

1976

Chapter 1

“Hello? Do you *mind*?” an impatient voice grumbles beside me.

Looking down at my magazine on top of the reception desk, I pay no attention.

He claps twice and I lift my gaze to be greeted with glassy blue eyes amid a very stern expression. “Yeah, *hi*. So, do people just stand around here waiting for assistance or...?” He snaps and I smell the alcohol on his breath.

I realize he’s speaking to me after glancing into the empty lobby of the recording studio. “Excuse me?”

“Ah-sis-tance,” he enunciates with a hint of a Southern twang.

He’s on such an ego trip, I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t need a TWA flight to get back from it. No wonder the receptionist is MIA. He stretches his neck forward, keeping his gaze on me, and snaps again, swaying as he reaches out to grab the reception desk to steady himself. His eyes are such an incredible blue, I’m almost distracted until he opens his mouth again. “Do you want to keep your job?”

Crinkling my forehead, I drop my chin, trying not to snort. “My... job?” I’m three weeks in working with Country-Rock legend Curt Parents on his fifth album as a session musician. I don’t think this guy has a say over whether I keep my job, even if he is friends with Curt. “Look, I get enough sass from the guys I work with,” I begin.

He squints, probably trying to get me in focus, and interrupts. “Do you know who I am?”

Wow, the ‘do you know who I am’ line? *Seriously? Yeah, bub, I know precisely who you are. Everyone in the music industry knows who Jeff Kingston is.*

“All I’m doing is trying to take a break.” I press the air between us with a flat palm. “I think you’re confused...”

Before I have a chance to explain, the receptionist returns, hurrying to her desk with a string of apologies. I step aside to let her sit and blink at Blue Eyes before I open my palm and turn to her. “Oh, he’s *very* important and needs ah-sis-tance *immediately*.”

He presses his lips together and blinks in my direction before turning his attention to her and mutters something about takeout menus. Instead of the attitude, though, he’s almost flirty with a playful smile and reaches over the counter to tug an end of one of her long blonde pigtails. When he finishes, he nods, looking back and

forth between us with his gaze landing on me. “Do you work here?”

“She’s in Studio B with Curt,” the receptionist answers for me. “Remember? I told you yesterday.”

Why would she tell him where I was working? Why would he care?

Walking past the reception desk, he stops to squint at me, poking my *International Musician and Recording World* magazine. “Ignore page thirty-two—band’s crap.”

As he wanders down the hallway, cowboy boots with worn heels scuffing as he goes, I flip the magazine to page thirty-two. His face, with the rest of his band, Expedition, stares up at me. Even in black and white, I can see how blue his eyes are. From down the hall, he looks over his shoulder, setting wire-rimmed sunglasses over his eyes. He’s a mess, quite frankly, but I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anything, or anyone, more rock-n-roll.

Later that night, I’m the only one left in the studio, ready to lay this guitar in traffic and be done with it. *Ages* ago my guitar teacher told me, “if you can sing it, you can play it,” since the brain controls both functions. This week, I doubt him. I’ve been singing what’s in my head for *days*. I can hear it, but there’s one section where my fingers refuse to play it. Curt loves what I’ve done, so he doesn’t care what I hear in my head. I’m the one that’s not satisfied.

The studio door opens, and I don’t think twice about it, figuring it’s one of the other session guys. They know how focused I’ve been, so I appreciate that they don’t interrupt. I keep working, running through the section a few more times. After the third attempt, I glance up to see who came in, intending to bitch about this riff still not working.

Instead, it’s Rude Blue Eyes, looking much more sober, wearing threadbare light denim jeans with a slightly fraying flair at the bottom.

“Do you need another menu?” I ask.

“You’re good,” he says, ignoring my comment and pushing away from the wall.

I fiddle with one of my strings, tightening it back into tune. “Thanks,” I mumble, and I lift my head. “Did you need something?”

“I heard you playing and wanted to check it out.”

“How did you hear me playing? I’m in a soundproof room.”

“I was looking for one of the techs in there.” He motions to the

booth with his chin. "We're just down the hall."

"I know. I bumped into you earlier, remember?"

He reaches behind his head and rubs his neck, his eyes narrowing as he winces—possibly with embarrassment. "Shit," he mumbles, and a Southern twang trying to break free makes me snicker. "I'm a belligerent asshole when I drink tequila."

Smirking, I arch an eyebrow. "*Just* tequila?"

He tilts his head side to side, pursing his lips and wincing again. "You may have a point, but tequila makes me particularly crotchety. Sorry if I was an asshole."

"Apologize to the actual receptionist." I turn my head to glance at my guitar. I'm using my sunburst Gibson Les Paul and notice a new scratch on the back with a sigh. Choosing one guitar is like choosing your favorite sunset, but this one is well-loved and well-worn and by far my favorite at the moment.

"Oh, *trust* me, I've kissed Jackie's ass several times over. Unfortunately, she knows me well," he says with a playful grin, like that's enough to get him out of trouble. Stepping across the studio with a long stride, he stretches his hand to me. "Jeff Kingston, by the way."

"Cassandra Taylor." Shaking his hand, I notice it's as torn up and calloused as mine.

"Curt's told us all about y'all. He's impressed with his new crew. You been a session player long?"

"Long enough." I don't mind being a session player. It's long, weird hours, and you need to be up for and ready to play whatever music they hand you. The pay is decent when I get the gigs. Competition is crazy, though. I mean, there are only two or three other females in the pool, but we're wrestling against guys going for the same jobs. Working with Curt adds to my credibility and experience, however, being the only girl in the band means I need to play twice as well at half the price while they expect me to clean up after them and take the lunch orders.

I want to do my own material, maybe even have my own band someday, like Linda Ronstadt, only with my songs. There are boxes of material stored under my bed waiting for me.

"My name's finally out on the circuit enough that I'm getting actual paying-something-worthwhile rock gigs." I run a finger along one of the scratches on my guitar before looking back at him. "I lose a lot of jobs because they think girls can only play that acoustic folksy-type stuff."

“Well, Joni Mitchell’s done okay,” he says with a chuckle, crossing his arms over his chest before rubbing the back of his hand over the stubble on his chin.

“Yeah, Joni Mitchell is cool. So are Judy Collins and Carole King, but who wants to be compared to them constantly? Do you want to have people ask you to be more like REO Speedwagon or the Stones all the time?”

“Well...” He lifts a shoulder. “We aren’t quite the same kind of band.”

“Joni Mitchell isn’t quite the stuff I’m interested in playing, either—but I am thankful she’s at least got the doors cracked open for the rest of us to try to squeeze ourselves through.”

“Well, you keep playing like that?” He lifts his chin and grins. “I don’t think you’ll have anything to worry about.”

“For the time being.” I shrug. “Unless I can’t get this damn line down.”

“Sounds pretty good to me.”

“It’s not where I want it to be.” I lift my hand. “There’re a bunch of notes in there that don’t want to come out here.” I wiggle my fingers as if that’s supposed to help break up the logjam.

“Well, I’ll leave you alone then to work it out,” he says, taking a few steps back offering a smile. His entire demeanor changes when he smiles. He looks approachable with eyes that crinkle at the sides. “Feel free to come hang out later if you want a break or something.” Tugging his sunglasses from his hair, he points over his shoulder. “Studio C.”

I nod before I return to my guitar, but lift my chin when I don’t hear him leaving. He’s paused by the doorway, listening again. I arch an eyebrow at him, and he sticks his sunglasses over those beautiful faded denim eyes before ducking out of the room.