

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

B-SIDES

Cheryl Nitely

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Country music singer J.R. Hall sacrificed his love and any on-going shot at personal happiness in exchange for his country music career, all because he bought into the unspoken custom in Music City that “there’s no gay in country music.”

Apparently, no one told Wyatt Ford about that rule. He moved to Nashville to host a syndicated morning radio show with his old college buddy. But when life doesn’t work out like Wyatt planned, he finds himself, for all practicality, back in the closet.

When J.R. and Wyatt meet, they find something in each other they didn’t expect—another shot at happiness. Having both lost their A-side loves can two B-sides make a hit?

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

B-SIDES

By Cheryl Nitely

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A bare-chested cowboy stands in a stark, fenced pasture. The image is black and white—emphasizing the long shadows of the trees and the solitary figure of one man, alone. He is wearing faded, worn jeans and a black cowboy hat, which obscures his down-turned face. His chest is broad and deeply muscled; he carries a western saddle by the horn in one hand, as if the weight means nothing to him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

All this time spent singing in those smoky bars trying to get to the top, and after finally making it, I now only have fame and fortune to keep me company. The one person I wanted at my side has left me and it is all my fault. What do I do now? I'm so lost.

Do I continue with my successful career that I worked so hard for, or leave it all behind for the love of my life? Can there really only be two choices? Someone help me, please.

Lonely Cowboy

[Notes: Mild BDSM and “make me cry” angst are okay but I’m a sucker for HEA or HFN. The song Weathered by Creed also inspired me along with the photo.]

Sincerely,

JoAnn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: celebrities, closeted, country musicians, cowboys, edging, HFN, light BDSM, radio DJs, sex toys

Content warnings: explicit

Word count: 19,756

Acknowledgement

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CHAPTER 1

February 28, 2011

I knew I could get into Wyatt Ford's pants when he tried to light my hand on fire.

As a guest star of his show, I was sitting on a stool in a Nashville radio studio where he and his buddy Phil host a nationally syndicated country-music morning show. Wyatt was standing just inside my left knee—closer than he needed to be. Any closer, he'd be straddling it. I admit my mind went there for half a second—long enough for my dick to wake up and tell me I'd kind of like to see that DJ ride me. The way he was brushing up against my leg was my first clue that if I wanted in his pants—or maybe even wanted to watch him ride me—I could get a front-row ticket to that show.

My rational mind was screaming to back off but my cock chimed in to my mental thought process with, *What are you thinking, son? A front-row ticket's fine and dandy but if this good old boy's gonna throw in a backstage pass, we're so getting in on that.*

The second clue clicked into place when he reached for my left hand to apply hand sanitizer. His back was to his buddy and the window of the control room was to the far right—the angle was all wrong for any of his coworkers to see his face and all right for some discreet indiscretion. Wyatt didn't need to hold my hand to run a line of sanitizer down the center of my palm, but he did it anyway. He rested the back of his hand holding mine on my thigh. His thumb massaged the sanitizer into the center of my palm... his fingers tracing my knuckles. I felt every skim of his fingers on my hand in my cock. The last thing I needed was to sport a boner if this guy was just a redneck with a man crush. I could just see it: as soon as I cleared out of here, the only thing he'd want was enough gossip to fuck up my career.

Almost involuntarily, I went to pull my knees together and bumped into his thighs. I was awarded with a quirk of his lips that leaned toward a smile, a smile that seemed to scream at me, *I know. Oh, I know what you like.* My stomach dropped down five inches, and I felt my ass slam shut.

Constant creeping fear tends to douse arousal. The emotional crutch of fear has been something I've relied on for the better part of my career to hide my sexuality. What game was this guy playing? I'd come in to play a little guitar, talk some smack to promote the last couple weeks of a tour, and get a couple promotional pictures taken with their DJs or on-air personalities—whatever those boys liked to be called these days. Even with digital releases, country-music DJs were still key gatekeepers to my listeners. I'd been through this studio before—I'd interviewed with Phil for years. This Wyatt guy was new, though.

I wiggled on the stool. Under the bill of his ball cap, he wasn't looking at my hand. His golden-brown eyes peeped out to make eye contact with me. Long eye contact. Significant eye contact that carried along with it a ghost of a smile in the lines around his eyes and mouth. I met his eyes for a moment. Then, I'll be damned if those pretty brown eyes didn't dart down to my crotch, and then up to meet mine again. I shook my head tightly at him trying to communicate that he needed to chill out. I tried to swallow and reached for a bottle of water on the worktable behind Wyatt. My throat was suddenly dry—which was not a good thing for me. Yeah, he was a redneck. And he might even be one with a man crush on the country star. But he sure looked like he wanted more than gossip.

“Ford! You're not supposed to rub it in. Jesus. He's gonna go up in flames,” Phil Cooper called over to us from his board behind a bank of computer monitors.

Wyatt shrugged and smiled weakly at me, licking his lower lip. As he slowly pulled his hand away, he wrapped one hand around my index finger, squeezing it briefly, stroking it like... well, a cock. *Okaaaaaaay. And if that wasn't the universal hand signal for “I wanna give you a hand job”, I didn't know what was.*

In all honestly, I really didn't know what much was. My experience with men was severely limited to one guy and what I could watch on the Internet. When my career took off, that was pretty much the end of my one gay relationship, if you could call it that. Women threw themselves at me on an hourly basis. But country music lent me a shield array that kept me off most guys' gaydars. Country stars just aren't gay. It might have happened to Chely Wright but she was a woman—and guys, that's just kind of hot, right? But male country stars? Big, masculine dudes like J.R. Hall—no way.

So, I'm a gay man with no idea of how to be gay and absolutely no idea of what to do with a dude trying to pick me up in the middle of a media interview.

About that time, their producer and staff brought out video cameras and Wyatt backed off. Ended up, my hand did go up in flame for about two seconds and that was the extent of it. Just a blue flash in the palm, literally. From the look on his face, that suited my manager Slade Allen just fine. He was over in the corner rubbing one of his temples probably trying not to imagine me finishing up the last two weeks of a tour with third-degree burns. The program director behind the glass wall looked pretty relieved, too. No one knows how to have fun anymore.

My palm's burn time didn't beat any of the records other artists had pulled when they came on this show—but in my defense, Wyatt rubbed in most of the sanitizer he applied. Guy would be damned handy at the beach... and my mind skipped forward to the mental image of Wyatt, naked, reaching behind his back, applying lube to himself. My eyes flitted over to Wyatt at that thought, raking over his waist, his chest, and up to his neck. He was cute actually—not what I've come to expect from radio DJs. Not to generalize but most of them are good old boy Bubbas. Balding, big guys with radio faces and smart mouths.

Not Wyatt Ford. He looked lean to me—tight but finely muscled like he was a runner, maybe. He had light-brown curls poking out from around that ball cap. He had that contradiction between country and cosmopolitan down pat. I knew musicians who paid stylists handsomely to accomplish that kind of

incongruity. His jeans were ripped, artistically and purposefully, covering a round ass I'd noticed way before we even started playing with fire. Shelly, my wardrobe guru slash stylist, had a pair of jeans with that same designer tag on them for me in wardrobe. Like a lot of my country-star clothes, I refused to wear them unless forced. No Wrangler's for Wyatt, though. The colors in his clothes also matched, something I paid other people to make happen in my life when I was going somewhere it mattered. His goatee was trimmed neatly but the tag of his tucked-in black T-shirt stuck out the back of his shirt over the collar of an unbuttoned flannel shirt. The guy had his shirt on inside out.

He was arguing vocally with Cooper over by his console about who was really their reigning flaming-palm champion, his hands animated and flying in the air. He'd be a screamer, I bet. When he caught my eye, he paused and grinned at me. I felt like I'd been busted. My interest in him felt like it was painted plainly on my face. I shrugged and smiled, then glanced over at Phil Cooper. He was rattling on about a contest but kept looking back and forth between Wyatt and myself, his eyes narrowing when they landed on Wyatt. Was Phil picking up on my interest in Wyatt? I kept my face blank. But, yep, my gut feeling said I'd been busted. I needed to say something to cover it.

"I see why you sit across from him and not next to him, Coop. Less collateral damage. He ever smack himself in the face arguing with you like that?" I leaned forward and spoke into the mic.

Cooper snorted. "Only every time I win the argument, which I guess makes that DAY-LEEE."

I laughed. "Y'all can't see this out in radio-land but when Wyatt argues with Coop he looks like a one-man catfight."

Cooper laughed.

"Hmm, yeah, real funny, Hall. Comedy? Not your calling. Let's see, how's that saying go? Oh yeeeah, I think it's 'shut up and sing'," Wyatt quipped and raised his eyebrows at me.

"Ouch. Harsh. But sure, how about a song? I think I still have enough feeling in my hands to pick out enough of a tune to be recognizable," I said

into the mic. “Anyone got a request?” I reached for my guitar and Coop picked up my cue.

“We’re down here at 1-800-555-7834 with J.R. Hall in the studio. Call us with your requests and we’ll put this guy to work. You can hit us up on our Ford and the Coop feed online at...” Cooper rattled on about various ways for fans to send in their requests.

I adjusted my guitar strap, mentally bringing myself back to center. By rote, my hands ran over my guitar checking connections and drifting into the place I mentally go when I perform.

After I played a couple songs, the station’s PR people took promotional shots around the station’s call-letter signage and the guys’ show-syndication signage. I cued in to what had tripped my radar. No matter what we were doing, Phil Cooper managed to physically insinuate himself between Wyatt and me. I needed to wrap this up and get away from these guys. Wyatt was a hot little country mess, and my instincts were telling me Phil was well aware that I was becoming well aware of it. I did not need to be in the middle of that. I did wonder if Phil was doing it because he was jealous or because he was a bigot. Or maybe both.

Sitting in the station manager’s office listening to Slade make plans for later that week at CRS—Country Radio Seminar, I wondered what was up with Wyatt’s handsy act in the studio. Was he gay? Had he heard a rumor that I didn’t know was making the rounds and he was fucking with me? Either way, what kind of balls did it take to hit on a country star in the middle of an interview?

People handle me all the time—messing with my hair, clothes, and makeup. They mic me and adjust me and my equipment before I step out onto any stage. All of it—impersonal. I don’t think I remember the last time someone touched me for the purpose of just touching me. And Wyatt Ford had been most definitely touching me rather than handling me. He edged right past my intimidating rep.

See, I'm a big guy. Most people think I'm a scary guy, too, because I'm quiet. When I do say something, it's deep—dangerously low in register, in fact. I didn't used to be this way, but living a mainly public life that is ninety-five percent lie in the name of country music has taught me to hold back most of what and who is really, authentically, me. I used to be a little wild growing up, outgoing, loud and probably obnoxious if you asked my daddy. Now I'm what people call brooding. Some woman reporter actually wrote that about me—"Hall is the brooding Healthcliff of the country-music industry"—in an *Entertainment Country News* article last year. Like I'm some kind of dark romantic hero. The only thing she got right is my torment but she didn't scratch the surface as to why. Don't believe my press. They think I'm a tragic widower whose silence is a way of mourning a dead wife. But they don't know anything real about me. They sure as hell don't know I'm gay, and the only thing I'm mourning is that the choices I had to make for living my dream left me guilt-ridden, with a life pretty much void of personal happiness.

The fact is, I was lonely, and I was tired of it.

The station manager and Slade were deep into mutual schmoozing and working out a schedule for me to record some promotional segments at CRS for their broadcasting corporation's affiliate stations. This was the last round of them I intended to do, but I wanted to get them done and Slade knew that. I excused myself to go find the men's room.

I was washing my hands when I heard the door open. I turned to leave and found Wyatt leaning up against the door, blocking my exit.

Drying my hands and tossing the brown paper towel into the trash, I moved toward the door. I expected him to step out of the way. He didn't.

"Finish your show all right?" I asked. I reached for the door handle and pulled. He moved slightly to block me and used his weight to keep the door closed.

"Show was great. You were great. Freddie told me you were still around. I'm glad I caught you," he replied.

“Hmm. Well, sure seems ‘caught me’ about covers it.” I released the door handle and looked down at him expectantly. Standing face to face, I was a good eight inches taller. I’m six six and I put him a couple inches shy of six foot, if he was lucky.

“We’ll be at CRS all week. Will I see you there?” Wyatt asked. He didn’t seem to want to move, just kept chatting up his captive audience.

“You might. I think Slade was working that out with Fred when I stepped out.”

“‘Cause, I gotta tell you, J.R., I’d like to see you again.”

There it was. I took a breath. Released it. I waited. Silence was always my answer, my go-to when something related to being gay came up. For someone who made a living creating sound, silence served me well. If I waited long enough, someone would always fill the blanks, hopefully with the wrong assumption.

This was apparently a lesson Wyatt also understood. He leaned his shoulders back against that bathroom door with his arms crossed over his chest staring up at me. He looked like he’d stubbornly settled into waiting for my reply as long as it took me to get around to giving it.

“Uh-huh.” I eyed him. “You think that’s a good idea, do you?” I figured I would just turn it around on him.

“Oh yeah. I think you do too.”

I didn’t know what to think of that or what to say. I was to the point where I wanted to know what was going on, for sure.

“What do you think is going on here, Ford?” *That’s right, I mentally congratulated myself, use his last name and get some distance on this thing.*

He stared at me. I stared back. It was a moment of truth and the truth is: I’m a coward. I was a coward when I decided to lead a life that was a lie. I was a coward when I gave up who I loved to do what I love. He could stare me down all day long but when it came to coming out, I could hold this stare until one of us passed from this earth.

“Ah, J.R.,” he sighed, and then he reached up and touched the side of my face tenderly, cupping my cheek.

Thinking back, I would have sworn I’d been holding my breath; but the moment I felt the touch of his hand on my skin, I inhaled sharply. All it took was a simple tip of my head to press my chin into his embrace.

“Yeah,” I breathed a soft reply that was barely a whisper. “Yeah, I thought that was what you were getting at.”

“I’m not wrong here, am I, J.R.?” His eyes traveled my face.

“Why? What are you gonna do with that? Tell the whole world J.R. Hall is a faggot on your show’s country-music-gossip segment tomorrow morning?” The words came out harsh, angry.

He had the grace to look hurt and shook his head slowly. If my burden of guilt didn’t already tip the scales at maximum capacity, I might have had the conscience to feel a bit more. But fear and desire were too busy battling it out in my beating chest for me to hold any leftover remorse for Wyatt.

“I’m gonna do this,” he whispered this time. He gripped my face in both hands and pulled me down while he stretched up to kiss me at the same time.

You could say I was shocked but not surprised. The tension had been building since he’d played his little fire-starter game.

Dear Lord, his mouth. Hard and forceful in all the right places. It’d been two years since Ericka died. Hi left years ago, with the fame that brought the lies and the women. I hadn’t kissed anyone since before Ericka’s death and definitely no man after Hite. I hoped sometimes that maybe I was asexual or maybe I was just Hite-sexual and loving him when I was so young messed me up for loving women later. Wyatt was making me think otherwise.

I could feel Wyatt’s lips moving against mine. Part of my mind was screaming, *Oh no, no, no. Now he’s gonna know I’m gay.* And the other part was rejoicing, *Oh, yes, he’ll know I’m gay.*

Wyatt’s lips moved under my mouth, still seeking entrance. He tugged me to him face-first so he was pressed between the door and my body. His mouth

opened to me and his tongue knew none of the pretense the rest of him played at. I knew, somehow, he was waiting for me take over, to step over that precipice in my nature. But I wasn't sure I wanted to. His hands slid to my shoulders and then down around my back, falling to my waist. His mouth grew more aggressive as he hauled my hips against him. We didn't quite match up because of our height difference, so he worked his thigh between mine and my thigh between his. I was already falling, lost, when I felt his hands slide around to my ass.

I planted my hands on either side of his head, my palms flat to the door, and opened my mouth to him: I just let him kiss me.

How do you even begin to describe the difference between kissing a man and a woman? Yeah, women are softer. But I think I would be able to tell I had a man under my lips if I were blind and deaf. The scrape of his goatee didn't discourage me. Nor did the column of hardening cock I could feel him grinding against my thigh. I was that much taller than him. I knew my own cock and belt buckle were probably digging into his stomach. All of these parts of him felt male, and something tight inside me unwound in relief. When I'd been with women, I had to always try so fucking hard. Just the maleness alone set me both at ease and off, simultaneously. Sex with women felt like some of the exercises the trainer I'd canned last year tried to make me take up. Spin class. Christ, so much work to get absolutely nowhere. This kiss felt like the pins in a lock tumbling open. It scared me stupid.

Stupid enough to stop. I pulled back and the kiss drew to a close. I was scared and I think we both needed air. I needed to get out before I fell into something deeper than a kiss.

I stepped back, untangling our legs, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"I got to get back out there. They're gonna miss me if I'm gone any longer," I told him.

"I want to see you," he said.

“I’m right here.” I pulled the ball cap off my head and ran a hand through my hair.

“I mean again. I want more.” He stepped away from the door and toward the sinks.

I followed him over. “I don’t see how that can work, Wyatt. I need to know what you plan on doing about this.”

“I told you, I want to see you. Hang out. I felt something with you. And you know how it is in this industry, if you’re in the public eye and gay, you’re in the closet. Country stars have the biggest closets in the world, and it’s not because of their fucking wardrobes. Although the rhinestone cowboy hats probably take up a hell of a lot of room,” Wyatt said with a smirk.

“Heh,” I snorted. “All my cowboy hats are straw or felt—got a couple fancy leather ones the wardrobe folks keep around for shows. Can’t say I have one rhinestone cowboy hat to my name.”

“Cause you’re not out. Come out and I’ll send you one.”

“Thanks, no. The last thing I need is a rhinestone cowboy hat,” I said and rolled my eyes, not mentioning the other last thing I needed—being out.

“No? Not enough compromisin’ on the road to your horizon to warrant one yet?”

I laughed bitterly, and nodded to let him know I got the unsubtle hint. “I wouldn’t say that. You’re kind of a smart-ass, Wyatt. And, you don’t look all that out to me. Last time I looked, we had the same audience. Is that what you’re doing here, outing cowboys? Do you drag everyone in here and give them the Wyatt Ford Gay Litmus Test?”

“Hey I like that... the Wyatt Ford Gay Litmus Test. Can I steal that line?” He laughed.

I sighed. “You can have it. As far as we’re concerned, this”—I waved my hand back and forth between us—“never happened.”

“Noooooo. No, J.R. Don’t be like that. I... like you. I really would like to hang out some time.”

“I don’t have to ask you to keep this between us, do I? I mean something like this... my fans are your fans. It’d hurt us both.”

“J.R., I’d never out you.”

“All right, then. Well, maybe I’ll see you around CRS. We can grab a beer and talk there, maybe.”

He looked at me and knew what I was really saying. I turned and headed for the door before he could say anything else. The kind of hanging out he wanted to do with me wasn’t going to happen at a country music seminar event, or at a bar after said event, surrounded by music industry figures, both public and private. The events would be for networking and securing loyalties and, thereby, music airplay. The next week was for kissing radio-executive ass, not kissing hot little morning show DJs.

CHAPTER 2

“Where’d you go there at the end of the meeting?” Slade asked when we got into the SUV.

I still lived on the fifty-acre farm I bought with my late wife Ericka south of Nashville, out past Franklin. I didn’t hate it. I didn’t love it, either. What I did like was that it was remote, which normally translated to private. But remote at that moment meant I was going to be locked in a conversation with Slade for the next thirty minutes, at least.

“Don’t even try to tell me you were schmoozing. I know you better than that.” Slade weaved in and out of traffic.

I looked out the window and answered him, “Men’s room. I ran into Wyatt Ford. He was talking about getting together this week during CSR.” I shrugged.

“That’s not a bad plan. He and Phil Cooper just signed on several new, huge metropolitan areas to their show. They’ve got one of the highest-ranked syndicated morning shows in country music.”

“Yeah? Where’d he come from anyway? I never did get that story. Phil had some other good old boy with him the last time we did this gig, Buddy or something.”

“His name was Bob Edmundson. He had a heart attack and retired. I think Wyatt and Phil go way back. The production manager was telling me they went to Alabama together and worked together before, but not for years. They headhunted Wyatt when Bob retired. They needed someone with the right chemistry to balance Phil. I think Wyatt was with a rock station in California.”

“Is that so?” I turned to Slade for a moment and then looked back out the window.

“Yep, I think it’s so.”

“Well, it explains a lot,” I said.

“A lot of what?” Slade asked.

“Wyatt. Being from California. Not working in country music. The guy... well, he don't have a radio face, if you know what I mean,” I answered. I knew I sounded like a dick but Slade knew me better than anyone.

Slade looked over at me. “No, what do you mean by that?”

“Too pretty.”

Slade was quiet a moment. “Is that so?”

“Yep, Slade, I do believe it's so.” I looked over at him and raised an eyebrow.

Slade's mouth quirked toward a smile he didn't think I saw. He could be a snide bastard at times. “J.R., you stoic bastard, are you making a friend?”

“Don't be an ass.”

“Uh-huh. But I'm so good at it.”

“Did you schedule those promos for tomorrow?”

“Yes, it will be the last ones you can do for a while.”

“Or like ever. I want to get these nailed down, now. I don't know what's going to happen with my voice... we have that TV thing that starts this summer, right? That'll be less straining.”

“*Breakout Stars* starts filming in August. J.R., you need to just have the surgery.”

“Not yet. I'm not ready to end my career yet.”

“You know that's not going to happen. The odds that the surgery will be success—”

“The odds are my voice will never be the same.”

I turned up the radio and pretended to watch the scenery fly by for the rest of the trip.

I hate coming back off the road.

The quiet of an empty house, or in my case, two empty houses, is constricting. I panic at the eclipse of the public light of scrutiny, the absence of the mad crush of people that pepper my every step, and the void of the companionship I get from the band and the rest of the staff I travel with—even though I hold them at arm’s length. Even when Ericka was still alive, coming back to the farm meant shedding my public plumage and being myself. Facing myself is something I’ve tried not to do for many years. For me, it’s just easier to be performing and working, so I arranged my life so I would always be working.

That intensity had taken a toll on my life and my voice.

When Slade dropped me off, no one was around so I headed for my studio house. When we moved to the farm, Ericka and I converted one of the guesthouses to a recording studio, and left the other for the live-in farm manager. We both recorded there. Even if it had been just one of us in the business, it still would have been a reasonable addition, a sound investment. The rest of the studio house still had space enough for a bedroom and a business office. I mostly lived there instead of the three-floor monstrosity down the drive.

The staff all think it’s because I can’t bear to be in the big house after Ericka died. Most people misconstrue my guilt and my remorse, even I do at times. My wife died from aggressive esophageal cancer. The public onslaught of sympathy from the country-music industry was overwhelming; they, too, lost one of their own. I’d always stood a little apart because of my tendency to not let anyone get too close. But Ericka’s death shoved me into a whole other echelon. My career was still skyrocketing from the notoriety that came with the tragic loss of my sham of a marriage. The more I protested it; the more people credited me as being noble. Sleeping in the house I shared with her just made the guilt worse.

The other fact of the matter is I grew up in a small house on a ranch, as a ranch foreman’s son. When I was off the road, the loneliness was crushing, and the foreignness of a big, echoing house only made it seem worse. So, my housekeeper lived in the big house and I lived in the studio house.

That afternoon, it was there that I found my mail.

CHAPTER 3

I grabbed a bottled water on my way in—I nearly always have one with me to keep my vocal cords hydrated—and the stack of mail my manager and staff determined was either personal or something I might want to see. I flipped the TV on to ESPN and started to work through the pile. I noticed the masthead of the alumni magazine from the Agriculture college at the University of Florida in the stack. I am continually amazed at the ability of the university's alumni foundation to hunt me down and mail me at my personal address. I truly believe nothing short of witness protection would shield me from them; and even then, if I still had a dime to my name, I'm pretty sure they'd still find me. I pulled the magazine out, meaning to set it aside as the start of my toss-away pile when the cover hit me.

On the cover, a blond man leaned against the gate of a ranch I knew very well. Hite Loventhrice. I felt my breath catch. Seeing just a picture of Hi made my heart rate triple. He looked good. And he wasn't alone. A man I didn't recognize stood on the other side of the Love Trust Ranch sign. I thumbed the magazine pages looking for the story. Who was this guy? New foreman? No, no. Dad would have told me if he'd been retiring; I'm distant but I'm not an irresponsible son. I found the story, finally. The headline said that the owner of the Love Trust Ranch and his new partner published a range cattle study. My brain was in overdrive and pieces of words were coming at me in chunks. I wasn't going to be able to read this until I'd calmed down. What I was getting out of it was that the ranch had a new partner and no one told me. Were they in trouble? I told Dad I would buy in if it ever came to them losing or selling off parcels of land.

I hit the number for my dad on my cell and waited.

“Yeaap.” I heard my dad pick up. “Jebidiah Hall speaking.”

I shook my head. My dad almost has phone manners. Almost.

“Hey Dad, it's me.”

“Lo, son. Where you at this week, John Roy?” He actually sounded glad to hear from me. I felt a fresh stab of guilt. My dad always supported me, even if he didn’t agree with my life choices.

“Ah, I’m at the farm near Nashville. Have to be in town for this radio event—you know the one where Ericka won the New Face in Country Music Award before she got sick. Have to shoot a video if the weather works out next weekend. Gonna use one of the fields here on the farm. Just depends on if there’s snow,” I answered.

“You should shoot down here. No snow at Love Ranch, I guarantee it,” he said. He always tries to get me to visit. I rarely do.

“Probably won’t be snow here either but still—can’t do it in Florida, Dad. They want it all stark looking, and everything here is still brown from winter.”

“It’s the palm trees, ain’t it? Nobody ever thinks a cattle ranch should have palm trees.”

“That’s probably part of it. Listen Dad, I got this magazine in the mail...” I started.

“Oh, so you got that, did you?” His voice changed. I could hear a strain of weariness work its way into the cadence of his Florida accent.

“What is this about a new partner? Is the ranch in trouble? I told you I’d buy in if it ever came to that. It’s my home, too. Tell me Hi and his dad didn’t sell off any land. Jesus. Who is this guy?” I hammered him with questions, taking no breaths.

He waited and sighed. Jeb Hall approached people the way he approached a bull on a tear; he was the kind of man to let you run out of steam before he spoke.

“John Roy.”

“I’m done.”

“That would be Brad. He’s not that kind of partner. Not a ranch partner.”

“He’s some kind of researcher?”

“Well, yeah. That and more.”

I picked up the magazine and looked at it again, scanning the story. Dr. Brad Williams, life partner to Associate Professor Hite Loventhrice.

“Oh. Oh fuck.”

“Language, John Roy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes sir. Sorry. But what the hell does this guy do—” I started.

“Son, you made your choice. There’s no gay in country music. Isn’t that what you always said? Hite, well, John Roy, he took another path. Leave the boy be. He’s happy enough for the moment.”

“But...” I wanted to know more. Hite had a partner? He’d really settled down with someone else. The realization felt so... final. I always thought... Well, that one day...

“No but about it, Johnnie. As your life stands, you got what you wanted.”

“Fuck.”

“John Roy, language. Your mamma’d slap you stupider than you already act if she was still around.”

I half laughed, half grunted. The man had my number.

“If your life ain’t what you want Johnnie, you change it. But I won’t have you goin’ and messin’ around in Hite’s happiness. He’s doin’ his research and workin’ on this tenure thing. He’s findin’ his way to fit in down here and be who he is. You boys...” My dad coughed. He was comfortable with a lot but not everything. “Well, he moved on and it’s long past time for you to do that, too. I think things with Ericka would have been easier if you had—” I didn’t hear anything else he said because I started talking over him.

“I know Dad, you think I don’t think about that every day?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Son, it’s time to let go and start finding somethin’ to make you happy. And right now, muddlin’ around with Hite ain’t gonna be it.”

We said our good-byes and hung up, with me promising a visit we both knew I wouldn't make any time soon.

I grew up on a cattle ranch in South Florida loving two things equally with all my heart. One was country music. The other one was Hite Loventhrice. It didn't dawn on me until I got a lot older that the two were mutually exclusive. By the time I knew enough to understand that, we'd loved each other and hurt each other too much to do a damned bit about it.

If truth be told—and with me, it never, ever is—I wouldn't have changed it. What time I had with Hi was ours, something I felt was sacred. If it was all we were ever going to get, I now treasured all of it. Ericka's death taught me that. There's a cruel irony that my not loving her gave me the freedom to love what I had with him. That was one of the many gifts and curses of Ericka's death. I wouldn't have traded the time I had with Hi for anything. Usually dwelling on the point that Ericka showed me how to treasure my time with Hi only made me feel more guilty. But that day, thinking about Hi on that ranch in someone else's arms felt like a bow rake running over my soul.

Then again, I guess that's the whole point of a bow rake—it rips up the soil to prepare it for something else to grow.

I spent that long, dark night drinking beer—which I'm not supposed to do with the nodes and scarring I have on my vocal cords—and staring into the fire, measuring my daddy's words about moving on against memories of Hi and my encounter with Wyatt Ford.

There was a time when I was angry and hurt and I hated everything about Hi and myself.

My daddy works for Hi's daddy on the Love Trust Ranch, and he has for all of my life that I remember. I don't have memories from my childhood that start any earlier than that ranch and Hi. He'd always been my best friend and when we became teenagers, things changed between us. We became something more than friends. I thought for years it was just sex. It wasn't.

We went to college together. I majored in agriculture communication and Hi studied agribusiness. We lived together. I played in the country bars around Gainesville and in Ocala at night. After college, I went to Nashville and Hi went on to a master's program at Texas A&M. My first few years in Nashville, me and Hi were still together, if you could call it that. We hid it. I was working the bars, beating the pavement, putting in my time trying to get my name and my songs out—just generally looking to be found as a country singer. Hi was in Texas learning how to make cows make better cows in an animal husbandry program. I'd tease him while we fucked that he was getting a degree in fucking. He'd retort that insemination wasn't necessarily fucking. Even back when we were kids, he'd been too smart for me.

Around the time I finally got a song writing contract with a publishing house, Hi went on to get his Ph.D. in California and that's about when things started to fall apart between us. I always knew deep down it was an either-or proposition for us, at best. I signed with a label and went on my first tour. Slade was the one who first figured out either Hi had to go or I had to act like a playboy—before the label and the public noticed. I don't hold that against him, now. I wouldn't have a career if I'd bucked him then.

However, it didn't hit Hi too well when I first started dating women. If I was going to see and date women for work, he was going to see other men. The jealousy burned both ways.

Hi called it an open relationship. I just called it doing what we had to—that was always the difference between us. I never got what being gay was about, while he did. I just loved him and wanted to fuck him. Not always in that order.

Maybe part of the problem was because I could date women to some, little satisfaction, while he never wanted anything to do with them. There was a part of him that thought I was cheating on him. At the time, I still didn't know I was really gay; I just had always wanted Hi. While Hi, he knew he was gay without a doubt. When he went out to Berkeley, he was finally living somewhere for the first time in his life where he felt like he could do something about it.

By that time he came to me and told me he was coming out, we'd done ourselves in for the most part. I knew we were over. I was opening at a big show in Mountain View and Hi drove down from Berkeley.

"I told Daddy last month," he told me that night in a motel room when we'd finally caught our breath after sex. "He and the family are fine with it. Johnnie, your dad's even okay with it."

"What? You told my dad about us." I was shocked.

"No, no. I told them about me. They already knew about us."

I couldn't believe how dismissive he was about people knowing. I'd felt so... exposed just listening to him talk about it. "Jeez, I need to call my dad. How did they know?"

"Seriously? Are you that clueless?" He rolled his eyes and then rolled off the bed.

"Nice, Hi. Apparently I am." Like I said, by that point, we were at the end of our rope.

"Besides the fact they aren't blind, if your manager could figure it out, don't you think our parents, who watched us grow up, could?"

I nodded. That made sense.

"Besides, your dad caught us in the barn when we were in high school."

"Oh God. Oh fuck! No way." I groaned. "He'll never talk to me again."

Hi laughed. "Oh Romeo, he's known since you were sixteen. I don't see him cutting you off because now you know he knows."

I sighed. He always called me that nickname when he was feeling shaky and unsure about us. It started in high school when I still used to go out with girls. He'd call me that when he asked me about a date I'd been with or a girl who he knew was interested in me.

"That's great, Hi, but you know this is something I can't do. I can't *be* out."

He yanked up his briefs and turned to me, facing me off with a snort.

“Just because you can’t *be* out, Johnnie, doesn’t mean I can’t, does it?”

I’ll probably never forget him standing there in black underwear with some designer’s name emblazoned on the wide band wondering where his tighty-whities went and worse, where he got the idea he needed fancy man-panties. The silence dragged out a bit and I sighed.

“Hi, I think it might.”

“That’s just stupid. Johnnie, I don’t want to spend my life hiding. I don’t know how to tell you what it feels like to just be... God, me. No more worrying about someone seeing me look at you too long, or hell, any man too long. It’s just a such a relief.”

“Who else are you looking at ‘too long’?”

“Really, Romeo? You’re gonna ask me that. How was that last date you went on with Ericka Eddy that I had to read about in *People* magazine?”

“Hi, I can’t do my job and be gay. The two don’t mix.”

“You don’t know that.” He sounded so reasonable and so idealistically wrong.

“I do know. You know, too. Look at the Dixie Chicks a couple years ago. And they were way more established than I am when country music turned its back on them.”

“It can’t always be that way,” he said.

I didn’t say anything back. Because it’s always been my fear that it would always be that way and I knew I was always gonna love him. That was a lot of always that didn’t mix together any way I tried to fit it.

I’d heard this argument from my manager enough that I could spout it off to Hi and make it sound like I believed it was the right thing.

“Might not always be that way for but now, the fans... they’d see it as a betrayal.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I see. You either betray them or you betray me.”

My dad was right.

I'd made my choice and it was time to move on. That brought me around again to thinking about how good Wyatt Ford's mouth felt under mine when I started to feel the locks I'd kept on my sex life begin to tumble open. I wondered what the rest of him would feel like.

What it would be like to have a different life, one where I could bring home a guy like Wyatt and fuck him senseless? I didn't think I'd be able to be out and keep my career. Last year, Chely Wright tried it. The vacuum of silence in response to her Come-to-Jesus moment was telling. It was like someone erased her presence in the industry. I don't think things would go so quietly for me.

If no one ever called me to play another venue, would I care? I wondered what my life would be like if my career was gone. I tested that thought emotionally and came up empty. That was the problem. I was always empty. I'd always thought maybe one day I could go back to the ranch and back to Hi. But he'd moved on. I heard my daddy's words in my head. *Leave the boy be. He's happy...*

I wondered what happy would be like. It'd been so long I wasn't sure I knew. I thought about the week ahead, seeing Wyatt again at CSR. I could move on, too. I didn't have to come out. But I could see what it was like to not be so damned alone.

CHAPTER 4

March 1, 2011

I met Slade early the next morning at the Convention Center. He had my publicist in tow and a busy itinerary plotted out.

I had a set of interviews scheduled that morning. We'd be doing this all week—with so many DJs in town at one time; this wasn't something any artist would pass up. I had a round of recording sessions for that afternoon reading promotional material that a couple national broadcasting companies used as cut-ins at their local affiliate stations. They generally went something like, *Hi, this is J.R. Hall with WKISS my ass*. Only without the ass. I'm positive it would have been more interesting with some ass in there.

I was expected to attend a Hall of Fame dinner that night. I was pretty pissed about that, actually, even if the Judds were going to be there. I wanted to watch the Gators' game that night and had to set my DVR to record it instead.

I didn't run into Wyatt until that afternoon. By then, I was nearly hoarse from running more than two hundred promotional lines. Doing them now was ego on my part. My voice had a character to it and I was afraid it was going to be lost or drastically changed when I finally gave in and had surgery on my vocal cords. If I did these promos now, they'd be out there, for posterity. Like I said: ego.

Turned out that Wyatt found me that evening, again, in the men's room. I turned to see him standing in the door way and my heart rate spiked. He looked good wearing a dark suit and a deep-red tie. I wondered if he wore an undershirt and if it was on inside out.

"Hey," I said softly. My voice came out a little raspy. Voice training taught me not to whisper but to speak softly, if at all, when my cords were irritated.

He put his hand up and waved. His eyes were running over the bathroom, sweeping the urinal area, and scanning the floor under the stalls.

"Just us," I said, again, quietly.

“Then why are you whispering?” He gave me a funny look.

“Voice going. You always pick up men in bathrooms, Wyatt?” I took a drink from my ever-present water bottle.

“I haven’t picked you up yet. So, no.” He moved toward the urinals. I wondered if he was going to whip his dick out and pee in front of me. I found myself curious. Heterosexual-man-law prohibited me from checking out the goods. I wasn’t sure what gay-man-law allowed. I’d never been at the urinals with a guy who knew I was gay, except Hi, and I already knew what his goods looked like.

“Hmmm. Time will tell.”

He turned, looking surprised.

“That wasn’t what you said yesterday,” he said.

I shrugged and replied quietly, “I thought on it last night. Slade mentioned to me that you and Phil are from Alabama—went to school together?”

A shadow passed over Wyatt’s face. He looked annoyed and suspicious. “Yeah, we did. Why?”

“Roll Tide, Roll?”

“Yep. And you’re from Florida. I read something about cows. They have cows down there?”

I laughed and started to cough. I covered the rough spot with another sip of water and said, “A few, yes. You going to this dinner tonight?”

“I am.” Wyatt looked completely flummoxed. I suppose the logic of my questions didn’t fit.

“I have to, too. I set my DVR to record the UF-Alabama game tonight. Should be over by the time this dinner tonight wraps. Interested in going to my place to watch the game?” I asked. After I said it, I realized I’d actually asked him out on what was essentially a date.

“You know, that’d be great. I’d really like that.”

We exchanged cell numbers and I gave him my address to put in his GPS. “It’s kind of hard to find, so let’s plan to meet up in the parking garage. Call me when you get to your car and we can caravan down to the farm.”

Wyatt pulled in beside me outside the garage of the studio house. He had a little red toy car compared to my SUV.

I parked in the garage next to a Jeep I used on the farm. I waited with the door open for Wyatt to join me.

“You know, I can never go anywhere with you if you drive, Wyatt.”

He looked hurt. “Geez, J.R., that’s harsh. Maybe this is a mistake and I should go...” He started to turn away.

“Wait. I just meant I’d never fit in that tiny car of yours. What is that thing?” I said.

I watched a smile dawn on his face. “Honda Civic. It’s a hybrid.”

“It’s a toy car. Come on in, let’s go see about this game.” I headed into the house. I noticed he’d changed from the more formal suit he’d had on at the dinner. I had just thrown a suit jacket over what I had on. Great thing about being a country star is that dressed-up means a decent pair of boots and black shirt with or without a jacket—every occasion is jeans-friendly.

“You live here?” he said as he followed me into the house and I reset the security system.

“Yeah, I have a studio in the house.”

He looked around. “What about that big house down the road? I saw the lights. Who lives there?”

“The housekeeper?” I shrugged and knew this was a weird thing.

“You’re not serious.”

I nodded at him.

“Why?”

“That place is huge. Who needs all that space? Most of it was stuff Ericka picked out. After she died... I just felt more comfortable here.”

“J.R., you are so far in the closet, your closet... your closet is actually a house?” he asked, somewhat dumbfounded.

“Don’t be a dick, Wyatt.” I said. “You want a beer?”

“Just callin’ ’em like I see ’em. Sure, beer’d be great.” I handed him a bottle from the fridge and uncapped the lid from a fresh bottle of water for myself.

“Am I drinking alone? You plan to take advantage of me?” Wyatt gestured with his bottle to my water.

“I shouldn’t drink alcohol with my throat the way it is.” I was still speaking quietly. I headed toward the living room where the entertainment center was. “And, yes and yes.”

“And what way is that?” he asked. He either ignored my attempt at flirtation or he didn’t hear it. He looked serious. But I got it—someone like me losing his voice was a serious issue. Wyatt knew the industry well enough to understand the implications.

I sighed and sat on the couch. “I have some problems with my vocal cords and am going to eventually need surgery. I take... precautions so I can keep working and try not to damage them further.”

“Nodes? Why don’t you just go ahead and have the surgery?” Wyatt asked. He sat down next to me, closer to me than I expected.

“I have some scarring, too...” I started.

Wyatt waited me out.

“No one can guarantee it won’t change my voice. I have one more album contracted with my label. I’m just not sure I’m ready to end my career.”

“You’re what? About thirty-two? You’ve still got years left. And God, you are going to be so hot in your forties. Throat surgery is not going to end your career.”

“Well, it might. It’ll change it. And you know... eventually... it’s going to end anyway.”

“Why’s that?”

I looked at him evenly and put my arm up along the top of the couch behind him, “Why do you think, Wyatt?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry... I worked in the rock-pop radio until a couple months ago. Some of the... traditions of country music escape me.”

“Heh. Traditions.” I shook my head and picked up the remote to cue up the game. “If you really do want to go up to the house we can. There’s a media room there with a bigger flat screen.”

“They make bigger screens than that one?” he said, seeming to actually not know for sure.

“Yeah.” I got the game ready. “Last chance.”

“You live here, right? It’s where you come to be yourself.”

I nodded.

“I’d rather stay here then.” He scooted closer to me on the couch, close enough so that if I let my legs fall completely open, I’d brush up against him.

I’m not sure which pleased me more—feeling him close to me or hearing him say that he wanted to stay where I am comfortable being me.

“You didn’t cheat and hear the score on the way down, did you?” I asked him.

He pressed his lips together. “Nope.”

“Gators win this one, we’ll probably go to the SEC Tourney.”

“What sport are we watching again?” He asked.

“Bas... ket... ball.” I answered slowly. “You seriously didn’t know that?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Well, I knew it wasn’t football.”

“Oh my God...” I trailed off as he started laughing and fell into me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You shit. You’re fucking with me.”

“Not yet, but I hope to be.”

I pretended to concentrate on the remote and started the game, not answering him mostly from nerves. He leaned into me, my left arm slipping from the back of the couch to his shoulders. I thought to myself, *this boy moves fast.*

I had no idea.

I could feel his breath on my neck, making me feel the need to pace my breathing.

“You know what?” His words brushed over my ear.

I turned my head a smidge toward him. I didn’t want to lose the contact. “What?”

“I think we should make a little wager on the game, don’t you?” He leaned in close enough for his lips to caress my ear.

“You think? What should we bet?” I was afraid to move my head because what Wyatt was doing felt so good. It reminded me of Hi, who used to kiss my neck and my ear, but he always poked me with whatever hat he wore. I shoved Hi from my mind as Wyatt slowly ran his tongue around the helix of my ear—the outermost shell—down to the fleshy lobe. I was already hard and we hadn’t made it to tip-off yet.

“Winner gets the first blow job,” he said. Then he nipped my lobe and sucked it into his mouth.

At that moment I knew for with absolute certainty what I’d long suspected: I had an electric current that ran from my earlobe straight to my cock. I didn’t think I would make it to the end of the game and I swear I almost didn’t. The game was tied at the half. I had mixed feelings about watching a recorded game for the first time. If it’d been live, then I could have made out with him through halftime. As it stood, I just wanted to get to the end of the game and skipped over the break altogether.

The Gators picked it up in the second half. We'd been kissing off and on during replays, long wet, delving kisses that made my lips numb and my cock throb. I liked to pull him on top of me and massage his ass, letting my hands trace where his crease was under his jeans, where I wanted my dick to be. He was remarkably cool about letting me pull away mid-kiss and let my eyes track the game while I rubbed the front of his pants, pulled on one of his nipples or just idly touched him. The first couple of times it happened, I expected to get yelled at. Not that I could remember one time ever making out with Ericka outside of the bedroom just for the sake of making out, but if I'd ever looked away from her to watch a game, I'd have been sleeping in the studio house—which honestly, I did my fair share of anyway. But Wyatt just treated the ball game like a long round of foreplay.

By the last ten minutes of the second half the Gators had pulled ahead enough so that Wyatt had the button fly of my jeans open and was crawling down to his knees on the floor in front of me.

“We didn't win yet,” I said, while I lifted my hips and let him tug my jeans and briefs down to my thighs.

“Oh, you want me to stop and wait.” He'd captured my cock in his hand when it flopped up and out of my jeans. God, I couldn't remember the last time I was that hard and that ready. I knew my cock, especially the top third, was palpably wet with precome and had been for some time.

He fisted my cock and looked up to watch me. I gave up on the game, my attention drawn to him kneeling compliantly before me. I traced the inner seam on the collar of his T-shirt around his neck. He had his shirt on inside out again.

“What's up with this? You do know your shirt is inside out, that it's always on wrong,” I asked him softly. My voice had been quiet all night. I should have spent the evening resting it.

He laughed a little and blushed. “Yeah. My skin is really sensitive... the tags drive me crazy. Sometimes the seams even bug me. I just wear them this way.”

“So that was why you went so crazy when I pinched your nipples earlier,” I pondered aloud, thinking back to when I had my hand up his shirt, squeezing and releasing his nipples to watch him wiggle under me and moan.

He smiled and pulled the head of my cock to his mouth. I watched that pink tongue I’d been sucking on for the last couple hours start with the top of my cock, circling the head, running up and down the sides.

“Taste good?”

“Mmmm. Mmmm,” he said after he captured the head in his mouth and began to suck me down.

I didn’t know what to think of him. We hadn’t talked a lot, just made out and frothed on the couch. He sucked my cock in earnest and I groaned. He gripped the base in one hand, slipping his other hand down to my balls, lifting them, and letting his fingers dance under them. I felt his finger pressing and rubbing at the root of my cock under my perineum.

His head, bobbing up and down in my lap, was a magnet for my hands. I knew I wasn’t going to make it to the end of the game. I’d discovered earlier how soft and fine his hair was and I wanted to touch him, to bury my fingers in his loose brown curls. I threaded the fingers of my right hand through the curls on the back of his head.

“This okay?” I asked. I hadn’t had a lot of experience with getting blow jobs and that experience was limited to only one man, whose boundaries I knew like my own. Asking just seemed... right. Besides, I’d watched my fair share of gay porn and read gay erotica on the Internet. I even had a collection of toys hidden in a locked trunk in my bedroom. I wasn’t a complete novice. Apparently, asking was the right thing because he nodded and picked up speed, my hand riding the back of his head until I was tapping him with my fingers.

“Wyatt... baby... I’m not gonna last much... I’m gonna come,” I moaned and got another nod around the mouthful of cock he didn’t want to release. The knowledge that he wanted it down his throat was all it took to tip me over the edge.

I dragged him up on top of me again after I came and kissed him, wanting to taste myself in his mouth.

“Come back to the bedroom?” I murmured to his lips, pulling back to look into his face.

His eyes met mine, darting back and forth between them, and he nodded.

When we got to my bedroom, I unlocked my trunk to dig out the condoms and lube. Wyatt immediately wanted to see what else was in the trunk. I made him undress first. The idea of him being naked, while I wasn't, turned me on. When he shed his clothes, he fell to his knees in front of the trunk to dig through my toys.

After Ericka died, I started buying sex toys and books online that interested me—things I'd read about or seen in gay porn. Some I tried; some I didn't. All of it I hid under lock and key away from the housekeeper.

“Why did I have to be naked to look in your toy box, J.R.?”

“Because I want you that way. Next blow job is mine to give, so I get to be in charge.”

“You got to be in charge when I gave you one.”

“Was that what that was? Me in charge?”

He made a *hmp* sound. “Which is your favorite—and don't tell me you don't have one,” he demanded.

I pulled out a flesh-colored dildo that was incredibly lifelike. I didn't tell Wyatt but it always looked a little like Hi's cock to me in the length and the shape of the head. I pushed the thought away.

“You're a bottom,” he stated as if he'd been betrayed by the implausible, like I was really a woman in man-drag. He kneeled there forlornly looking up at me with my dildo in his lap.

“You sound so disappointed.” I laughed at him. “Don’t worry, I like to top. But I have my moments. I have a prostate, too, ya know.” I shook my head and pointed to the dildo. “It doesn’t see much action because I’m never home.”

“What, your dildo isn’t allowed to leave the house?”

“Close actually,” I said and watched the disbelief dawn on his face. He was about to add another smart-ass comment when I added, “Wyatt, what if a TSA agent decided to check my carry-on because they saw a tubular object on the scan, and then they want me to show ’em that my dildos and butt plugs do, in fact, vibrate and are not bombs? Can you even imagine the YouTube hits from the camera-phone videos?”

“Don’t you have your own jet or tour bus?”

“No jet, actually. I looked into one but it’d cost as much as this farm. We charter them and sometimes the label arranges one. But I fly commercial a lot, too. Even when we’re touring on the bus, I might have to catch a flight when I least expect it,” I answered. “And there’s no privacy on a tour bus.”

“Poor, lonely sex toys. I’ll play with you.” Wyatt began digging deeper into the trunk.

I rolled my eyes. “So much for being in charge,” I commented.

Wyatt pulled out one of my pictorial books with images of men having sex in varying positions and some light BDSM. I found a number of the images beautiful and erotic. A few pages were well worn.

“You’re kind of a bad boy, aren’t you, J.R.?” Wyatt asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a dirty boy—kinky.”

I shrugged. “Well, hot is hot.”

“Hmm, so you ever do any of these things?” He flipped through the pages.

“Some... a long time ago I was with someone,” I answered.

“You do like to be in control, don’t ya? Got a little bit of a dominant streak in ya? I picked up on that.”

“I don’t know how you did, but, yeah, I like to call the shots at times,” I told him. “Or I like to fantasize that I’m calling them. I’ve only been with one other guy.”

“Really?” He paused and looked speculatively at me.

“Yeah.”

“Someone important?”

“Yeah, when I was younger. He... he didn’t want to hide and I wanted to be a star.”

“Yeah, I had a relationship kind of like that when I was younger, too. First loves, huh? A bitch to get past,” Wyatt said with a shrug.

Wyatt stopped flipping through the pages when he got to an image of a guy tied to a bed.

“The page is dog-eared on this one, J.R.” Wyatt sat back on his heels, looking up at me. He was beautiful, with a sparse covering of light-brown hair on his chest, trailing down his stomach to his half-hard cock.

“Yep... Um. Hot is hot?” I grinned at him.

“When you look at this, do you wanna be the tie-er or the tie-ee? No let me guess, Mr. I-like-to-be-in-charge-when-it’s-my-blow-job-turn.” Wyatt mimicked my deep voice. “You wanna tie me up.”

I looked at him evenly.

He looked right back. “I asked you if you wanna tie me up.”

There was a sharp inhale on my part. Jeez, just when I thought this guy couldn’t make my dick any harder. “Yeah, Wyatt, I do,” I said.

“Okay.” He got up, climbed into the middle of my California king-sized bed and was dwarfed in the expanse. I kind of liked it because it made him seem... smaller and vulnerable... and made me want to dominate him before I fucked him into my mattress.

He lay on his back with his arms and legs spread.

“What? Now?” I asked.

“Yeah. No time like the present, right?” Wyatt said.

Shit, shit, shit. I was trying to think of what I could use to tie him down. I had no rope in the studio house, not even neckties. Those were up in the big house or in my wardrobe. I needed rope. I grew up roping cattle. I was good with rope. It was one of the reasons tying a guy up originally appealed to me.

“You gonna think all night?” he asked.

“I might.”

I thought there might be some rope in the barn but then I remembered all the tags sticking out the back of Wyatt’s shirts. His skin was too sensitive for a T-shirt tag. Even if I could find rope in the barn with a softer lay to it, it would be way too abrasive for his skin. I wanted to dominate him a little, not hurt him. The idea of hurting someone did not turn me on.

“Okay.” I tossed him the book. “I’m gonna be back in five minutes...” I thought a second about how far and back I was going and amended that. “Well, maybe ten. You have to stay right here.”

“All right.”

“I mean it, don’t move from the bed.” I could grab a jacket by the door; I wasn’t going that far.

“I said I wouldn’t.” He told me.

“Promise me.”

“Okay, okay.” He rolled his eyes.

“No, promise me.”

“Geeesh, I promise.” He was sitting up on the bed with his arms crossed, looking mildly perturbed.

“If you move, you’re gonna be in trouble.”

“What are you gonna do, spank me?”

“Yes.” I wouldn’t. Well, I might smack his ass a couple times with my hand but like I said, pain really wasn’t something I was into.

“*Pffft*. How do you know I want to be spanked?” he asked me, indignant.

I thought about that. He had a point. I had no idea what his limits were.

“You’re right. I don’t know if you want to be spanked.” I walked out of the room to the office.

“J.R., wait, you’re going now? You’re just gonna leave me naked in your bed,” Wyatt called after me.

“No,” I called from the office in the next bedroom. “And at least I didn’t leave you naked *and* tied up in my bed. Bright side to everything, Wyatt.”

“Look who is suddenly the optimist,” he muttered. I don’t think he thought I heard him and it kind of made me smile. I realized suddenly that I was having fun. I didn’t think I remembered the last time I had fun in my life that didn’t have singing attached to it.

I came back and tossed him a pad of Post-it notes. I also tossed a book onto the bed.

“You got an assignment,” I said as I dragged the open trunk over to the side of the bed where he could reach it. “While I’m gone, I want you to mark the page with a Post-it for ten things in this book you want me to do to you.”

He blanched. “What if I can’t come up with ten things?” he asked.

“Then I’ll know you weren’t working on looking and were moving around instead. And I’ll spank you,” I replied.

“Jeez, control freak much?” he mumbled.

“Um, yeah, kind of the point isn’t it? That was what you were trying to get at here, or have I read this wrong?” I asked him, totally serious.

He grinned.

“Annnnd...” I said, “I want you to pick out five toys from the chest you want me to use on you.” I watched the grin fade.

I shoved my feet into my sneakers, not bothering with socks, and headed off to find me some soft rope.

“You got ten things?” I walked in holding my bounty.

“Barely.”

“Good. I found what I needed.” I toed off my shoes as soon as I got into the room. I’d left my coat by the door.

“Lie on your back in the middle of the bed—spread eagle.”

I tossed the gold-and-light-sage ropes on the bed, took one of the cords and began tying his right hand to the bedpost.

“What the hell, J.R.? Are you using drapery tiebacks to tie me up?”

I laughed, “Yep.”

“You went up to your big, fancy mansion and stole these off the curtains to tie me up?”

“Pretty much.”

He craned his neck to look up at his hand. “Shit. Those gold ones even have goddamn tassels on ’em. I’m gonna look like fucking Carol Burnett dressed up as Scarlett O’Hara here.”

“Not sexy, Wyatt.” I tugged on the cords restraining his first hand. Secure.

He rolled his lips into his mouth and swallowed a laugh. “Funny though. You gotta admit that.”

I turned away so he wouldn’t see me smile and walked down the bed to his ankle, going to work on it with another tieback. “You got a smart mouth on ya.”

“Frankly, my dear...” he started.

“Go there and I gag you.”

“Hey, I didn’t pick out any gagging pictures or toys.”

He was right. He hadn't.

A little while later, Wyatt was securely tied down and moaning in my bed.

I'd flipped through book and put it with toys down at the foot of the bed while I looked over him and what he'd deemed acceptable. My eyes landed on one of my favorite toys.

"Interesting selection, Wyatt," I said.

I turned to the trunk to get a condom and lube.

"What are you getting?"

"That's for me to know," I told him and watched him roll his eyes at me.

I went back to the foot of the bed with the lube. Before I'd tied up his legs to the bedposts, I'd shoved a pillow under his ass. From where I stood, I could just catch a glimpse of his hole peeking out between his spread legs, under his balls. I crawled up onto the bed between his legs and popped open the lube, smearing some on my fingers. I pulled his balls up with one hand and rubbed my lubed fingers across his puckered ass. I petted and pressed the pad of my forefinger to the twelve o'clock spot on his pucker until he relaxed and I slid my finger in: sliding it in and out, twisting and testing, lubing him up to see how he accommodated the size of my finger. I had a smaller toy, similar to the bigger version he'd chosen, but I wanted to use the one on the bed. It had more interesting features.

He moaned and I smiled at the reaction. He was watching my face intently. I pulled my finger away and added another bit of lube to the outside of his ass and then swiped his cock with my hand, pumping it until he was stiff and a bead of precome slipped from his slit, then I let him go. He groaned when I stopped. I turned away from him for the moment so he couldn't see what my hands were doing.

I tore open the condom wrapper.

“Don’t tell me I picked out all those toys when I could have been snooping through your stuff and you’re just gonna fuck me,” Wyatt complained when he heard the wrapper ripping.

I rolled the condom over the protruding, bulbous end of the prostate massager and laid it on the bed in the V between his legs. I only had one massager like the one he’d chosen and I’d used it—repeatedly. If I was going to share it with him tonight, it got wrapped up.

“You really do have a smart mouth.”

“Smart, talented mouth.”

“True. But what I’m interested in at this moment is your ass rather than your mouth.” I applied a bit of lube to the bulb of the massager and then pushed it against his ass.

“Oh my God, what is that?” He tried to crane his neck, looking down his body.

“You picked it out, don’t you remember?”

“Noooo. I wanna see it.”

“You can see it later. Push out a little for me, baby.”

“So bossy,” he complained, but I felt the tension in his muscles change and the massager slid right in. I slowly pressed until it was seated with the little curling arm situated in the center of his perineum.

He moaned. “Oh God, that’s um... good. So good.”

I turned the pulse on low and listened to his groans. I watched him tug on the ropes while he writhed. He really was beautiful, finely muscled, lean and long.

“Be right back, baby.” I turned.

“Oh, God... J.R., don’t leave me here.” I heard him as I walked to the kitchen and pulled a glass from the cabinet.

“You son of bitch. You promised me a blow job,” he yelled at me. It was probably a good thing I lived in the sticks.

I laughed and got some crushed ice and water from the fridge's auto dispenser. Wyatt might want me to dominate him a little but he was never truly going to be a sub.

"Problems, Wyatt?" I asked when I strolled casually back into the bedroom.

"Oh my God. J.R., please..." Wyatt said, moaning. I could see how he'd figured out that the massager got the massaging part of its name from his movements. I watched his abdominal muscles and pelvic area contract and release in time with his groans. I could see him clenching his glutes together as he bore down on the massager, working his ass as much as he could, considering his restraints. His cock was stiff, with drops of precome gathering on his belly.

I drank from the glass before setting it down on the bedside table. I turned up the intensity on the vibrator a notch and then bent and took a nipple into my mouth, sucking and then letting some ice chips fall from my mouth to his chest. I pushed the chips around with a finger, watching and listening to him moan, groan and finally beg me to touch his cock.

"Wyatt, baby, the way your skin is so sensitive... you're beautiful," I told him.

I loved watching his reactions, how he would move and grind his hips and then groan from the effect that movement had on the bulb pushing on his prostate. I pinched his nipples, holding them tightly for a moment and then releasing them to watch him cry out and throw his head back.

"Please, please J.R., touch my cock. Stroke it. I don't even care if you blow me," he bargained.

I lightly dragged my fingers, callused from guitar playing, down his stomach to his neatly trimmed pubic hair. This amazed me, actually. I'd suffered chest waxing just recently for the video we were filming, but no one ever touched my hair there. I love how the clean look set off his cock.

I ran my fingers over the trimmed hair. "Will you show me how you do this? I'd like to do mine."

“J.R., don’t you get it, I will do anything you want if you touch my cock already. Please.” He took a deep breath, getting control of himself. I couldn’t have that, so, I took the remote and turned it up to the highest setting before wrapping my hand around his cock and fisting it and pumping hard.

I pumped him until he started to come and then I released his cock and flipped the remote off.

“No... no. J.R. Don’t stop.” He protested.

I got up off the bed and took my jeans and briefs off. I’d lost my shirt earlier, but now I wanted to be naked with him. I stroked his chest, tracing his nipples and the lines of his muscles while his breathing started to slow. When he had himself back in control, I turned the remote back on low.

On my knees between his legs, I started to slowly stroke his cock. I gradually increased the pace, stopping to blow air across his glans. As more and more fluid oozed from his cock, I ramped up the intensity with the remote.

He was babbling at this point. I fisted his cock, pulling up for several tight strokes, bringing a stream or two of seminal fluid with each stroke. The massager was, essentially, milking his prostate. I ran my tongue over the head of his cock and up and down the sides. His cock was covered in precome and tasted sweet and salty, not overpowering. I wondered how his come would taste in comparison. I knew my come and precome tasted different. When I thought about discovering how Wyatt’s come tasted in contrast to his precome, a little knot of anticipation formed in my stomach that wasn’t necessarily all related to arousal. I stroked his length again, pulling another heavy stream of fluid to the tip of his cock.

“Wyatt?”

“Yeah?”

“Look at me.” Meeting his eyes, I pumped lightly and quickly at the base of his cock, ran the tip of my tongue through the thick fluid and pulled it away from his dick in a viscous string leading from his dick to my tongue. His eyes got wide and he groaned. “J.R., now. Now. Now.”

I took him into my mouth and sucked, pumping my head in rhythm with the tight pulls of my hand gripping the base of his cock until he came down my throat, and I did, in fact, exactly learn the nuances of his taste.

CHAPTER 5

March 5, 2011

Saturday started early in order to catch the light, which put me in the utility barn where wardrobe was set up at five in the morning. They didn't expect rain but the wind was chapping that early—especially with the state of dress they expected me to be in.

Shelly Browne was my wardrobe manager and stylist. She looked like someone's grandma rather than a fashion consultant. The woman kept track of all the clothes I wouldn't allow in my house but insisted I own despite my feelings on the matter. I actually had on a comfortable pair of jeans and boots. At the end of the day, those jeans were going to make it back to the house with me. I *did* make exceptions, now and then.

“Cowboys do wear shirts, Shelly,” I cajoled her.

“They shouldn't if they have pecs like yours, honey.” She tossed a belt at me, and then one of the dreaded leather cowboy hats.

I firmly believed cowboy hats should be lightweight—a symptom of my upbringing in south Florida. They're supposed to keep the sun off but not keep the heat in. Ranches other places called for heavier material. I just wasn't used to it.

“You need a haircut, too, J.R.”

I pushed back my nearly black hair and pulled the hat on. I had my mom's part-Seminole coloring and my dad's Irish frame. “Nobody's gonna see much of it under this hat, anyway.”

“Still, I'm going to have Susan nail you down next week when she has you in the chair and a little more time,” Shelly said. I don't remember much of my momma, but if I did, I think I would have liked her to be like Shell.

The worst thing about the shoot turned out to be the wind during the first couple hours of the day, when the sun cast long shadows and I had to stand around in various states of undress.

That wind just blew away the heat from the off-camera industrial heaters before they did me any good. The day finally did warm up to nearly sixty degrees, but not until half of it had passed. I rode horses, pretended to herd some of the farm's poor, confused milk cows, and carted around all kinds of cowboy gear. I could see my farm manager didn't think too much of it. I didn't blame him. It was a farce—but a farce that would sell songs. I'd thrown my hands up over arguments regarding authenticity ages ago.

The best thing about the day was seeing security escorting Wyatt out to the pasture where we'd been filming. He got there about nine a.m. He didn't have a show that morning so I knew he'd be free. When I asked him if he wanted to come out and watch the video being shot, he asked if he could bring a camcorder and do a short for the station. I wasn't crazy about the idea of him wanting an interview. It made me question his motives. He'd said it would make it easier to explain to Phil why he was coming out to the farm if he was doing an interview. What I didn't expect was that he brought Phil along with him. That guy was going to screw up my plans for the day with Wyatt; I could just tell.

They called a break to set up a new shot and I approached them in the tent.

“Hey, Wyatt. You made it out.” I nodded at him. I reached over and held out a hand to Phil. “Phil, good to see you. Decide to tag along for the fun?”

Wyatt mumbled hello and gave me a weak smile.

“Hey, when Wyatt here said he was coming down to make a short, I grabbed the chance to see a real country music video in the making. Hope you don't mind me crashing the party. I'm sure my invitation just got lost in the mail, right?” Phil shook my hand, firmly. He took a step closer to Wyatt, putting Wyatt behind him a bit.

I nodded in a slow, exaggerated way, making a little time to watch the two of them. I was even more sure that there was or had been something between

them. This guy had never blinked at me over the years and now he suddenly turned all caveman around Wyatt and me.

I heard my name called, letting me know they were ready for the next shot, so I waved Slade over.

“Hey Slade—you remember Wyatt and Phil, right? We talked about Wyatt doing a little short for their show’s Web site. Can you work with them so they aren’t shooting something that’s gonna get my ass in hot water with the production team? I can do a one-on-one interview when we have a longer break.”

When we wrapped, I found Wyatt in the tent they’d set up for the crew.

“Wanna ride back with me?” I asked. It was less than a mile back to the studio house but when I started the morning, it’d been much darker and colder.

“Definitely. Listen, J.R., I’m so…” he started.

“Where’d Phil get to?” I asked, leading him toward my Jeep.

“Security took him back to his truck. He had to go. Tee Ball registration today, something about getting signed up for the ‘best’ team. But that’s what I was trying to say—I’m sorry about him tagging along. I was checking out the equipment yesterday and he insisted.”

“You should have at least called or texted me. They might have hung you both up at the gate. Hell, they should have.” We’d reached the Jeep at that point and we got in. “Wyatt, I need to ask what’s going on with Phil.”

“Man, I don’t know. I said I was sorry he invited himself.”

“No, I mean what’s going on with you and Phil?”

“I’m doing a show with him. He’s an old friend.”

“Wyatt, he goes all alpha male every time I look at you.” I cut my eyes toward him to see his expression. He didn’t look happy.

Wyatt sighed. “What are you asking me, J.R.?” he said cautiously.

“Are you fucking him?”

“Seriously, do you think I’d be here if I was with him, too? Thanks a lot. I see you have a high opinion of me.”

“Wyatt, we just met. I’m just trying to figure this thing out. Not to mention, I never do this... dating thing. So I’m sure I’m crap at it. I don’t know what you’d do. I know what I hope you’d do. But I need to know what’s going on with you and your buddy.”

“Nothing. Show business. That’s it.” He sighed. “Now anyway.”

“Were you fucking him?”

“Please don’t ask me that. I don’t talk to him about you and me. It’s only fair that goes both ways.”

I pulled into the garage of the studio house. “I guess that’s a yes,” I mumbled.

The door rolled down and we sat in the Jeep in the dim garage, with only the late afternoon sun filtering in through the window at the end of the garage.

“You know I said I was in... that there was someone important to me when I was younger, in college. Well, Phil and I got into radio together in college and did a show for a few years after we graduated. But we had... well, a parting of the ways... we didn’t agree on some... lifestyle choices, if you know what I mean. I went into rock and ended up in California and he stayed with country music.”

“Why did you come back? To Nashville?”

“Phil and his wife separated a year or so ago, not long before Bob Edmundson retired. Phil asked me to replace Bob. We have the kind of chemistry that you need for a syndicated radio show. For a while, after I moved here, Phil and I were pretty close again, close like we were in college.” Wyatt paused and looked at me pointedly.

“Okay, then what happened?”

“When Chely Wright came out last May, Phil freaked out—”

“What? That’s crazy. What does her decision have to do with Phil’s life?”

“Well, it was the way the whole industry just quietly turned away.”

“That was weird. When the fans blew up over the Dixie Chicks, it was loud and proud. But this thing with Chely... the non-reaction is almost worse than the reaction.”

Wyatt nodded. “Because it’s discrimination. You saw the study they did at CSR again this year where they poll listeners?” Wyatt asked. His hands were moving so I could tell he was worked up about this. “They always ask them if the Dixie Chicks should be played and if they deserved what they got. There wasn’t a goddamned word about Chely.”

I nodded.

“My grandma used to put this white stuff under the sink in the bathroom when it got too humid... desiccate?”

He looked at me and I shrugged, not sure of the word, but willing to wait to hear where he was going with the point.

“Well, it sucked the water out of the air. You were left with a cup of a water. Coming out for Chely... it was like desiccate for her career. Quietly and thoroughly sucked away,” he sighed.

I licked my lips because this was something I’d faced... since I was a teenager. I knew, too well, what he was saying.

“So Phil...” I asked.

“This scared the crap out of him. There are all kinds of gay men and women in the country music industry but they aren’t in the public eye. Phil and me—we’re just enough in the public eye for him to be worried. I was out when I lived in California but I don’t play it up here. He ended up going back to his wife, to try again for the kids, he said.” Wyatt looked down. I reached over and tugged on the tag sticking out of the back of his collar. I rested my hand on his neck and massaged the tight muscles at the base of his skull.

“You think he loves her?” I asked. I knew the having-a-wife defense too well. If Phil really loved his, it would make a difference.

“Don’t really know. I know he loves his kids.”

“Sometimes I really hate this industry,” I said. I moved my hand to his shoulder, rubbing at the tense muscle in one and then sliding over to hit the other.

Wyatt moaned and dropped his head back against the seat. “I’ll give you all day to stop that. Feels good.”

“We don’t have all day. We have a game to get on the road to in—” I looked at my watch “—about an hour.”

I had one of the reps at the label get me a pair of tickets to the UF-Vanderbilt game at Memorial Gym in Nashville that night. It’d been years since I’d been to a Gators’ game—football or basketball.

“We’ve got some great seats. We’re front row of the donor side. We’ll be looking up the legs of the players’ shorts.”

He looked over at me dubiously. “That makes no sense.”

“You’ll see. Their gym is freaky, set up weird, like a stage. The floor is above the seating for the first couple rows.”

“Well, since neither one of these teams are mine, those better be some cute legs,” he said. He rolled his head in my direction and reached over to flick one of my nipples. “Do you think that director took your shirt so you’d be all nippy for this vid?”

“I wish. They never gave me a shirt to start out with.”

We headed into the house. I re-armed the security system and then followed Wyatt into the living room. He turned before we got to the couch.

“I thought you told me you didn’t have any leather cowboy hats.” He flicked the brim of my hat with a fingertip.

“I said I had them in wardrobe. This isn’t the stuff I wear normally, though I’m planning to steal these jeans,” I answered. I pulled off the hat. “This is one of Shelly’s ideas and it’s going back.”

Wyatt cleared his throat and coughed twice. Purposely fake.

“What?”

“Can we... um... maybe hang on to it?” He raised his eyebrows and smiled up at me.

I looked at him questioningly. “Sure. Why?”

“I feel like maybe having a little rodeo.”

“You know, Wyatt, I grew up going to ranch rodeos and festivals and I spent all my time playing cowboy music. I didn’t do a lot of riding.” That was Hi’s thing, not mine. I pushed thoughts of Hi out of my mind.

“Did I say you were gonna be the one ridin’?” He grinned and I handed him the hat.

He wore it to the UF-Vandy game and the rest of the night—only taking it off when I knocked it off his head.

Later that night we were on the living room couch naked with Wyatt straddling my lap.

On his knees with his shins tucked up against both sides of my thighs, he straddled me with his legs stretched wide open. He had that black leather hat tilted way back on his head. I rested my hands on his waist, waiting to see what he wanted next.

He started stroking my cock and kissing my neck. For once, I had to look up at him.

“Gimme that rubber, cowboy,” he demanded.

“Who’s supposed to be the cowboy here? Me or you? I was kind of hoping to be the horse.” I reached for the condom and lube and tore the packaging open with my teeth. I handed the rolled rubber to him.

“Haven’t you heard? You know, save a horse, ride a cowboy?”

“Oh my God, is corny a personality requirement for DJs?”

“Humor me. I’m a country-music-cliché virgin; I’m allowed a grace period to get all the clichés out of my system.” He pinched the tip of the rubber and rolled it down my dick. I exhaled. I loved his touch. I wasn’t sure about loving him yet but his touch definitely moved me.

“You played it in college. You’re not a country-music virgin.”

“Sure I am; it grew back.”

I shook my head. “That grace period gonna last much longer?”

He didn’t deign me a reply. “Lube, hoss.”

I grabbed for it off the cushion beside me and handed it to him. He squirted some in his hand and reached back behind him. I wanted to come just from the sight of him; I’d imagined him like this.

“That day I met you and you were putting that crap on my hand, I thought about what you’d look like doing this.” I reached around to where he was smearing lube on his hole, touched his fingers where he was touching himself.

I looked up into his face. His eyes were mostly closed. “Look at me, baby. I want to see your eyes.”

His eyes met mine and I told him, “Finger yourself. I want to watch you watching me while you do it. I want to feel your fingers in your ass.”

“You’re so bossy,” he complained.

But he nodded and got quiet for once, and pressed his lubed forefinger into himself. I ran my fingers up and down the sides of his embedded finger, tracing where his ass stretched around his finger.

”Oh baby, you are so sexy. You know that?” I leaned forward and flicked my tongue over one of his nipples.

He hissed. “Um...” He gave me a weak smile. He was so cute... all I had to do to break down that wall of smart ’tude was breach his tight little ass.

“You ready for another finger?”

I got a short nod in reply. His pupils widened.

“Go ahead. Add this one.”

I stroked his middle finger. He slipped his forefinger out, lined the two fingers up and guided them back inside him.

“Oh, nice, baby.” I reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him briefly. “You are such a good boy. You gonna finger-fuck yourself for me?”

He pressed his lips together, rolled them into his mouth and then nibbled on the bottom one. He nodded his head, his eyes looking down into mine. I could smell his precome. When his cock brushed against me as he swayed forward and back a little, I could feel the warm, wet trail he left behind. I took our cocks in my other hand and stroked them together in a couple of swift tugs, transferring some of his precome to the condom covering my cock. We weren't at all perfectly aligned, but his cock felt amazing against mine. I pulled my hand all the way up to this cockhead so I could see drops of his precome ooze out.

He arched his back a little and began to push his fingers in and out of his ass. His eyes were drifting closed and I reminded him, “Don't close your eyes, baby. I want to see you.”

His eyes flew open to mine.

“Scissor your fingers for me.” I stroked the webbing between the fingers buried in his ass and felt them open and close, stretching his hole for me.

He groaned.

“Keep stretching yourself for me babe.” I grabbed the lube and spread some on the hand I had been feeling his exploration with and ran it up and down my latex-covered cock.

“Oh God, J.R. I'm gonna come if I don't stop,” he moaned. “And I want to ride you... oh God.”

“Show me how you fuck yourself with your fingers. I promise I'll still fuck you.”

I got a short nod and he started pumping his fingers faster, like a piston in and out of his ass. His other hand gripped my shoulder for leverage and I watched him arch his back.

He hiccupped and groaned. "I can't hold it," he moaned.

"Stop, baby, shhhhh," I said. I took the globes of his ass in each palm and squeezed, pulling them apart. "I'm gonna fuck you now, baby."

"Can I take my fingers out of my ass now?"

I laughed. "I love that you asked. Yeah. If you wanna ride, you're gonna have to."

I pulled him up onto his knees again long enough to situate my cock under him and let it slide into the crease between his cheeks. He was pressed against my chest, his precome glazing us. I canted my hips a touch to feel my cock slide back and forth between his ass cheeks and hissed. I stroked his back with my hands, tracing his spine down to the spread of his cheeks.

I slid my hands under each side of his ass and lifted him up. "Kneel here for me a minute, baby."

He worked with me and I lined the head of my cock up with his hole. "Come on, baby, push out for me."

His head fell back and he lost his hat. I caught it and pushed it down on my head for safekeeping. I felt him level himself with his hands on my shoulders. He slid down over the head and I growled, my voice deep.

"God, I love it when you growl at me and order me around in that deep voice," he said as he was trying to slide down my cock. "Oh fuck, wait... just a minute. I need a minute."

"You okay?" I asked, brushing my lips over his chest, aiming for the closest skin I could reach with them.

"Getting there," he answered.

I wasn't sure if the angle was off or what but he reached back and grabbed my cock. He knelt up and off, then pushed the head of my cock against his ass,

again, and sank down. I felt him contracting around me, adjusting and then sliding down further. It was an excruciatingly slow process but eventually I was fully seated in his ass—with his balls resting in my pubic hair.

“Oh God, Wyatt.” He was so tight and hot. I watched his face as I tilted my hips up, angling to hit his sweet spot.

He groaned and then smirked. “I want the hat. You promised.”

“You got it, cowboy.” I plopped it down on his head and said, “Okay, baby. Ride me. Giddy-the-fuck-up.”

And he did.

I’m not sure which approach remains my favorite. I loved holding his waist and helping him bounce up and down on my cock, his own hard dick flopping and smacking my stomach and chest. But then, I also loved it when he ground down side to side and back and forth with my cock buried completely inside him. Eventually, I had to help him, working us into a position where I could piston my hips up and into him while he rode me and stroked his cock.

After a few moments of this, he moaned, “I’m gonna come.”

“Do it, now, Wyatt. Come for me. I want to see your eyes when you come, baby,” I told him.

And I did see them. His eyes got wide, his huge pupils making his eyes appear much darker than normal. His cries got higher and his hot spunk hit my stomach. His orgasm clamped the muscles in his ass down on me and I lost it, groaning into his neck, pumping into his ass.

I reached up and pulled his chin down and kissed him. He wilted around me. He wrapped his arms around my neck and sank down on my lap, his head falling to my shoulder, nearly losing the hat again. I put it on my head and let him rest his head on my shoulder.

We were both quiet for a few minutes, regaining control of our breathing. I ran my hands over his body, finding all the places where his skin was damp with sweat. I softly kissed his neck under his ear, darting my tongue out to taste the sweat there and burying my nose in his curls.

“Hey, that’s my hat. I’m keeping it,” he told me, his head still on my shoulder.

“I can already hear the lecture about continuity from Shelly when she looks for it for the next shoot.”

“Yeah, but I’m worth it, right?”

“Totally worth it, cowboy.”

CHAPTER 6

March 7, 2011

Slade and I were on the way to the airport Monday morning to finish up the last two weeks of the tour when I broke the news to him.

“Can you call my surgeon and schedule surgery for later this month—after we finish recording?” I asked him.

“Really? Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah, we got that TV *Breakout Stars* reality thing starting this summer, yeah?”

“Filming starts in mid-August.”

“Great, so I will have some down time before I have to perform again and the TV thing won’t be intensive for my voice.” I didn’t mention that I’d have several months of down time to spend getting to know Wyatt a little better. We’d just leave that unsaid.

“The Academy of Country Music Awards show is on April third, it will have to be after that,” Slade said.

“Sounds good.”

“And if your voice is different?”

“Then, it’s different. I’ll have time to recover and retrain it. Maybe I’ll crossover and become a rock star instead.”

Slade glanced between me and the road, a mildly alarmed look on his face.

“Can you call the realtor, too? I want to get started on putting the farm on the market. It’s got to go in one piece though—as a farm. I don’t want to sell off chunks of land for someone to try to develop.”

“This is Tennessee, not Florida, J.R. I think it’s less of an issue here.”

“My daddy brought me up that you don’t sell off your land to developers. Nashville’s like any big city. It’ll keep spreading out. Someone else can carve it up but while it’s my land, I won’t be a part of it.”

“And where are you going to live?”

“At this point, anywhere else would be a step up. Shhhh...” I said and reached over to turn up the radio. Wyatt’s show was on and I could hear Phil Cooper ranting about not being invited to the Vandy game with us.

“I saw you and J.R. Hall on TV at the Vandy game on Saturday. Did y’all lose my ticket?”

Wyatt laughed. *“Yeah, blew out the window, Coop. You had that Tee Ball thing. J.R.’s a huge Gators fan. He had an extra ticket so he invited me. I thought it was a cool thing for him to do.”*

“We’ve got a huge surprise for y’all out there. We got some great video this weekend that we’re going to post on our Web site in a couple days. J.R. Hall invited me and Wyatt down to his place to check out the filming for his music video for ‘Ridin’ Ahead of the Herd’.”

“I thought you didn’t invite Phil Cooper along Saturday,” Slade commented.

“I didn’t,” I answered, tightly.

“Y’all should be able to check it out in the next day or two. They have another location or two to film, I think, before but I think J.R. said the video would be released in April.” Wyatt said over the air.

“You two really hit it off, you and Hall, Wyatt. Y’all have a whole bromance thing going on?” Phil badgered.

I shifted in my seat. Slade head turned sharply, giving me a pointed look.

Wyatt laughed. *“You’re just jealous, Coop.”*

Coop didn’t reply so Wyatt kept at him.

“You’re jealous I got to hang out with the big country star and you didn’t,” Wyatt taunted. *“He’s really a great guy.”*

“Oh, he is. I know, I’ve known him for years,” Phil replied.

I rolled my eyes.

“So what’s his house like, Wyatt? I only got to see the fields.”

“Oh, you know, huge mansion. Really fancy curtains—like Gone-With-the-Wind fancy. My condo would fit in one of the bathrooms.”

I laughed and released the breath I’d been holding. Wyatt and I never made it up to the big house over the weekend. I texted him: *I’m going to kick your ass, Scarlett.*

A song came on and Slade said, “You got something to tell me, J.R.?”

“Nope,” I shook my head. I knew he knew, but it was *my* business. “Nope, I sure don’t.” *Yet.*

“I’m going to set up a date for you for the CMA Awards in April,” Slade said.

“No. No, you’re not,” I insisted.

“John. I’m not stupid. Remember Hite?” Slade countered.

I shook my head. “Fuck you, Slade. Like I could forget Hi. Ever.”

“J.R., I had to...” Slade started.

I sighed. “I’ve lost enough already. I don’t blame you for what happened with Hi. I wouldn’t have had the career I’ve had otherwise. But I’m not hiding anymore. I’m just not gonna do it.”

Slade sputtered and protested, “Come on, J.R., THINK about this!”

I held up my hand. “I’m not gonna flaunt it, either. I’m not ready to have NO career. But I’m not gonna lie to any more women, or my fans, by dating people for appearances.”

Slade nodded.

“Ericka... God. I’m going to Hell for that, you know that right? I might as well find some happiness while I’m still in this world.”

“John, you can’t believe that. You never hurt Ericka.”

I shrugged.

Slade went on about how Ericka's death wasn't my fault. I tuned out the lecture. We'd beaten this horse dead and bloody; I'd seen road kill that stood a better shot at recuperation.

"You sure you want to give it all up for this guy? Seems like his attention really isn't all on you." Slade nodded at the radio. Wyatt and Phil were bantering about whether or not Donald Trump would make a viable presidential candidate for the 2012 run.

"I'm not giving anything up, Slade. And my attention... it ain't all on him, either. Me and him—we're a pair of vinyl B-sides to each other. Our A-sides just skipped too much and didn't play. I guess 'til country music takes a liking to scratching, we'll make do."

Slade sighed. "Hmm. I don't think it's going to be as easy as a country listeners buying into country-rap collabs, for some reason."

"Well, they buy into something new every year. I have to think, eventually, people change. It's too soon to tell if Wyatt and me are some kind of B-side hit or not. But right now? I'm happy. That's not a place where I've spent much time in too damned many years."

EPILOGUE

March 5, 2011—Arcadia, Florida

Hite Loventhrice had his finger on the button of the remote. The Gators' game was in an extended time-out so Hite thought he'd flip to the other ESPN channel and see if he could find some highlights of the Texas A&M win over Texas Tech earlier that day or maybe even the Alabama victory over the Bulldogs.

The image on the screen abruptly halted his surfing.

He hadn't been surprised to see John Roy on TV or even at the game. He'd grown used to seeing his face in the media and hearing his voice on the radio years ago. He'd grown calloused to the repeated shocks of encountering "Celebrity J.R." over the years.

But what kicked Hi in the nuts this time was J.R.'s reaction to the man he was with. The announcer rattled on about how celebrities often popped up in the Nashville area and people forgot the Music City was the home of so many famed country stars. They mentioned something about J.R. Hall being a UF alum who lived in the Nashville area. They didn't mention the name of the man Hi saw sitting next to J.R., patting his arm and nodding up to the where crowd cam must have been displayed. Clearly, they'd seen themselves on the screen at Vandy.

Nice looking guy, Hi thought. He wondered... then immediately convinced himself it was someone J.R. knew from the business; it couldn't be a date. J.R. was so closeted his only dates, real or otherwise, had breasts.

Then, Hi saw the man lean over and say something in J.R.'s ear and then Hite saw J.R.'s eyes slide to meet the other man's before he reached back with his left arm and tipped the cowboy hat off the guy's head.

Hi gasped. "Aw, no Romeo..."

Hi personally knew that hat tip. Whenever he rammed the bill of a ball cap or cowboy hat into J.R.'s neck to whisper to him or kiss him, J.R. would knock it off his head. He'd never seen J.R. do it to anyone else.

An announcer laughed and went back to talking about the Gators' shot at the SEC title that year. Brad came back in the room carrying two beer bottles.

"What, babe?" Brad asked. He sat down next to Hi on the couch and handed him a bottle.

"Oh, nothin'."

"What'd I miss... Oh! Isn't that Johnnie?" Brad pointed his bottle at the TV.

"J.R.," Hi corrected. Brad had never met him, but picked up the name Hi and Jeb Hall sometimes used to refer to J.R. "Yeah. I think so. Looks like he caught a break, after all."

A few days off tour wasn't the kind of break Hi was referring to, though Brad didn't pick up on it.

"That's great. I thought his dad said he'd be on tour for another month or so," Brad said. His partner always seemed way too enamored of the idea that Hi's childhood friend was a huge star. Hi had just let him think that. He loved Brad and he did trust him with everything—his ranch, his research, his heart. J.R.'s secrets, even the ones Hi shared with him, weren't his to reveal.

But seeing J.R. out with another man and *just knowing* by watching them together that it was more than a couple of guys at a ball game made Hi wonder why he kept that secret, how unfair it was, and why it wasn't him up there at that ballgame with J.R. After Ericka died, Hi always kept a small spark of hope in his heart that maybe J.R. would come around, literally and emotionally, but it had been two years since her death. Apparently, J.R. finally came around but not around Hi.

"Wow, you think he'll come down? It'd be great to finally meet him." Brad said.

Hi shrugged. "I don't know when he'll come around Brad, if he ever does."

THE END

Author Bio

Cheryl Nitely is from Florida. Since the age of fifteen, when she used to steal her mom's Loveswept novels, she's wanted to write romance—the steamier, the better. Her degrees and academic background are in the journalism field. She loves both country and blues music and enjoys swimming.

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