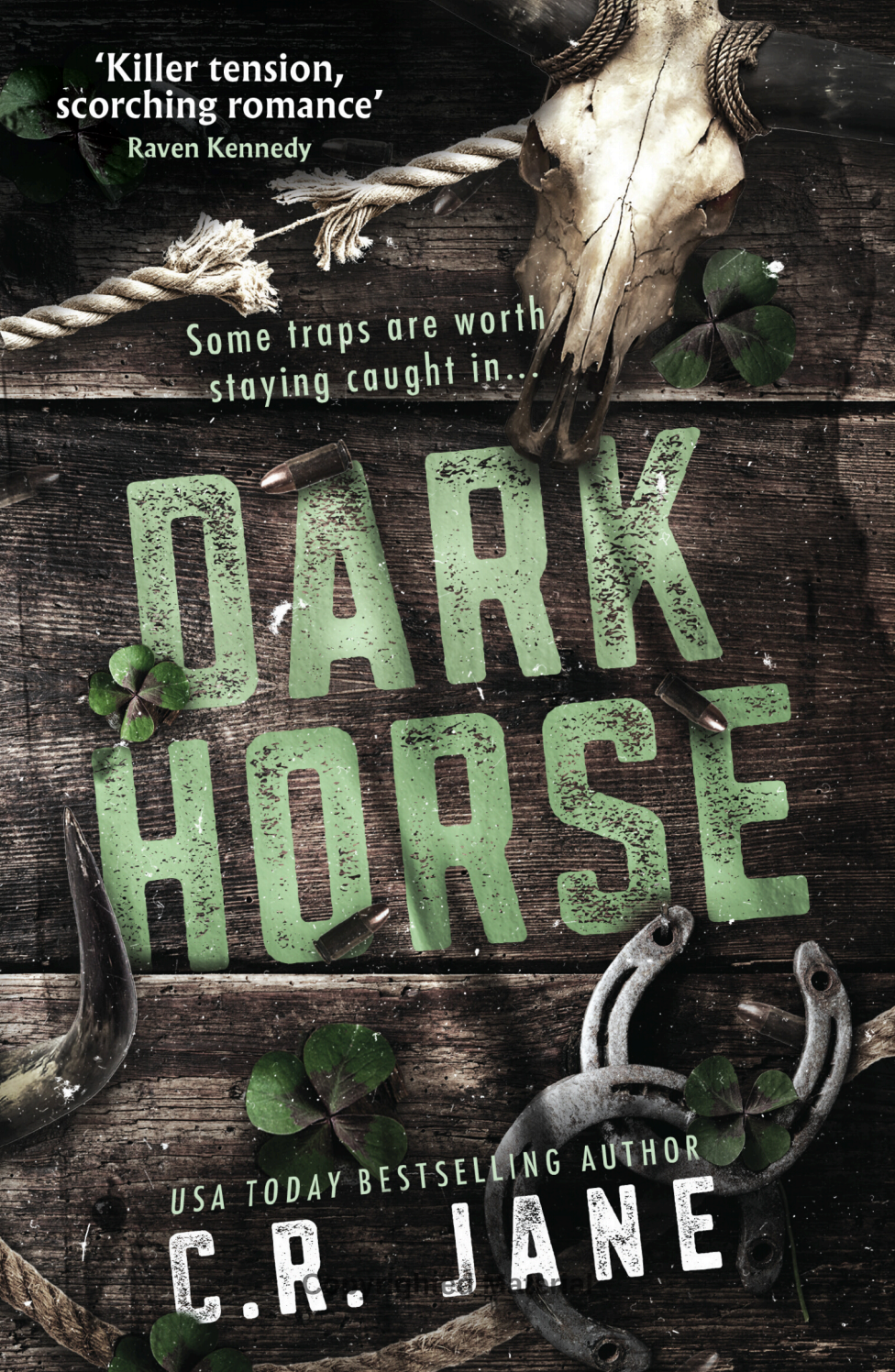

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Raven Kennedy
Some traps are worth staying caught in...
DARK HORSE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
C.R. JANE



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The Pucking Wrong Series

The Pucking Wrong Number
The Pucking Wrong Guy
The Pucking Wrong Date
The Pucking Wrong Man
The Pucking Wrong Rookie

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Dear Red Flag Renegades,

Before you dive into Blackwood, I want to say a few things first.

This book is dark and violent. It's funny in places it probably shouldn't be. And somehow, beneath all the murder, morally grey cowboys, and inappropriate levels of obsession, it's also a story about healing.

Sienna begins this story angry. Angry at herself, angry at the choices that brought her to Blackwood, and deeply unwilling to trust another man with the power to wreck her life. Sterling begins it believing that his urges are what he has to live for. Neither of them are healthy people when this starts. Most of the people in Blackwood probably need extensive therapy and several federal investigations.

And yet.

At its heart, this story is about being seen fully—messiness, damage, darkness and all—and loved anyway.

If you've read my books before, you already know I love writing obsessive heroes who fall hard and never recover from it. Sterling Hayes might be one of my most unhinged yet, which is saying something considering my track record.

This book also leans heavily into dark romantic suspense territory. There are graphic scenes, violence, discussions of trauma, and themes that may be difficult for some readers. Please take care of yourself while reading and check the content warnings if needed.

But alongside all the darkness, I wanted Blackwood to feel alive. Ridiculous town gossip. Overprotective men. Chaotic friendships. Serial killer museums treated as tourist attractions.

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The sort of place where danger and comfort somehow exist side by side.

Thank you for trusting me with your time and your heart. Every time you pick up one of my stories, you allow me to build another little world, and I'll never stop being grateful for that.

Now come to Montana with me.

Just…maybe don't let the hot cowboy near your car.

XOXO,

C.R. Jane

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Please read…

Dear readers, please be aware this is a dark cowboy romance and as such can and will contain possible triggering content. Elements of this story are purely fantasy, and should not be taken as acceptable behavior in real life. Our love interest is possessive, obsessive, and the perfect shade of red for all you red flag renegades out there. There is absolutely no shade of pink involved when it comes to what Sterling Hayes will do to get his girl.

Themes include serial killers/murder, graphic violence, vigilante justice, stalking, kidnapping and coercion, manipulation and morally grey behavior, violence and graphic injury, dark obsessive themes, flashback of parental suicide, manipulation, references and on-page description of physical and emotional abuse in relationships (not involving Sterling Hayes), threats, torture, gore, blood and graphic injury descriptions, PTSD/trauma responses, panic attacks and anxiety, explicit sexual content, knife play, and light captor/captivity.

There are no harems, cheating, or sharing involved. Sterling Hayes only has eyes for her.

Prepare to enter the world of Blackwood, Montana…you've been warned.

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“I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me.”
—Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar

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DARK HORSE SOUNDTRACK

Burning House
Cam

Somewhere Over Laredo
Lainey Wilson

TEXAS HOLD 'EM
Beyoncé

Dry Spell
Kacey Musgraves

monsters
Ella Langley

Graveyard Whistling
Morgan Wallen

Wind Up Missin' You
Tucker Wetmore

Loneliest Girl
Kacey Musgraves

Worst Way
Riley Green

Come Join the Murder
The White Buffalo

Wonder
Megan Moroney

Cowboy Killer
Blake Tyler

Wish I Didn't
Megan Moroney

Cowboy Like Me
Taylor Swift

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For the women who know red flags just look prettier in Montana sunsets.

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PROLOGUE

I DIDN'T GRAB ENOUGH.

I knew that as soon as I zipped the duffel closed. Half of it was stuffed with random clothes, the necklace my mother gave me before she died, and two expired protein bars I'd found in a drawer.

I didn't grab my passport, which was locked in the safe in my office. I didn't grab my grandmother's quilt I folded at the end of the bed. I didn't grab the photograph tucked into the mirror frame, its edges curled from years of sunlight…my smile frozen in a moment I would never get back.

There wasn't time.

There was never time anymore.

I stepped back from the bed, and the floorboards groaned, making me wince. Every sound felt too loud, too sharp, too exposed. My room was dim, any light warped by the dresser lamp that flickered with a dying bulb.

I lifted the heavy duffel and pulled the strap over my shoulder, and it bit into my collarbone like punishment.

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Good.

I deserved it.

I wasn't running on courage. I was running on fear. Raw, blinding fear…and all I could do was pray it made me faster than *him*.

The storm outside had broken an hour ago, but the wind still howled through the eaves like a warning, rattling the glass as if it wanted in. The power had already failed more than once. Ten endless seconds of darkness before the lights had sputtered back to life. Even worse, my phone was dead, and no charger on earth was going to revive it fast enough.

I stepped out of my room, into the hallway steeped in darkness. Shadows puddled along the floor, stretching toward me like fingers as I crept toward the stair, a gaping mouth leading down into deeper dark.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My pulse pounded in my ears. Really damn helpful when I was desperately listening for any strange sounds.

I hesitated, squinting into the dark like maybe I would suddenly learn night vision.

Was that…?

There was a faint stir in the air, like a ghost brushing past, and then the barest suggestion of weight on the boards below.

I froze, my breath locked, every nerve straining for proof. Maybe it was just the wind…or the house settling.

Yeah. That was it. Just the house. *Please, let it just be the house.*

I ticked off the seconds…ten…twenty.

There was nothing but silence.

I had to take a chance.

Forcing myself to move, I clutched the duffel tighter and crept down the stairs, skipping the third step that always

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groaned. My shoes touched the hardwood, its shine hiding a merciless bite. The same surface that had kissed my cheekbone when he'd slammed me down on it. Every squeak of rubber on the polished floor felt loud enough to give me away.

Keys. Door. Car.

That was the plan. I'd never been good at planning, though. My plans never worked out.

But this one was simple enough to be foolproof. Or at least that's what I kept telling myself.

The kitchen was dark and quiet, and I moved quickly, grabbing the key ring from the counter with a trembling hand.

As I turned, heading back down the narrow hallway toward the laundry room and the back door, something stopped me cold.

The hallway door, the one that separated the living area from the back of the house...it was cracked open.

Just a few inches. Just enough to bleed darkness through the gap.

It had been shut, though. I knew it had. I'd passed it only a minute ago.

That sick feeling pooled in my gut as I once again reassured myself it was nothing.

Maybe the wind had done it. A draft through the old frame. Hinges that never sat right. A hundred explanations stacked themselves up, one on top of the other.

But the longer I stood there staring at the open door, the flimsier the excuses became. Because even though he'd just been released, and there was no way he could be here yet…

The house was too quiet. Not empty, but quiet like it was holding its breath. Quiet like it was…*waiting.*

I crept forward, slow enough that every step felt like it took a year off my life. The knife block sat on the counter to my

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right, right where it always was, ordinary and menacing all at once. My hand slid out before I could second-guess it, and my fingers trailed across the cool wooden edges until they found the handle I wanted.

The biggest blade.

My grip tightened, and I pulled the knife free as quietly as I could. The weight hit my palm with a jolt of déjà vu. His hand had pressed this same knife to my throat once, the blade so steady I'd felt my own pulse beating against the sharpened edge.

I forced my attention back to the dark slit of the open door. Inch by inch, I raised the knife and nudged the gap wider with its tip, every muscle wound tight, braced for what waited on the other side.

The hinges creaked as the door gave way, and I peeked inside.

The laundry room stretched out before me in that same muted cream color that I hated, every surface heavy with stillness. I peered into the room, my eyes locked on the back door. Still bolted. Still shut. Relief started to bleed in…

And the hallway light behind me flicked off.

The room dropped into gray, my breath seizing as I whipped around. Back to the hallway.

But I found nothing there. No watching figure, just a thick, creeping darkness that felt far too interested in me.

A small whimper escaped, and I pressed my back to the wall, fighting the urge to hyperventilate. I fumbled for the switch, and the lights blinked on again, bathing the hallway in a soft white glow. The storm roared outside, the wind battering the glass.

The lights flickered again, then died, plunging me into total darkness.

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That's when I heard it.

Steady breathing that wasn't mine…threading through the shadows around me.

My eyes darted frantically down the hallway one way, then the other, straining to catch the smallest shape, the faintest movement. But all I could see were black walls and deeper shadows. I kept searching anyway, jerking my head from side to side, certain that if I stared long enough, something would rise out of the dark to stare back.

But nothing revealed itself.

There were no footsteps, no movement…no sounds of anyone there. Only the fridge humming in the background and the sharp, smug tick of his family's heirloom clock above the stove, a sound I'd hated from the moment I moved in.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I walked down the hall, one slow step at a time, keeping my back against the wall so nothing…and no one…could sneak up behind me.

The knife handle was still gripped tight in my fingers.

I wasn't going to be a headline on the news. At least, no more than I already had been.

Not tonight.

The window over the couch rattled hard in its frame as a gust of wind crashed against it, and I jumped, my heart slamming into my throat.

I tried to convince myself that was the only thing trying to get in. Just the wind—

"Hello, Sienna."

Time stopped. I couldn't breathe. Even the ticking clock seemed to disappear.

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The voice had slithered out of the dark, smooth and mocking, echoing the tone he'd used the night I'd clawed at him and dialed the police with shaking, fumbling hands. The night I thought maybe I could get rid of him forever.

It had sounded almost amused then, too…like my struggle was nothing more than his entertainment. Now it came from near the living room, by the front door.

I needed to run. *Move, Sienna… Run!*

A scream tore loose as I bolted, swinging the knife wildly in front of me, carving at shadows as I ran. The blade cut nothing but air, but I kept slashing, desperate, frantic, as if steel could hold back the darkness chasing me.

I ran to the back, yanking the door open the rest of the way, knife in one hand, keys in the other…my hastily packed bag dropped and abandoned.

The screen door slapped against the siding as I tore into the night.

Mud slicked under my shoes, and my feet slid, but I didn't stop. I ran through the wet grass, across the yard, aiming for the dark wall of trees at the property's edge. Their shadows looked like salvation if I could just get there first. I'd circle around the fence, make for a neighbor's house…maybe my car…anywhere that put distance between his breath and my neck.

A hard gust of wind slammed into me, flinging my hair across my face. I staggered forward. Darkness crowded close, swallowing everything except the faint outline of the shed up ahead.

But I heard him.

The soft crunch of methodical footsteps behind me. He wasn't running. He didn't have to. Predators didn't chase…they stalked, and then closed in.

A sob broke past my lips, wild and ugly. I slapped my palm

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over my mouth, strangling the rest of it as panic spiked. The half-formed sound lingered in the dark like bait.

Don't be prey. Don't be prey. Don't be prey.

I kept chanting it like it would make any difference. Like it would suddenly give me superhuman speed…or at least enough to outrun a man who had always physically bested me.

I veered around the shed, my heart thundering, and my foot caught on a rut in the ground. My ankle twisted, white-hot pain shooting up my leg. Biting back a cry, I stumbled the last few steps before dropping low behind a rusted wheelbarrow. The knife shook in my grip, clenched so tight my knuckles burned.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The moon slipped free of the clouds for a heartbeat…just long enough to spill light across the yard.

And there he was.

A silhouette cut from shadow, broad-shouldered and unhurried.

He was always like that. Controlled. Calm. Like he had all the time in the world to ruin me.

He stood in the yard, his head tilted like he was listening. I didn't dare make a sound.

"Sienna…" he called again, low and coaxing. "Come on, sweetheart. I just want to talk."

Sweetheart.

I clamped a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming and curled tighter into the shadows, willing myself invisible.

Rain fell again, soft at first, then steady, pelting the tin roof of the shed in a rhythmic beat that almost masked the sounds of his boots moving closer.

I held my breath.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," he said, his voice seeping into the night like smoke under a door. "You always

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were stubborn."

That voice. I felt it in my bones before I even processed the words, a cold clamp closing around my spine.

No.

I wasn't doing this.

I wasn't falling apart. Not again.

I crept backward on hands and knees, away from the shed, deeper into the shadows, where the trees started. My injured ankle rolled on a branch, but I bit down on the cry of pain.

I was almost there.

If I could just get to the neighbor's fence line—just far enough to scream, to be seen—

A twig snapped behind me, and I twisted toward the sound, my palms scraping the dirt.

Nothing.

Dragging my gaze back…I collided against a nightmare.

"There you are," he murmured as he bent over me. Too fast, his arm snaked around my waist, and he hauled me off the ground. His other hand clamped around my wrist. My nerves shrieked as bone ground beneath his grip.

The knife slipped from my hand, and desperately, futilely, I reached out after it. "No, no, no, no… NO!"

"I said stop *running*," he growled furiously. His breath flushed hot against my ear.

I thrashed, kicking and clawing…but he only cinched me tighter. My twisted ankle screamed as he dragged me toward the woods, rain sluicing over us both, his hold unyielding, my breath breaking out in staccato gasps.

The security light on the next property burst on, flooding the night with a bright, artificial glare.

"Hey!" a throaty female voice called. "What the hell are you doing?"

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It was Mrs. Callahan. The widow next door, who sometimes marched over with a ruler to measure the grass at the edge of my lawn, just to make sure I was cutting it short enough.

Her porchlight snapped on next. *God bless nosy neighbors.*

His grip loosened for a breath, just long enough.

I seized the knife from the mud and turned, adrenaline roaring in my ears.

A strange calm swept through me, cold and absolute.

And then everything went black.

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CHAPTER ONE

SIENNA

I **WAS TRYING TO STOP** looking over my shoulder…but some habits were hard to break.

Somewhere between Nebraska and my next emotional crisis, I realized I'd been driving with my parking brake on for about forty-seven miles.

I fixed it, obviously. I'm not completely irresponsible. But still. My car smelled like hot pennies and poor life choices, which if I were being honest, had become my signature scent. At this point I probably had a higher tolerance for the smell of copper than any normal person should—and not just from the smoking parking brake.

I shook my head. That life was over. Now, I was nearly thirty, husbandless, and the proud owner of two suitcases, one dying Prius, and a glittery compact mirror that said *You Look Fine (For Your Age)* in bold serif font. Boston was behind me. California was the dream. And the road in front of me?

Endless. Dusty. A quiet that made you start talking to inanimate objects just to feel something.

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"Not now," I muttered to the gas pump at mile marker who-the-hell-knew. It was stuck on "please remove nozzle," and I was two seconds from body slamming it into cooperation.

I didn't need "destruction of property" added to my permanent record, so I gave up trying and headed for the tiny building across the lot.

I'd stopped here because I'd made the fatal error of trusting the Next Gas 75 Miles sign like a chump. Also, because I needed caffeine before I committed a felony. My latest playlist, titled "Vengeance and Emotional Support Bops," had run its course an hour ago, and now I was running on fumes and spite. Which was unfortunate, because it had been working overtime to keep certain…thoughts under control.

This gas station looked like it had been built fifty years ago and immediately abandoned. There were three pumps, one ancient soda machine half full of Shasta…and a front-door chime that made a noise like a dying cartoon character when I entered.

Inside, I passed a dusty rack of postcards and a wire shelf of snacks that might've once been food-adjacent in the same way that a sea cucumber is technically an animal.

The cashier didn't look up from his sudoku as I approached.

"Hi, do you have a bathroom key I could use?" I asked.

He pointed to a wooden spoon hanging from a string on the wall. A literal spoon. With the word "KEY" burned into it.

I took it solemnly, like a knight accepting an enchanted sword. Which, if it had been, would not be the strangest thing I'd done on this road trip.

When you've driven alone across the country for five straight days with nothing but gas station coffee, TikTok voice filters, and your past trauma for company, your brain starts doing weird things. Like convincing you that stopping at The World's

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Largest Corn Dog outside of Des Moines was a reasonable use of time.

Spoiler: it wasn't.

The corn dog was twelve feet long, mounted to a rusting pole, and looked like a war crime against fair food. I'd taken a selfie with it and added the caption: *Me and my last healthy relationship.* Then I sat in the car and ate a gas station taquito… which was another example of a poor life choice, since I was literally at a corn dog exhibit.

Another questionable stop had been the International Banana Club Museum, where I learned nothing and everything all at once. There were plaques and photos…and grown adults nodding seriously at bananas. I left changed, though I couldn't explain how or why.

I wasn't chasing enlightenment with any of these stops. I wasn't even chasing fun. I think I just wanted proof that the world still had absurdity in it. That not everything had to be so tightly wound and miserable. That somewhere between heartbreak and survival, you could still pull over and laugh at a giant plastic banana someone had named Cheryl.

And now here I was at yet another absurd stop, except this one was necessary.

The bathroom door creaked when I pushed it open, like it had been waiting to be dramatic all day and finally found its moment.

I froze.

Look…if someone wanted to murder me while I was peeing in the middle of nowhere, this was the exact setting they would choose.

Flickering light overhead? Check.

Cracked mirror? Check.

A single sad paper towel hanging from the dispenser like a

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white flag of surrender? Check.

I stared at the shadows near the stall…but nothing moved.

"Just me," I said to the air like all of this was fine. "One woman. Two kidneys. Hoping to keep both, please."

The air didn't respond, which felt rude but also encouraging.

The bathroom door didn't close unless you leaned your full body weight against it, and it took two full heaves of my shoulder to make me feel secure enough to do my business in record time. I washed my hands in the freezing cold tap water, refusing to look in the mirror (I've seen *The Ring*; I know how this works), and bolted the second I heard a soft *tap-tap* from the ceiling tiles above me.

It was probably just a mouse, but it could just as easily have been a demon. If you thought about it, the line between the two was pretty thin.

Once back in the relative safety of the store, I grabbed a can of cold brew that promised to "slam your brain into gear" and a bag of neon-orange chips that claimed to taste like "sriracha fire." Because apparently I wanted to cry and suffer more than I already had on this trip.

The cashier still didn't move as I approached. He was in the same pose—elbows on laminate, pencil over sudoku, face set in the blank expression of someone who had long since made peace with their boredom.

I carefully hung the wooden spoon labeled *KEY* back on its little hook.

"Bathroom was…fine," I said.

He didn't look up. "Mm."

"Unless you count the suspicious noises coming from above my head, which I am choosing not to investigate because I enjoy being alive. That feels more like a *you* job, anyway."

"Mm."

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"I think something's living in the bathroom ceiling."

"Probably," he said without inflection. "We had an opossum once. Could be him again."

"Um, that's…cool." I shuddered, imagining an angry opossum plummeting through the ceiling tile directly onto my face while I was sitting on a toilet. Though I guess there were ways I could sink lower in life.

He scribbled a number in a box, his attention still glued to the page.

I set my cold brew and chip bag on the counter, and at last, his gaze flicked up—then caught, holding on me. He skimmed my messy hair that I'd had in the same bun for days, my travel-stained sweatshirt, and the sad half slouch of my entire body.

"You look like you're on the verge of a full mental collapse," he said casually. Like this was his version of "how can I help you?"

"Excuse me?" Strangers didn't usually judge me out loud, and I was fairly certain I didn't like it when they did.

He shrugged, ringing up my items. "If I had to bet whether you were running away from something or just slowly crumbling under the weight of existence…I'd go with both."

I stared at him.

He stared back.

The register beeped weakly, as if it were embarrassed to be in the vicinity of this conversation.

"That'll be six ninety-eight," he added.

I fished a ten out of my pocket and handed it over. "You really know how to charm the customers."

He gave me back my change with another shrug. "I call it how I see it."

"Have you considered being slightly less hostile toward the paying public?"

"Have you considered getting more sleep and less caffeine?"

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"I'll take that as a no," I muttered, wondering what he would do if I threw the sriracha chips at him.

He wasn't wrong, though. I'd barely slept for days. Weeks, months…years.

I turned toward the door, cradling my snacks like they were the only things holding me together.

"Hey," he called after me, and against my better judgment, I stopped.

He didn't smile. He just offered, "It gets better. Or it gets weirder. Either way, you keep going. Right?"

He dipped his head, a small, worn-out nod that felt like his version of a lifeline, one you only give when you know what it's like not to have one.

"Right," I managed, swallowing around the ache in my throat. "That's good advice."

I pushed out the door, blinking against the late afternoon light. The air smelled of sun-warmed asphalt and gasoline, and for a moment I simply stood there, keys in one hand, can and chips in the other, letting myself breathe.

Then I opened the door to my Prius, slid behind the wheel, and merged back onto the empty road…as if I weren't steadily fraying at every edge I had left.

As if I still remembered how to want a life on the other side of this.

As if some part of me hadn't stayed behind that night.

The silence hit harder than I expected.

The sky was turning the color of old bruises. Purple and yellow and a kind of sickly green, like it couldn't decide what mood it was in. I could empathize with that feeling.

I cracked open the cold brew with trembling hands and took a sip. It tasted bitter, almost rancid, but at least it had caffeine in it.

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I'd drive for two more hours before stopping for the night, and I'd spend those two hours convincing myself I was heading toward something I could build into a better life…instead of just falling further apart.



Turned out I was perfectly willing to lie to myself, because those two hours had ended…well, six hours back.

Somewhere in between, I'd taken another detour I absolutely shouldn't have taken. A handwritten sign on the side of the highway had promised WORLD'S MOST ACCURATE PSYCHIC. EXIT 211. NO REFUNDS. I'd swung onto that exit before my brain had even caught up with my hands on the wheel. Apparently when your life is imploding, all it takes is a glittery Sharpie on cardboard for you to go full existential scavenger hunt.

The "psychic" was a middle-aged woman in a folding chair behind a roadside tent. She was wearing a Dallas Cowboys hoodie and asked if I'd brought exact change before launching into a monologue about how my aura looked like a haunted bag of Funyuns.

I told her it was more like sriracha fire…but she didn't laugh. Instead, she leaned back slowly, like she'd just realized my problems were way above her pay grade, then offered me a grilled cheese from her cooler.

I'd turned her down, a decision I now regretted with my whole soul, because night had fallen, rain was coming down in sheets, and my stomach wasn't just growling. It was openly considering rebellion.

The road had turned into a winding mountain pass about

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twenty minutes ago, and I was pretty sure I hadn't blinked since.

Everything outside my windshield was black…ink-black, soul-black, a black that made you feel like maybe the world stopped existing past your headlights. Rain slapped the glass so hard I had to turn the wipers up to full panic mode, which mostly just smeared the water in newer, more creative directions.

Fog curled around the edges of the road like it was trying to get inside the car, and I gripped the wheel tighter.

My visibility…maybe four feet. My control…rapidly approaching zero.

I was crawling fifteen in a fifty-five, clinging to the white line on the right side of the road. That thin reflective strip? It was the last available lifeboat on the *Titanic*. My one and only ride-or-die.

I whispered to it like a prayer. "Just you and me, buddy. We're gonna make it."

A car behind me honked, long and aggressive, and I flinched, checking the rearview.

Headlights blazed in, riding way too close. Another honk followed, clearly translating to *get the hell out of the way*. But there was nowhere to go. I had a rock wall on one side and an open void on the other.

What did they want me to do? Pick the best way to die?

I didn't cry, even though every part of me wanted to. Instead I sucked the tears in so hard I was pretty sure they went straight into my lungs, and I focused harder on the white line. Inch by inch, I continued to creep forward. The tires gave a squeal on the next curve, and my body leaned with it…like I was riding a bike instead of driving a Prius that was practically the size of a soda can.

The car behind me finally swerved wide and blew past, vanishing into the mist like they had both a death wish and

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excellent insurance coverage.

I didn't follow.

I couldn't.

It felt like if I so much as blinked the wrong way…if I took one breath too deep…I'd slip right off the edge and disappear into a glorious crash below.

And maybe that was exactly what someone like me deserved.



The rain got worse.

Which didn't seem physically possible until it was happening…like the sky had been holding back out of politeness and then suddenly decided, *You know what, she looks like she could use some more character development.*

The white line disappeared.

So did the road.

So did everything.

I slowed to a crawl, one hand clenched so tight around the wheel my knuckles looked like skinless bones. My headlights hit nothing but water and fog and what might've been the edge of existence.

"Nope," I whispered. "No thank you. I refuse to die on a Wednesday. A Friday maybe, but definitely not a Wednesday."

The universe, apparently amused but not cruel enough to follow through, blinked first.

A green exit sign bled through the mist like a minor miracle, glowing faint and unreal. I didn't catch the number or a city name, and I didn't pause to question it. I just yanked the wheel like my life depended on it, because I was suddenly very sure it did.

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The exit curved hard, and I hit it too fast. The back tires fishtailed, my soul ejecting straight to the roof with a very clear *girl, really?* before the car caught traction again.

I coasted down the ramp in near-zero visibility. The storm wasn't letting up. If anything, it was getting louder. Angrier. Thunder cracked overhead like the sky had hurled something at the wall and missed.

The road at the bottom of the exit was darker than the highway. Just two faded lanes swallowed by trees on either side. My GPS had stopped talking to me around the same time I'd left the World's Saddest Psychic, so I had no idea where I was.

But I didn't care. I just needed to find a place to pull over and stop feeling like Mother Nature had decided I was the nightly special.

So I drove forward, following nothing but instinct and fear and the occasional flicker of a roadside reflector like some medieval peasant following a ghost light into the woods.

The rain kept falling. The trees got thicker.

And the name Blackwood flickered past on a rusted sign I almost missed entirely.

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CHAPTER TWO

STERLING

THE STORM WAS CRAWLING down the mountain.

I could feel it in my teeth.

Out here, you didn't need Doppler radar to know the weather was turning. You just had to pay attention. The cows grew restless. The dogs went quiet. And the air thickened with a silence that made your skin itch.

It was beautiful, though.

From my front porch, all I could see were miles of raw land and restless sky. The storm hadn't hit the ranch yet, but it was coming fast, sweeping over the black-tipped pines like a calvary charge. Somewhere below, the edge of town blinked with light, sparse and sleepy.

Blackwood wasn't a focal point on any map. At least not for *most* people.

I leaned back in my rocking chair, boots crossed and a whiskey sweating in my hand. The wood groaned beneath me, keeping time with the wind. Behind me, the main house glowed warm, with big windows and high ceilings opening into rooms

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that sat empty except for me and a cattle dog who was spoiled enough to believe he owned the deed.

It was empty upstairs, anyway.

"Storm's rolling in," Ryder drawled behind me, stepping out with his own glass of something strong and brown, his badge catching the light at his hip and that easy grin that made people trust him without asking questions. "Do you think she'll take the power out again?"

"Probably."

"Your generator in good shape?"

I raised an eyebrow at him, a little annoyed he would think I'd be that careless. It's not like I *wanted* what was in the basement to get out.

"Still working," I said, taking a slow sip. "Better than yours, I'd bet."

Ryder snorted, lowering himself into the other chair like he had all the time in the world. The storm lit up the horizon in front of us, a white flash that carved his face into something harder.

"Mine's fine," he said. "But if it dies, don't think I won't haul my ass over here. I know you've got a freezer full of steaks and enough whiskey stashed to survive the apocalypse."

"You mean you'd finally admit you only keep me around for the food and liquor?" I shot back.

He grinned wolfishly. "That and your *charming* personality."

The wind shoved at the porch, rattling the railing between us. For a second, I thought I heard something else under it, a faint bang, out of place in the storm. But Ryder kept talking, unconcerned, like he hadn't noticed.

"Reckon half the town's already at The Hollow," he added, swirling his drink.

The sound carried again, faint but sure, and I knew it for

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exactly what it was. My grip tightened around the sweating glass, boots pressing harder into the boards as I forced myself to stay where I was. Ryder finally cut me a sidelong look.

"When exactly are you planning to deal with that? Or are you in one of your play-with-your-food phases?"

I smiled like I had no idea what he meant.

Like I hadn't already spent half the afternoon deciding exactly how it would end.

Ryder rolled his eyes and scoffed, muttering something under his breath as he knocked back his drink. The porch light spilled over him, catching in the gold of his hair and turning him into something almost saintly. Angelic, even. Which worked out real well for the town sheriff. People looked at him and saw a lawman they could trust without question, because how could a man who looked like that do anything wrong?

I let my mouth curve around the rim of my glass, amused. Ryder's halo was a very convenient mask for the things we got up to after dark.

The scrape came again, faint under the storm. I heard it clear as day…and so did Ryder.

He tipped his glass back, sighed like a man bored out of his mind, and set it down with a *thunk*.

"If we're not gonna do anything about it tonight," he said, "then I need to get laid. Jett said there's a new waitress at The Hollow. Says she's blonde and bitter and has thighs that could crack a man's spine."

I grinned into my glass. That sounded exactly like Jett, with the exception of…

"He say that last part or did you add it?"

He smirked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

Typical.

My gaze drifted past him, down to the scatter of lights in

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the valley. Blackwood, Montana wasn't big. A couple of bars, a motel, a diner, a few random stores, a restaurant that tried too hard to be upscale and mostly failed, a church that doubled as an AA meeting spot on Wednesdays, a museum tourists traveled miles to see but usually left uneasy, and Ryder's sheriff's office—officially handling drunks and wandering cattle, unofficially making sure the worst things never made it onto a report.

Everyone knew everyone. And everyone had a theory about why I'd come back after so many years away…nostalgia, desperation, or a very early midlife crisis.

They were all a little right.

I inherited the ranch at twenty-one, after my old man died in a hunting accident no one liked to talk about. My mother had already been gone a few years by then, leaving behind a handful of rules about discipline, restraint, and what to do with certain impulses that ran a little too strong in the Hayes bloodline.

Five years later, after college and a stint at a Manhattan hedge fund that never quite fit, I came back and turned the place into one of the biggest outfits in the state. Cattle, bison, horses, and land…a lot of it.

As it had for the generations before me, the money followed.

More than anyone suspected.

Sterling Hayes, people liked to whisper. *Rancher. Playboy. Occasional philanthropist when it suited him.*

None of them knew me. Not really.

My mother had made sure of that.

The wind rattled the porch again, louder this time, and underneath it slipped that sound, soft but enough to wake the restless itch in my chest, the one always hungry to break free. I caged it, breathing through the urge.

Not yet.

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Beside me, Ryder's eyes flicked toward the house, then back to me. Green, piercing, and carrying the same need I felt gnawing at my ribs. He swallowed it down, too, but I saw it… because it lived in me the same as him.

"The Hollow?" he asked, gripping the wooden armrests of his chair like they could hold him back.

I rolled the whiskey slowly in my hand, weighing the thought. The bar would be full by now. Ranch hands blowing their checks, old-timers swapping lies, tourists hoping the place lived up to its reputation. Options for a good lay if I wanted one because the Hollow was the only good one for miles. Women fell easily for me. A smile here, a round of shots there, and someone would decide I was their bad decision for the evening.

They saw the charm and assumed that was the whole story.

The sound came again, like a nail dragged across wood. A harsh breath leaked out of me as I set the glass down. I needed something to distract me from the itch twisting tighter in my chest. "Let's go."

Ryder's grin lit up with that reckless, predatory charm he wore like the badge on his uniform. He stood, his boots heavy on the boards. "Knew you'd come around."



By the time we got to town, the wind had turned mean.

Blackwood wasn't just one road, but it might as well have been tonight. The streets were empty and the storefronts dark, the storm keeping everyone inside. Only the parking lot at The Hollow told the truth. This town didn't sleep through storms—it gathered under neon and whiskey, packed in tight like church on a Sunday.

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I pulled into my usual spot in front of the bar, half on the curb, half in the road, and exactly where Babs told me not to park every time.

That never stopped me, though.

Ryder slammed his door at the same time I did, and we strolled toward the entrance. My eyes wandered down the street briefly, skimming over the oversized steer statue before returning to the building in front of us. The wind whipped around us, carrying the familiar mix that always clung to The Hollow after eight p.m., a blend of scorched grease, spilled beer, and the nighttime bravado that fell apart with the sun.

Thankfully, it wasn't carrying *that* smell tonight. My basement was already full.

Ryder fell into step beside me, tugging his hat lower against the wind. "Nothing like the sweet perfume of grease and regret to let you know you're home," he muttered.

I snorted, pushing my hands into my pockets. "Careful. Talk like that, and Babs'll spit in your beer before you take the first sip."

He grinned, and I couldn't help the twitch of mine in return. The Hollow had been ours for years, full of fights, booze, women, and the kinds of stories we'd carry for the rest of our lives.

The air inside was thick with whiskey fumes. Strings of half-lit Christmas lights sagged across the ceiling, their glow casting everything in the faint, seedy warmth of a dive bar that knew exactly what it was. The walls were a patchwork of beer signs, old rodeo posters, and handwritten IOUs Babs kept tacked up for the drama of it.

A mounted longhorn skull hung crooked above the jukebox, and the floor creaked with every step. The bar itself was heavy wood, scarred and stained from years of abuse. One leg was

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shorter than the rest, so it tilted slightly. Just enough that your drink always slid toward the edge if you weren't paying attention.

There were only twelve stools at the bar, and every single one had a story.

Old Harvey was parked on his usual corner stool. Gray beard to his chest, a Vietnam vet cap permanently fixed to his head, and a smile full of nicotine-stained teeth. Harvey had been drunk for years, and somehow he still remembered everyone's birthday.

"Storm's coming, boys," he slurred as we walked in, raising his glass toward us. "Feel it in my knees. Or maybe that's my arthritis. Who's to say?"

"Appreciate the update, Harvey," Ryder drawled, tipping his hat. "Nobody else saw the lightning flashing in the distance but you."

I snorted, but Harvey didn't seem to notice.

"Tell your mama I said hi," he called to no one in particular. I had a brief flash of my mother's face as Harvey took a sip and stared contentedly into the distance like he was watching a war only he could see.

In the back corner, a game of darts was unfolding with the quiet intensity of a prison standoff. Two broad-shouldered guys from the mill squared off against Daisy, the night vet tech, who still wore scrubs speckled with something that might've been blood or ketchup. She lined up her throw with one hand and cradled a whiskey in the other, looking like she'd neutered something larger than both men earlier that evening and wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

I wouldn't bet against her.

At a back table, two of the older ranchers, Earl and Dale, were deep in some kind of argument that involved aggressive

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whispering. Earl used to ride bulls and now had knees made of metal. Dale was a conspiracy theorist who once claimed the mayor was reptilian. Babs let him stay because he made her favorite jerky.

And at the bar, Babs, as usual, looked like she'd wrestled Death on her way in here and walked away with his wallet.

She was in her mid-fifties, or maybe older…not that anyone had the guts to ask. She had tanned skin covered in a constellation of faded tattoos. Her denim vest was from some outlaw motorcycle club that didn't exist anymore. Probably because Babs had dismantled it herself.

Her gaze cut across the room, landing on us, and she scowled. "What did I do to deserve the two of you darkening my doorway tonight?"

Ryder tipped his hat, all false sweetness. "Missed us, Babs?"

"Like a rash," she shot back.

Her eyeliner was smudged in a way that gave her sharp eyes an even fiercer edge when they pinned you down. Her graying brown hair was twisted into its usual bun, tonight stabbed through with a screwdriver. Last week, it had been a cigar. Once before, a steak knife, and thinking of that night was the easiest way I knew to flatten an erection.

And she ruled The Hollow like it was her kingdom.

Ryder and I slid into an empty booth along the far wall, the vinyl groaning under our weight. I leaned back and stretched out, keeping my gaze on the door.

And that's when the piano started.

Chuck was hunched over a dusty keyboard in the corner, hammering out slow, off-key minor chords like he was auditioning to score his own funeral. No one had hired him, and no one had suggested he should. He just dragged in that busted Yamaha on random nights, sat down, and played like

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the world was ending in black-and-white and he was the only one who'd gotten the memo.

Ryder glanced over his shoulder, brow raised. "Sweet mercy. Is he trying to summon something or just punish us all for existing?"

"Hard to say," I muttered as my eyes drifted around the room. "It feels like both at the moment."

"Evenin', boys."

A tall blonde, who had to be the new waitress Jett had mentioned, leaned an elbow on our booth, her voice pitched sweet and practiced. Her skirt barely covered her ass, and her top was cut so low it looked like her nipples were about to make their own introduction. Add in the stilettos teetering on warped bar floors, and Ryder lit up like Christmas. His grin turned wicked as he dragged his gaze down and back up again.

Slow enough to make sure she noticed.

"Well, damn," he drawled. "Whiskey. Don't care what kind, so long as it's *you* handing it over."

I bit back a laugh. I'd seen Ryder run this routine a hundred times, and he always cared what whiskey he got. The second his dick stopped thinking, he'd be bitching about the pour.

"Beer, please," I said evenly. "Ma'am."

Her eyes lingered on me a beat too long, like I was the one she wanted. But she'd get nothing from me. Even if I was interested, we had a code among us, and Ryder had already called dibs.

Before the blonde could bat her lashes again, a shadow fell over the booth.

"This isn't even your section," Babs growled, her voice rasping like a match striking sandpaper. She wedged herself between us and the waitress, arms crossed, the silver rings stacked on her fingers flashing in the light. "Move your ass back

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to the pool tables before I staple your skirt to your section so you remember where it is."

The blonde blinked, her cheeks flushing pink, then pasted on a tight smile and tottered off. Her heels clicked unevenly against the warped floor planks.

Ryder slumped in his seat like he'd just lost his best shot of the night. "Who's gonna get our drinks now?"

"With that attitude?" Babs said. "You can get them yourself."

Scowling, Ryder dropped his hand. "I was just being friendly. Y'all ever heard of that?"

Babs barked out a laugh that turned heads at the bar. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm just glad I won't have to mop up the drool you were leaking on my floor."

He gave her a wounded look, all wide eyes and dramatics. "It's like you don't even want me here."

"It's not *like* that, it *is* that." Babs scoffed, her face scrunching like she'd smelled something sour, though I caught the ghost of a smile tugging at her mouth before she turned away.

I smirked.

Ryder lifted an eyebrow at me. "Don't get too cocky over there, Sterling. We all know I'll always be Babs's favorite."

I rolled my eyes and slid out of the booth. "If you're her favorite, then you can be the one to beg her for our drinks."

Ryder snorted but followed, and we cut through the noise toward the bar. The Hollow had swelled even more, bodies crammed shoulder to shoulder, heat and sweat clinging to the air.

We'd barely reached the bar when Kelsey leaned over from the other side. Early twenties, heavy on the lashes and lip gloss, she draped herself across the wood.

"You need something, Sterling?" she purred in a voice so

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syrupy my balls damn near shriveled.

I kept my eyes firmly on her forehead.

As evidenced by the new blonde, Babs was pretty loose about her employee dress code, and Kelsey's interpretation of it left very little to the imagination. Jett swore her entire left boob had made a surprise appearance last week, and the way she was leaning over now, her right one was about to introduce itself, too.

Ryder coughed into his drink to hide a laugh, though I knew damn well he'd sampled that particular special more than once.

I let my gaze finally land on Kelsey's for a beat. "I'll take the *drink*," I said, putting weight on it. Her smile faltered.

"Am I paying you to flirt, or am I paying you to work?" Babs snapped, appearing out of nowhere. She had a sixth sense for when her staff was thinking with anything but their brains. Kelsey flinched, then moved only marginally faster toward the taps.

Babs shook her head, muttering, "I swear, these waitresses are one spilled shot away from humping the furniture."

Her eyes cut between Ryder and me. "If y'all are finished trying to outdo each other in pissing me off, somebody put a dollar in the jukebox, and put Chuck out of his misery."

"I heard that," Chuck croaked from the piano, not missing a single off-key note.

"You were meant to," she snarled.

As if the sky agreed, a gust of wind slammed against the windows, rattling the panes in their frames. Rain pelted the glass, and The Hollow seemed to pause for half a breath, putting everyone on reset. But a moment later, they all carried on louder, like the storm had given everyone permission to get wilder.

Kelsey reappeared and slid a beer in front of me. I took it

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with a muttered, "Thanks."

Someone near the jukebox must have dropped a dollar in, because the first twang of George Strait cut across the room, mercifully drowning out Chuck's off-key funeral march.

The song caught in the back of my mind for a second. My mother used to play it when I was a kid. I took a slow sip of my beer and let the thought drift away before it could settle.

Ryder dragged a stool out from the bar, and the wood scraped across the floor. He leaned back, elbows braced, scanning the bar like he was cataloging who might be his next arrest.

"You hear anything from Jett this week?" I asked.

"He's riding at that Vander event up north," he said. "Told me he broke Jenkins's nose yesterday. Not over rodeo—Jett was scouting the area, looking for some guy he's…looking for."

I took a slow sip of beer, hiding my grin. *Look for* was Ryder's polite way of saying it. Jett made his living as a bounty hunter finding people who didn't want to be found.

A useful skill for our shared…pastimes.

"So he's doing well," Ryder added, like that passed for good news.

"As well as Jett ever does," I muttered, thinking about the last of our little trio. The three of us were all running from our own demons. Jett was just a little bit better at following his out of town.

Movement flickered at the edge of my vision…Kelsey, working up the nerve to try her luck with me again. I braced for the singsong purr, the leaning-too-far cleavage act.

But before she could pounce, a loud *crash* split the night outside, violent enough to silence the room again. Every head in The Hollow turned toward the door.

That hadn't sounded like thunder.

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I was already on my feet, leaving the bar, with Ryder close behind. I shoved the door open and stepped into the wind.

Rain pelted my face like gravel, dripping off the brim of my hat in steady streams. The streetlights blurred through the downpour, the water making them look like they were flickering.

Through the sheets of rain, something massive filled the middle of Main Street. Big Hank. The metal steer that had guarded Blackwood since before I was born was lying on the ground like a toppled king.

Face down. One horn splintered. A leg tucked under like a ballerina mid-fall.

And jammed against its ribs was a silver car.

Blackwood's fiercest bull had been taken out…by a Prius?

The hood was crumpled like tinfoil, steam hissing from underneath. One lonely windshield wiper kept dragging pathetically back and forth, even though the front of the car looked like it had lost the will to live.

A gust of wind tried to rip my hat off, and I caught it with one hand, my eyes fixed on the wreck in the street. Ryder stepped up beside me, then stopped short.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered. "Somebody killed the town mascot."

"Looks like it."

The car door groaned open, its hinges screaming in protest.

From the driver's side of the Prius, a woman stumbled into the storm. Rain swallowed her in seconds, plastering dark blonde hair to her cheeks, soaking the jeans that clung to her legs. An oversized hoodie sagged heavy on her frame, water dripping from the sleeves.

She looked wrecked. Not fragile or delicate. Just wrecked in that way people only get when life's been taking swings at them and they've stopped ducking.

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