

THE RED ROAD

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

I Never Arkansas It Coming

A Vampire in Versailles

The Romanov Legacy

The Cherbourg Jewels

THE RED ROAD

A Novel

JENNI WILTZ



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DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, March 26

FOUR METAL SPEAKERS BLARED INTO the courtyard. Emma watched the perforated cones pulse in rapid succession, strained by the exuberance of a mariachi band. She tried to remember how to describe the tempo of a piece of music. Beats per measure? Time signature? She couldn't remember anything from the two years she'd taken flute. If pressed, she could pick out "Lean on Me" on the piano, but that was all. She hated "Lean on Me." And she hated the ranchero music the school played during lunch.

A handful of Mexican boys got up to dance, pulling their girlfriends behind them. Emma picked one couple and watched their sensual sway. The boy wore pointy cowboy boots and a lizard belt. When he smiled, his teeth shone cloud white against his brown desert face. He danced with a girl wearing a midriff

shirt, the fingers of his right hand resting on the waistband of her jeans. Half an inch up and they'd be on her bare skin.

Emma sighed. The only thing that touched her bare skin was the too-tight elastic of her bra and underwear, a situation unlikely to change anytime soon. She swallowed hard to push down the pang of jealousy burning the back of her throat.

Emma and her friends occupied their usual table at the far end of the courtyard. On one side, Rachel Cooper sat with pale legs folded to her chest, a waterfall of red hair shielding her face from the sun. Emma sat on the other side. Next to her, Via Mebrete bounced her right leg with a rhythm that would have put a drummer to shame. "What's for lunch?" Rachel asked, pointing at Emma's brown bag. "You know I eat vicariously through you."

Rachel's parents had divorced sophomore year. She and her mom lived with an aunt and uncle, but were thinking of moving in with her grandma instead. If they did, it would be the third place Rachel had lived in less than a year. Her mom worked two jobs, one at a motel and one at a gas station, because Rachel's dad, a lawyer, had all the money. Emma wondered what he did that was so bad Rachel's mom couldn't stand to be married to him anymore.

She opened her sack lunch, packed with a turkey sandwich, a sliced Granny Smith apple, two oatmeal cookies, a can of lemonade, and a paper napkin folded in half lengthwise. Her mom had wrapped the refrigerated soda can in foil so its condensation wouldn't liquefy the napkin.

"Your mom is so cute," Via said. "Mine gives me loose change and tells me to go to the cafeteria." She nudged the cardboard

tray that held soggy fries, a plastic cup of apple juice, and a hamburger. “They don’t even have pickle relish in there.”

Via’s family was in even worse shape than Rachel’s. Her parents split up before she started kindergarten, when her dad left to join a group of fellow Ethiopian expats in Washington, D.C. He sent a postcard with a picture of Kennedy’s grave for her tenth birthday. She had no idea if he was still there.

Every time the subject of fathers came up, Emma was the odd man out. Her dad taught her to throw a football (she sprained a thumb), ride a bike (she fell off, mostly), and put things on the grill (there was a picture of her, shirtless, at age three, using tongs to turn hot dogs over the flame). He remarked on all unforeseen events by saying, “What are the odds? It’s like Lou Gehrig getting Lou Gehrig’s disease.” She couldn’t imagine life without him.

“I don’t know,” Emma said. “Sometimes I’d rather have a hamburger.”

“I can’t remember the last time my mom made me anything,” Rachel said. “She keeps her purse in the oven.”

“Don’t your aunt and uncle cook?”

“They like Hot Pockets.”

At the far end of the courtyard, behind a folding table draped in plastic, a student council representative sold prom tickets. Rachel’s gaze drifted toward the line of people waiting to buy. It happened every time there was a formal dance. Rachel picked out a mark and found a reason to stand by his locker. She twirled her strawberry curls, put on two coats of mascara, and waited for an invitation. It always came. She’d been the only freshman to attend the junior prom.

On good days, Emma tried to convince herself she could do the same. Awake or asleep, though, the dream always ended when she saw her face in the mirror. She lifted her hand and tapped the massive zit on her chin. *Yep*, she thought. *Still there.*

A breeze whipped through the courtyard, shuffling papers and stealing loose napkins. Via zipped up her hoodie. “We have a chem test tomorrow, you guys.”

Rachel groaned. “I’ll lose four hours of study time at work.”

“A few hours of slave labor at the Falafel Hut isn’t worth failing this test.”

“That’s slave labor *plus tips*. I have a car payment, you know.”

“I’m not taking any chances.” Via shoved her chemistry binder at Emma. “Quiz me.”

Via’s loopy letters filled every college-ruled line from edge to edge, exhibiting a reckless disregard for margins. Emma scanned her notes and tried to think like a teacher. “The change in potential energy of a chemical reaction is a reflection of what?”

“Are you trying to fucking kill me? Give me a warm-up question first.”

Rachel sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” Via said. “I forgot you joined the morality patrol.”

“It’s a youth group.”

“You mean it’s where Tim hangs out.” Like Rachel, Via had a car and an after-school job. She also had a CV, two letters of reference, four art shows under her belt, and this past Halloween, she’d driven to Santa Barbara by herself just to go to a party. On the scale of bravery, Emma topped out at killing small spiders.

“Moving on,” Emma said, turning the page in Via’s binder. “What is a coulomb?”

“A unit of electric charge.”

“Correct.”

“Okay, now ask me a harder one.”

Emma looked at Via’s drawing of an electrochemical cell and blanked on the difference between electrolytic and voltaic cells. Tomorrow’s test, covering electricity, voltage, and half-cell potentials, was going to be hell. The whole year had been hell. She’d already suffered through seven and a half months of Honors English, AP Chemistry, AP US History, third-year French, pre-calculus, and PE. She did homework every weekday until bedtime and all day Sunday.

It still wasn’t enough.

On the university-prep track, getting straight A’s was the equivalent of treading water in a shark-infested sea: You used up all your energy maintaining the status quo and the sharks still got you in the end. The good schools *expected* perfect grades. Unless you also led a successful crowd-funding campaign to build a girls’ school in Uganda, discovered the cure for cancer as part of your science fair project, and spent weekends teaching foster children to read, you were average — borderline disposable. Some days it was all Emma could do to remember to bring her math book home. *Maybe the students who get accepted are all mutants*, she thought. *With adamantium skeletons that can stand up to the weight of all those expectations.*

“You guys,” she said. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“The SAT, college, scholarship applications, all our regular homework.” Emma brushed her fingertip over a word carved in the table’s wooden surface — NORTE. Her nail slipped easily into the shaft of the *t*. “I’m signed up for five AP classes next year.”

Via shrugged. “We were scared of this year, too, but we’re surviving.”

Emma’s eyes drifted back to the Mexican kids. None of them brought their books to lunch. They smiled and laughed like they were actually having fun. She, on the other hand, would have an ulcer before she could vote. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be this way. We shouldn’t just be wishing it was over.”

“I don’t wish that,” Rachel said.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not valedictorian yet.”

As valedictorian of her middle school, Emma had been given a \$25 savings bond and told to make a speech at graduation. Before going on stage, she threw up in the bathroom twice, leaving a speck of celebratory pre-ceremony canapé on the hem of her dress. The experience resulted in no net gain of which she was aware. “You have a 4.0,” she said. “You do lacrosse and tennis and you’re on the yearbook staff and the leadership committee. You volunteer at the soup kitchen. Your transcript is perfect.”

“It’s not enough,” Rachel said softly. “You know that.”

Emma looked away. Her own transcript was pockmarked with two B-plusses in the first semesters of chemistry and pre-calculus. She pictured a pair of Old West gunslingers, aiming for each other’s hearts beneath the blazing sun of high noon. She, not Rachel, was the one who fell backward, clutching a gaping hole in her side. “We’re sixteen. We’re supposed to be having fun.”

“Fuck fun,” Via said. “I’m going to Amherst.”

Rachel glared at her and took a deep breath.

“Here.” Emma shoved her bag of apple slices toward Rachel. “Eat. My mom gave me too many.”

As Rachel reached for a slice, a group of tall boys wandered into the courtyard. There were five of them, all on the water polo team. The tallest, Dan MacLeod, wore knee-length green shorts, a black T-shirt, and black plastic flip-flops. Even when it was forty degrees outside, Dan wore the same black plastic flip-flops. He had a weird backpack, too, a striped woven sack with thin rope straps.

He sat next to her in AP Chemistry, but never seemed to have the requisite supplies. At the beginning of the year, she became his go-to paper provider, and he'd agreed to be her lab partner. Lucky for her, he was the most precise measurer she'd ever met, and that included her mom, who was like Attila the Hun with measuring cups.

Everything was fine until February 8, when he'd leaned over their lab table and asked if she had a hot date for Valentine's Day. Her pencil slipped, and instead of entering "NR" for the cross of Pb with $\text{Pb}(\text{NO}_3)_2$, she blistered through the page with the tip of her Ticonderoga. "What did you say?" she asked.

His dark hair flopped over his eyebrows, almost reaching his cheekbones. "Here," he said. "Let me do that. You're messing it up again." Since that moment, she'd been haunted by the implications of his question. No one had ever asked her out and she'd assumed no one ever would, not while she had baby fat and bad skin.

One day during sophomore year, class president Javier Benavides flung an arm around her after biology class. Javier's friend said, "Hey, is this your new girl?" Javier raised both hands quicker than a cowboy in a calf-tying contest. "No way," he'd said. "These are the ones you save for marriage." Emma had no idea what that meant, aside from the fact that it was mortally

embarrassing for Javier's name to be linked with hers in any romantic context. She was dating kryptonite — until February 8 at 11:42 a.m., when Dan joked about her having a date on Valentine's Day.

This was no small thing.

She watched Dan and his friends walk toward her table. They were heading for the main hall, its doorway just behind her. She liked the way he walked, with slightly turned-out legs that weren't bowed but definitely weren't straight. He had very smooth lips, while hers were always chapped. It didn't seem fair.

She tried to smile, in case he looked at her. The boys shuffled by, talking about the match on Saturday. He didn't see her. He didn't even look in her general direction.

Story of my life, she thought.