick out of her head. A descending roll in C major, twangy as a rubber band, it was crying out for lyrics, a bass line, a song to live inside. She tapped her long nails on her desk as she scrolled through her emails.

"Later," she said, to herself or to the lick, she wasn't entirely sure. "We'll give you some attention when the boys show up to play."

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and already she'd fielded six pleading requests for Ruthanna Ryder, one of country music's grandest queens, to grace some big industry event or another with her royal presence.

She couldn't understand it, but people just failed to get the message: she'd *retired* that crown. Ruthanna didn't want to put on high heels, false eyelashes, and a sparkling Southern smile anymore. She wasn't going to stand up on some hot, bright stage in a dress so tight it made her ribs ache. She had no desire to pour her heart out into a melody that'd bring tears to a thousand pairs of eyes, hers included. No, sir, she'd put in her time, and

now she was done. She was still writing songs—she couldn't stop that if she tried—but if the world thought it was going to ever hear them, it had another thing coming. Her music was only for herself now.

She looked up from the screen as Maya, her assistant, walked into the room with a crumpled paper bag in one hand and a stack of mail in the other.

“The sun sure is bright on those gold records today,” Maya said.

Ruthanna sighed at her. “Come on, Maya. You're the *one person* I'm supposed to be able to count on not to harass me about my quote, unquote, career. Jack must've called with another 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'”

Maya just laughed, which was her way of saying, *You bet your white ass he did.*

Jack was Ruthanna's manager—ahem, *former* manager. “All right, what does he want from me today?”

“He wouldn't tell me yet. But he said that it's not what *he* wants. He's thinking about what *you* really want.”

Ruthanna gave a delicate snort. “*I* really want to be left alone. Why he thinks he knows something different is beyond me.” She picked up her ringing phone, silenced it, and then threw it onto the overstuffed couch across the room.

Maya watched this minor tantrum serenely. “He says the world's still hungry for your voice. For your songs.”

“Well, a little hunger never hurt anyone.” She gave her assistant a sly grin. “Not that you'd know much about hunger.”

Maya put a hand on her ample hip. “And *you* got room to talk,” she said.

Ruthanna laughed. “Touché. But whose fault is it for hiring Louie from the ribs place to be my personal chef? You could've picked someone who knew his way around a salad.”

“Coul'da, would'a, should'a,” Maya said. She put a stack of

letters in Ruthanna's inbox and held out the paper bag. "It's from Jack."

"What is that, muffins? I told Jack I was off carbs this month," Ruthanna said.

Not that Jack believed anything she told him lately. The last time they'd talked she'd said that she was going to start gardening, and he'd laughed so hard he dropped the phone into his pool. When he called her back on his landline he was still wheezing with delight. "I can't see you out there pruning roses any more than I can see you stripping off your clothes and riding down Lower Broadway on a silver steed like Lady Godiva of Nashville," he'd said.

Her retort—that it was past the season for pruning roses anyway—had failed to convince him.

"No, ma'am," Maya said, "these are *definitely* not muffins."

"You looked?"

"He told me to. He said if I saw them, I'd be sure you opened them. Otherwise he was afraid you might chuck the bag in a bin somewhere, and that'd be...well, a lot of sparkle to throw away."

"Sparkle, huh?" Ruthanna said, her interest piqued.

Maya shook her head at her, like, *You just don't know how lucky you are*. But since lovely Maya had a husband who bought her flowers every Friday and just about kissed the ground she walked on, she was considerably fortunate herself. Ruthanna, divorced seven years now, only got presents from people who wanted something from her.

She took the bag. Unrolling the top, she looked inside, and there, lying at the bottom of the bag—not even in a velvet box—was a pair of diamond chandelier earrings, each one as long as her index finger, false nail included. "Holy sugar," Ruthanna said.

“I know. I already googled them,” Maya said. “Price available upon request.”

Ruthanna held them up so that they caught the light brilliantly and flung rainbows onto her desk. She owned plenty of diamonds, but these were spectacular. “They look like earrings you’d buy a trophy wife,” she said.

“Correction,” said Maya. “They look like earrings you’d buy a woman who made you millions as she clawed her way to the top of her industry and into the hearts of a vast majority of the world’s population.”

The office line rang, and Ruthanna put the earrings back into the bag without trying them on. She gestured to Maya to answer it.

“Ryder residence,” Maya said, and then put on her listening face. After a while she nodded. “Yes, Jack, I’ll pass that information along.”

“He couldn’t keep his little secret after all, could he?” Ruthanna asked when her assistant hung up.

“He says they want to give you some big giant honor at the Country Music Awards—but you’d actually have to go,” Maya said. “And he’d like me to tell you that you really shouldn’t pass up such a perfect opportunity to wear those earrings.”

Ruthanna laughed. Jack really was something else. “That man can buy me diamonds until hell turns into a honky-tonk,” she said. “I’m out of the business.”

CHAPTER

4

Ethan Blake's aging F-150 coughed and belched as he pulled through the wrought-iron gates of Ruthanna's sprawling compound in Belle Meade. It was a good thing the security cameras didn't record audio, because the Ford sounded downright embarrassing. It needed a new exhaust system plus half a dozen other repairs. But until he had more than a few grand in his bank account, vehicular maintenance was on the back burner.

Ethan pulled up under the shade of a massive oak and looked at his watch. When he saw that it was 11:02, he jumped out of the cab so fast he was halfway to the door before he realized he'd forgotten his guitar. By the time he was on the stoop outside the kitchen door, it was four minutes after the hour, and he was sweating through his white T-shirt.

He gave the knob a tug, but it was locked. Then, as the seconds ticked by, he started banging on the glass. There was no response. He fired a volley of curses into the ivy creeping up the sides of the Greek Revival mansion that Ruthanna jokingly called the Castle, and then he went around to the front and

began stabbing madly at the doorbell. Ruthanna was going to kill him.

Maya finally opened the door. “May I help you?” she asked. She looked him up and down like he was a stranger trying to sell her a set of encyclopedias.

“Maya,” Ethan said, exasperated. “I’m here to record.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. But she didn’t step aside to let him in.

“I’m late,” he said. “I know, I’m sorry. I couldn’t get Gladys started.”

Maya’s dark eyes widened. “I sure don’t want to hear about that!” she exclaimed.

Ethan blushed right down to his neck. “Gladys is my *truck*.”

Maya laughed at her joke, and then her face grew serious again. “Well, you know where you’re going, and I guess you’d better get yourself there quick. You-know-who’s waiting.”

He ducked his head in thanks, nerves jangling, and hurried through the marble-floored foyer, passing the magnificent living room on his left. Ruthanna probably called it the parlor or the salon or something fancy like that, because it looked like one of those roped-off period rooms in a museum. There were leaded-glass windows; massive, glittering chandeliers; and walls hand-painted with tumbling English roses. It was ten times bigger than his entire apartment.

He’d never gotten a tour of the mansion, since all Ruthanna cared about was that he knew where the basement recording studio was, but the house had to be nine thousand square feet at least. He’d even gotten lost in the halls once. But now he took a deep breath—he could just *feel* Ruthanna waiting on him, simmering with impatience—and then he practically ran down the basement stairs.

Though it seemed as though the majority of music these days was recorded and mixed using little but a MacBook and Pro

Tools, Ruthanna was old-school. She had an old tube mixing board she'd saved from some legendary Nashville studio or another, and she liked all her musicians playing together rather than overdubbing for days. She said she loved the raw, natural way the songs came out sounding when people actually played their parts at the same time.

Opening the door to the live room, Ethan saw most of the band already assembled: Melissa, with her fiddle tucked under her arm; Elrodd, perched behind the drums; and Donna, tinkering around on the upright bass.

"Hey," Ethan said. He didn't see Stan, though, which meant—thank God—that he wasn't the last one to arrive. Relieved, Ethan was just setting down his instrument when the lead guitarist came out of the isolation booth with his Stratocaster in his hand.

Stan gave Ethan a look that said, *Ub-oh, bro.*

Ruthanna's voice came at Ethan over the intercom. "I know you're the new one in the room, but I did think you'd know enough not to keep your fellow musicians waiting. Didn't they teach you about punctuality in the army, Captain Blake?"

He turned toward her; she was in the control room with the engineer, on the other side of a gleaming pane of glass. "I'm sorry, Ruthanna. I couldn't—"

She cut him off with a flip of her hand. "Absolutely not interested in your excuses," she said. "You think you're so special that you can roll in whenever you want to? Sure, you're real cute, you've got a nice voice, and on a good day you could be Vince Gill's pale imitation, but Nashville is lousy with guitar players with tight jeans and a tight butt *who can show up on time.*"

Stan gave a low whistle under his breath. He was clearly glad not to be on the receiving end of the dress-down. And though Ethan's cheeks burned, he kept his mouth shut for once. He

didn't want to lose this job. He *couldn't* lose this job. His part-time gig bartending at a karaoke dive wouldn't even cover the rent, let alone get Gladys running the way she should.

"I'll never—" he began.

"Damn right 'never,'" Ruthanna said. "Now take your guitar out and get tuning."

As he did what he was told, he glanced over at Donna. "Are my jeans too tight?" he whispered.

But she just laughed at him.

After he'd tuned, he warmed up by playing the song Ruthanna had written yesterday, a smart-ass send-up of certain music industry types called "Snakes in the Grass." He picked the bass line with his thumb and the melody with his other fingers, Chet Atkins-style, until he realized that Ruthanna had left the control room and was standing right next to him.

"Mr. Blake, let me remind you that we *have* a bassist," she said. "So don't think you need to do her job."

He turned to meet her fierce eyes. Ruthanna was twice his age but still beautiful. She had a smile that could light up a whole concert hall and a tongue sharper than a serpent's tooth. He just about worshipped the ground she walked on, and he couldn't believe how lucky he was to get to play music with her. But he also couldn't understand why she wouldn't release any of her new songs.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said.

She landed a light smack on his shoulder. "The word you're looking for," she said, "is *boss*."

Then she turned on her heel and walked over to the microphone.

"All right, then," she said. "Let's play some damn music."

CHAPTER

5



U nderneath a buzzing neon sign that read CAT'S PAW SALOON, AnnieLee smoothed her hair and took a deep breath.

"You can do this," she whispered. "This is what you came here for."

It wasn't much of a pep talk, but AnnieLee figured she shouldn't stand around on a city sidewalk muttering to herself like a crazy person, so short and sweet would have to do. She took another deep breath, yanked the door open, and strode inside.

The bar was cool and softly lit by Christmas lights draped in multicolored strands along the ceiling and walls. On a stage at the back of the room stood a man in a big black cowboy hat, playing a battered guitar and singing a Willie Nelson tune in a low, mournful voice. To her right was a long wooden bar, and to her left, a woman in a DON'T MESS WITH TEXAS shirt was racking balls on a red-felted pool table. AnnieLee scanned the crowd, such as it was, and decided everyone looked reasonably friendly. The air smelled like beer and French fries.

In other words, it was a perfect dive bar, and it would do just fine for her Nashville debut. AnnieLee walked over to the bar and climbed up onto a stool, ignoring the admiring eyes that followed her progress.

The bartender, a middle-aged man with a handlebar mustache, slid a cardboard coaster toward her. “What can I do for ya, miss?” he asked.

AnnieLee swallowed down her fear and smiled her klieg light smile at him. “You can put me up on that stage after that guy’s done,” she said.

The bartender gave a snort and swiped the coaster back. He bent down behind the bar, reappearing with a knife in one hand and a giant lemon in the other. AnnieLee watched as he started cutting the lemon and pitching the slices into the garnish station, next to a tray of crimson-dyed maraschino cherries. He didn’t look at her again or say another word.

Is that it? she wondered. Is he going to ignore me now?

She tapped her fingers on the bar as she glanced over at the singer, now playing the opening chords to a Garth Brooks number. No one in the room seemed to be paying much attention to him. AnnieLee wondered if he felt bad about being background music, or if being up there with a guitar and a microphone was reward enough. Because if he wasn’t enjoying himself sufficiently, she’d trade places with him in a heartbeat.

AnnieLee gave her hair a nervous flip. She knew she could shine on that stage—she just needed the chance. And Mr. Mustache here had to be the guy who’d give it to her, because her feet hurt too much to walk any more today.

She turned back to the bartender, who was now hacking away at a bunch of limes. She cleared her throat, but he still didn’t look up.

Her courage wavered. She had the songs, but she hadn't prepared the sales pitch.

Listen, she said to herself, you didn't carjack your way to Nashville to watch someone cut up a damn fruit salad, so you better open your big ol' mouth and start talking.

"I'm sure you get people coming in here wanting to sing all the time," she said to the bartender. "But I think I've got something that you'd really like to see."

"Your titties?" The voice was a low, lewd growl, and it came from right behind her.

AnnieLee whirled around, heart pounding and hands curled into fists. An old man with gin-blossom cheeks took a wary step backward, even as he kept leering at her.

When she realized she didn't know him, she unclenched her fingers. "Pig," she said.

"Just a peek?" he asked, his voice pleading.

But the bartender had overheard him. "Oh, damn it, Ray, that's it," he yelled, snapping his towel at the old man. "You're eighty-sixed. Go home."

Ray blinked drunkenly. "But Billy—"

"Don't make me repeat myself, you old creep," the bartender said.

Suddenly chagrined, Ray looked over at AnnieLee. "I beg your pardon," he said, bowing, and then he lurched away toward the door.

"I'm really sorry about that," Billy said as he watched the old man leave. He filled a glass of water and set it in front of AnnieLee.

She was rattled, but she did her best not to show it. Vulnerability was never a good look. "I was ready to defend myself," she said.

"I noticed." He briskly wiped down the bar top. "What are you drinking? I'll put it on Ray's tab. He owes you now."

“I’m okay, thanks.” AnnieLee paused, steeling her nerves, and then the words came out so fast there was hardly a breath between them. “Look, I can’t tell you how I got to Nashville without incriminating myself—which is too bad, because it’s a really good story—but I can tell you *why* I’m here. I’m going to make it as a singer or else I’m going to die trying. My name is AnnieLee Keyes, I turned twenty-five years old last week, and I’m asking you to give me a chance to sing up there on that stage. Will you be the one to give me my first big break? I really hope so. And then when I’m famous, I’ll tell everyone that I owe it all to Billy the bartender at the Cat’s Paw Saloon.”

He gave another snort, but this one was gentler. “Like I need *more* desperate wannabes coming into my bar.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Though you don’t look desperate, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

“That’s because I look *ambitious*.” She leaned forward like she was about to tell him a secret. “And I also look like I did my makeup in a Popeyes bathroom.” She held out a slender arm. “Seriously,” she said. “I really did. On this here wrist is nothing but pure eau de fried chicken.”

The bartender stared at her for a moment and then burst out laughing. “You’re funny. Country music’s a tough business. Maybe you should consider a career in comedy.”

She said, “Yeah, that’s on my bucket list, right after climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and becoming a contortionist in Cirque du Soleil. But I need to get this dream accomplished first because it’s in the number one spot. So do you want to keep chatting me up or do you want to hear what I’ve got?”

“Can you sing?” he asked.

“Like my name was Melody,” she said.

Billy didn’t say anything for a moment. He got a bottle of whiskey down from the shelf and poured some into a shot

glass. But instead of giving it to a customer, he knocked it back himself.

She watched him, her heart fluttering in her chest. She couldn't fake confidence like this much longer, but she couldn't let this chance slip away, either.

"Okay, listen," she said, more serious now. "I was kidding just then. I don't care about mountains or circuses. I only care about this."

Billy dropped his shot glass into a sink of bubbly water. "Do you have any idea how many people come up to me every week, just like you're doing?" he asked.

"Probably about a million," AnnieLee acknowledged. "But I'm one *in* a million—not one *of* a million. That's a big difference there."

Billy pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "I did just kick out my filler act."

"Ray?" AnnieLee gasped.

"That man can out-Cash Johnny when he's sober."

AnnieLee sat up straighter. "I guess this is my lucky night," she said.

"I guess it is," Billy agreed.

AnnieLee bit her lip. "Just one thing," she said. "Do you happen to have a guitar I could borrow?"

CHAPTER

6

If AnnieLee had been jittery trying to talk her way into singing, it was nothing compared to how she felt as she stood at the back of the bar, waiting for her turn to go up onstage. Nerves made her chest hurt so bad she almost wondered if she was having a heart attack.

Deep breaths, girl, she told herself. *This ain't the firing squad.*

She touched the edge of a picture of Emmylou Harris that was hanging on the wall and then brushed a speck of cigarette ash off the frame of Ruthanna Ryder's photo, wishing that somehow the spirits of these great country women would give her strength.

She scanned the room, trying to breathe long and slow. There were only a few dozen people in the bar, most of whom probably wouldn't even look up from their beers when she started playing. So why did she feel so damn nervous? Her hands were sweaty, and her cheeks felt as hot as frying pans.

Maybe she was so jumpy because this was the only first chance she'd ever get. Or maybe it was because she was scared

and alone and she needed some kind of proof that this all wasn't some giant mistake.

The singer with the ten-gallon hat and the battered Martin came striding off the stage to the sound of half-hearted applause. He passed close by AnnieLee on his way to the bar.

"Good luck, kid," he said gruffly, and then it was her turn to walk up those three impossible steps.

She made it onto the stage without tripping—and without turning tail and running, which she did for one instant consider doing. Her legs were trembling, and her heart had shot so far up into her neck she wasn't sure she could speak. She sank onto the folding chair. Keeping her head down, she moved the lower microphone so it was positioned right in front of the sound hole of the guitar and then adjusted the vocal mic so it was close to her lips. When she looked up, ready to face her audience, she realized she could barely see anything or anyone with that stage light in her face.

Well, she thought, that's probably good, all things considered.

She cleared her throat. "Good evening," she managed, and the microphone squealed. Startled, she jumped back before collecting herself and trying again. "Sorry," she said. "I'm kinda new at this. But I guess I'll at least sound better than *that*."

A low chuckle floated up from the front row. Encouraged, AnnieLee gave the guitar's strings a light flick of her fingers. "I want to thank you for sitting here with me tonight," she said as she twisted the tuning peg on her high E. "Living in Nashville, you've probably seen more live music than I've seen hot dinners."

She began to strum a chord progression she figured they'd recognize—"Crazy"—and she could see Billy behind the bar, nodding his head in approval.

The safest thing to do was to play a cover—she knew that. Something old and beloved, or else a song the middle-agers

in the room would've sung in high school. "Strawberry Wine," maybe, or "Friends in Low Places."

But as she got ready to channel Patsy Cline, AnnieLee hesitated. This was her stage right now—this was her chance. Why sing someone else's words when she could sing her own?

She stopped on the C7 and let the notes hang in the air. "You know what? I think I'm going to play a song you've never heard before," she said. "A song so new I've never sung it for anyone else." She strummed G, then E minor, then a D. "No one's going to mistake me for Maybelle Carter on this thing, but I can play the chords all right. And that's what I hear you need—just three chords and the truth?"

Someone in the back gave a whoop, but whether it was because of what she'd said or because a billiard ball had just gone spinning into a pocket, she couldn't tell.

"Anyway, I guess I should stop talking and start singing, huh?" She smiled nervously as she gave the body of the guitar a jaunty little slap. She knew how to do this. She was ready. She just had to relax.

The fingers on her left hand found their positions. Tapping her foot on the worn floor, she began to pick out the intro. She fumbled once, stopped, began again. And then, when her fingers felt steady, she started to sing.

Is it easy?

No it ain't

Her voice wavered and fear tightened her throat. *Dear God, don't let me blow it*, she thought.

Can I fix it?

No I cain't

She sounded so tentative, and nerves gave her voice a thin, quivering vibrato.

But I sure ain't gonna take it lyin' down.

Somewhere in the room, a beer bottle fell to the floor and smashed.

Will I make it?

Maybe so

Closing her eyes against the hot light, AnnieLee imagined she was far away and long ago from the Cat's Paw Saloon, when she was a kid who'd sing to her teddy bear with a hairbrush microphone. Back then, she'd imagined a huge, awed crowd hanging on her every note. Now she pictured the opposite: one lone teddy bear, half drunk on Miller Lite, not even bothering to listen.

The thought made her feel ten times better, and when it came time for the chorus, her voice came out stronger. It growled, then hollered, then implored.

Gotta woman up and take it like a man

She could feel the crowd's new attention. Her fingers flew over the strings, and by verse number two she was belting out the song at the top of her lungs. She sang for joy, and she sang as if her life depended on it.

Because, she knew, it did.

CHAPTER

7

You sure weren't lying when you told me you could sing," Billy said as he poured a round of shots for a rowdy table in the back.

AnnieLee took a sip of her club soda and then pressed the cool glass to her burning cheeks. Her heart still hadn't stopped pounding, and the sound of the audience cheering and clapping echoed in her ears.

"I don't lie," she said, brushing her damp bangs away from her forehead. Sure, she might break a law or two, or fail to answer certain pointed questions, but she always told the truth unless she absolutely couldn't. Her stepdad had been a cheat and a liar, and she never wanted to be anything like him.

"So maybe you'll let me come back sometime?" she asked Billy.

He waited a beat, and then he gave a single nod. "I reckon maybe I will," he said.

"Well, I'd be honored," AnnieLee said. She'd played just four of her own songs and then, figuring she shouldn't wear out her new Nashville welcome, she'd tucked that old bar guitar under her arm and headed offstage. That was when the Cat's Paw

regulars started stomping their feet on the floor, and Billy began waving madly at her from over by the beer taps, shouting, “Stay up there, girl! Go on!”

For a moment she’d stood there, frozen in the bright light, truly doubting this moment was real. She’d imagined a night like this for so long that suddenly she was afraid she’d conjured it up, straight out of her wild and grandiose imagination. Maybe she was dreaming as she slept on a park bench somewhere. Or maybe she’d flipped that big, dumb semi into a ditch, and the Cat’s Paw Saloon was just a hospital bed hallucination no realer than a young girl’s secret, most heartfelt wish.

“Is it easy?” someone shouted. “No it ain’t!”

Those six simple words had broken the spell and brought AnnieLee back to herself. She’d sat down on the rickety stage chair again. And then, with sweat beading on her upper lip and trickling down her neck, she’d had to confess that she couldn’t play any more originals.

“I’ve been traveling a bit lately,” she said, “and so I’m kinda rusty on my back catalog.” She laughed. “But I could play you an oldie but a goodie—something I didn’t write.”

She’d just started to strum the chords to the old hymn “I’ll Fly Away” when someone in the back said, “Play *your* songs again!”

And so, not knowing what else to do, she had—one right after the other. And everyone seemed to like them even better the second time around. Some people even sang along with the choruses.

Now, perched comfortably on a barstool, AnnieLee wasn’t sure if she was glad her set was over or if she wanted to run back onstage and do it all over again.

Billy held out a menu to her, but she waved it away. She couldn’t very well admit that she didn’t have enough money to pay for dinner. She wanted to be remembered for her

performance, not her poverty. Besides, she had granola bars and gorp in her backpack, so she wasn't going to starve.

Not yet, anyway.

"Suit yourself," Billy said amiably.

"They make a good burger here, you know," came a new voice. "Of course, it's cat meat."

AnnieLee swiveled around on her stool and saw a man in a denim shirt and faded blue jeans smiling at her. He was dark-haired and coal-eyed and as long-legged as a young Johnny Cash, and her heart gave a little skip in her chest. He had just about the nicest face she'd ever seen.

"I'm kidding. I hope that's obvious." He held out his hand. "I'm Ethan Blake," he said. "I'm a big fan."

She drew in a slow and deliberate breath. She'd die a thousand deaths before she'd let him see that he'd flustered her. "Are you, now?" she asked.

His smile got wider, and a dimple appeared in each lightly stubbled cheek. "Yes," he said. "I'm really a fan, and my name is really Ethan." He gestured to the empty seat next to her. "Do you mind if I join you?"

She gazed down into her drink; the ice cubes had all but melted. "Suit yourself," she said.

"Can I buy you a beer?" he asked. "Or a glass of wine, or a carton of milk?"

She bit back a smile as she stirred the club soda with her straw. "No, thank you."

"You were really something, though," he said. "You wrote those songs?"

That made her look over at him again, and this time there was fire in her eyes. "Of course I did. Does that surprise you, Ethan Blake? Do you think I look too young to write them? Too meek? Too female?"

He held up a hand. “No, no, not at all. Sorry. I’m just trying to make conversation.”

AnnieLee scooted her stool a few inches away from him. The last thing she needed was a man hitting on her; it didn’t matter one bit how handsome he was. “Well, I don’t generally talk to strangers,” she said.

“Okay, I get it,” he said, and he sounded good-natured as opposed to defensive. “That’s totally fair. But Nashville’s a small town, and maybe someday we’ll be friends.”

“I doubt it,” she said.

He put a twenty down on the bar and called, “See if you can buy her a drink for me, will you, Billy? She did good up there.”

Then he walked away. AnnieLee watched him go, prepared to look the other direction if he turned back around. But he didn’t. He just picked up that same old bar guitar and started heading toward the stage.

Her stomach gave a terrible lurch. *Keyes, you utter fool*, she thought. *You were rude to the next act.*

CHAPTER

8

AnnieLee grabbed her coat and ducked out of the bar before Ethan Blake started to play. If he was bad, she didn't want to hear him. And if he was good—well, she didn't want to know. No sense kicking herself all night for being snotty to the next Luke Combs. She'd been kicked enough already.

Outside the air was cool and the street empty and quiet. Lower Broadway, Nashville's honky-tonk hotbed, was just a few blocks to the southeast. But from where she stood, AnnieLee could hear nothing but the electric hum of a streetlight and the whir of a police siren far in the distance.

After glancing around to make sure that she was alone on the block, AnnieLee hunched up her shoulders and started walking. The early spring breeze was chilly and her shirt was still damp with sweat. She walked quickly, alertly, occasionally stopping to look behind her, wary as a rabbit in a wide-open field.

But no one was following her. She slipped along the streets, beneath flowering crab apples whose blossoms seemed to glow in the darkness. She turned one corner, then another, heading for the water.

Along the Cumberland River, which snaked its way around and through Nashville, lay a narrow strip of a park that AnnieLee had called home for two nights now. She'd slept in better places, that was for sure. But she'd also slept in worse.

She crossed Gay Street and climbed over a low stone wall, and in another few steps she was standing beneath trees just coming into their leaves. Though it'd been eighty degrees the day she'd left Houston, spring was late this year in Tennessee. She could hear the river sliding along its banks and the sound of traffic on the bridge.

Ducking down between two giant hydrangeas, AnnieLee pulled her backpack from its hiding place. She took out her tarp and lay it on a smooth patch of ground beneath an elm tree, humming softly, almost tunelessly, to herself. Then she unrolled the lightweight down sleeping bag she'd gotten—along with a knockoff Swiss Army knife, forty dollars in cash, and a lewd proposition—in exchange for Maybelle at Jeb's Pawn.

A folded sweater served as her pillow. Light from a neon Coca-Cola sign on the other side of Gay Street flickered through the tangle of branches.

Sleeping outside reminded AnnieLee of summer nights when she was a kid, when she'd lie in the back of her mom's pickup truck as it sat parked in the driveway. Mary Grace had been alive and happy then, and sometimes she'd join her daughter under the stars, singing her to sleep with old folk lullabies like "500 Miles" and "Star of the County Down."

It had felt like a wonderful adventure to slip into dreams with her mother beside her and the whole sky of stars hanging right there above them. But bedding down outside like this now? It was nothing but a cold and lonely necessity.

A gust of wind blew last winter's dead leaves and a torn scrap

of notebook paper toward AnnieLee's face. As she brushed them away, she saw words scribbled in black marker on the paper: *...ave never felt like this before, and it...* The rest was ripped away.

She wondered if the note had ever gotten to the person it was meant for, or if it was just wadded up and pitched into the bushes.

Lines written but never read

Like a song only played inside your head, she sang softly.

Then she stopped to readjust her makeshift pillow. If she had a nickel for every scrap of a tune she'd ever written, she'd be curled under six-hundred-thread-count sheets in a fancy hotel instead of stuffed inside a polyester pawnshop sleeping bag underneath a damn elm.

She closed her eyes and thought back to earlier that evening, when she'd stepped onstage for the first time and sung her scared little heart out. Maybe there was a song in that experience. Certainly there was a story in how she'd got there, and what she was running from. And as she drifted off to sleep, she thought of Ethan Blake and the warmth of his dark eyes.

Eventually AnnieLee began to dream, and inside that dream, she spoke out loud. The words were nonsense at first, and then came a name. "Rose," AnnieLee muttered as she curled tighter inside her sleeping bag. "Rose!" Her arms flew up as if to ward off a blow. "Oh, Rose, be careful!"