

Mandi June

Secrets of Willow Creek



She felt real. Nothing else did.

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MANDI JUNE: Secrets of Willow Creek

Small town. Country songs. Forbidden love.
And the secret that changed everything.





Prologue

When the Past Stops Waiting

Some things feel like they're going to stay with you forever.

Or at least long enough that you stop pretending they don't matter.

I learned that early.

Growing up in Willow Creek means being surrounded by stories everyone knows — or thinks they know. People smile, say your name like it belongs to them, talk about the weather, and move on as if certain memories never existed.

But nothing really disappears.

The past doesn't leave.

It settles in.

It learns how to stay quiet.

Sometimes it comes back through old songs playing on the radio.

Sometimes through the tension that fills the air when



someone mentions a name no one talks about anymore.

And sometimes... it shows up in ways that feel too strange to be accidental.

I'm not the kind of girl who dreams of running away without looking back.

But I'm also not the kind who can stand still and pretend everything is fine.

Willow Creek is beautiful.

And still, it carries cracks no one wants to look at too closely.

My family, my music, my friends — they're what keep me here. And somehow, they're also what hold me in place. Every street has a memory. Every silence says more than words ever could.

And then there are the feelings you don't choose.

Certain presences.

Looks that last a second longer than they should.

Connections that form in the wrong place, at the wrong time, involving people you know you should keep your distance from.

Some things don't ask permission.

They just happen.

I try to move forward. I really do.



But some questions refuse to stay buried.

They wait.

They watch.

And when they decide to return, they do it gently — almost carefully — like they know exactly what they're about to disturb.

This isn't a story about changing who I am.

It's about the moment the past decides it's done waiting.

If you've ever felt like something needed to be said, even knowing it might change everything...

If you've ever realized that some truths hurt more when they stay hidden...

Then maybe you'll understand why I could never really leave.

Because some stories don't want to be forgotten.

They want to be faced.

Chapter 1

Southern Light





"Almost...
just one
more try."

The wind drifted slow and warm, carrying the smell of dust and coffee with it.

I was out on the porch, guitar in my lap, trying to finish a song that kept slipping through my fingers right when it felt almost done.

Banjo, my lab, was asleep at my feet.



KWCX was still crackling inside — my dad insists on leaving it on, even when no one's listening. Ever since the night Jay Carter fell from the tower, the station's felt like a ghost we keep feeding, just to hold on to some piece of my dad's legacy.

Our house is small, old, and filled with the sound of my mom's piano. She teaches lessons. After I was born, she pushed aside her dream of becoming a singer and poured everything into our family. And when the radio started losing ground, she took on even more students, teaching half the town to love music.

Her voice is soft, even when she's exhausted.

"Again, but hold the pedal at the end," I heard her tell a student.





I paused to listen.

Her music always pulls me back, makes me want to try one more time.

I opened my worn leather notebook, the same one I always use, and wrote at the top: Front Porch.

It felt right. Maybe because this was the one place where I still felt like myself.

My mom appeared in the doorway with her hair clipped up in a way that said she'd been rushing for hours and a smile that said she was happy anyway — happy just because I was there.

“Want some coffee, sweetheart?”

“I do.”

“Your dad’s at the station again, fighting with the bills.” She sighed, long and tired. “Sometimes I think he talks more to numbers than to us.”

I smiled, not sure what to say.

She went back inside.

I stayed, listening to the wind and Banjo’s slow breathing.

The whole town felt half-asleep.

Her student left with a quick “thank you,” leaving behind that kind of simple hope people carry before they understand what things really weigh.

My mom came back with two mugs.

“You playing at the Rusty Spur tonight?” she asked, settling beside me.



“Yeah. Three songs. Nate says my voice fits the place. Says it completes the room.”

“It fits everything, Mandi.” She gave me that look — the kind that says more than words ever could.

The Rusty Spur is half café, half bar. Mornings, folks drink coffee and talk about nothing and everything. At night, they dim the lights, switch on those warm amber bulbs, and call it live music. It’s the only place in Willow Creek where applause still feels real.

I work there part-time a few days a week. Serve coffee to people I’ve known all my life. And some nights, I get up and sing just to keep from getting rusty. Nate, the owner, was my dad’s childhood friend — practically family.

“Jo texted me,” I told my mom. “She wants to pitch a project about the history of the Peach Festival this year — old photos, videos, real town records... and she asked me to help.”

“‘Real’ is a dangerous word, honey.” My mom stirred her coffee slowly. “Just be careful not to open things people aren’t ready to see.”





“We’ll only show what’s pretty.”

“What’s pretty to some can hurt others. Don’t forget that.”

She smiled, then drifted back to the piano.

Jo Rivers is my best friend.

My confidante. My cheerleader. My wake-up call when I need one. She’s the voice of reason in my life.

We’re different — maybe that’s why we work so well.

Jo has always been the kind of person who watches before she speaks.



While everyone else rushes to be seen, she tries to understand.

I stared out the window — our street, people walking by, the sky burning slow at the edges. Sometimes I think Willow Creek is beautiful in a sad way.

Later, my dad stepped onto the porch. He always looked a little smaller than I remembered, like time had been taking pieces of him one by one.

He carried a spreadsheet and the radio station keychain hanging from his pocket.

“We’re out of coffee,” he said, glancing at the empty street. “Ask Nate to get us a bag of whatever brand he uses. Tell him I’ll advertise the bar for free this week.”

He paused, then added, “Tell him it’s an old friend doing a favor.”

“Alright.” I smiled. “Nate always helps us out. He knows we settle things in our own way.”

Dad let out a quiet laugh — a rare sound.

“Your mom called me a little while ago. Mentioned that photo project Jo wants to do. You really getting involved in that?”

“We just want to show the good side of town. The festival, the shops, the stories... the usual folks.”

“Just remember there are stories that hurt the ones who try to tell them.”



“We’re not touching those. I promise.”

I went on,

“This year’s festival is gonna be great. I’m performing, and they said I can play something original. It feels different — playing my own songs.”

He looked genuinely happy hearing that. Smiled to himself for a moment, rolling the KWCX



keychain between his fingers.
The metal caught the light, flashed — and suddenly something heavy crossed his face.

My dad exhaled, touched by a memory he never escapes.

“Sometimes I think the whole town is still stuck in that night,” he said, meaning the tragedy.

“I do too,” I answered softly.
“But we’re going to move forward, Dad. I swear we will.”

He nodded and walked back inside with that familiar shadow of guilt tugging at him whenever he tries to feel joy.

My phone buzzed.
Jo.

Jo: *“Got access to an old cloud from the festival! There’s a photo you need to see.”*

Me: *“A photo of what?”*

Jo: *“I think it’s the radio tower. Look at this. There’s something in it.”*

(photo attached)

I tapped it open.

The file was corrupted.
You could make out... something — more like a blur — but you could still recognize the silhouette of the radio tower on top of Raven Ridge, the sky already turning dark behind it.

And in the file properties, the part that made my stomach twist:



The same place.
The same time.

My breath caught.

I shut the photo instantly.

For a long second, I just stared ahead, trying to steady myself.

Banjo nudged my knee with his nose, asking to go out. Sometimes I'm convinced he understands me better than most people.

I grabbed the keys, pulled on my boots, and slid into the driver's seat.

KWCX was already tuned in — always. It's part of us. Part of everything we've lived.

I whispered into the empty cab,
“Oh God... what is that?”





I turned the key.

And drove off.
Slowly.

Wondering if I actually wanted to know what was hidden
in that file.



Chapter 2

Rusty Spur Nights





The sun was slipping away, leaving the whole town washed in that soft orange glow Willow Creek does so well — the kind that makes everything look calmer on the outside, even when it isn't.

Here, people always seem to know what you're going to do before you do it. Sometimes it feels like they're trying to read your mind.

I walked up to the Rusty Spur and could already smell the coffee and cinnamon drifting out onto the sidewalk.





It's the kind of place where everybody pretends time pressed pause years ago.

Nate showed up wearing an apron, smiling wide with that familiar “uncle who’s known you forever” energy.

“Well, if it ain’t Mandi June!” he said, opening his arms. “Lemme guess — your dad sent you for coffee?”





“He did.” I laughed. “Said the payment is free radio ads this week.”

“That Thomas... never changes.” Nate chuckled. “You singing tonight?”

“Three covers. Don’t wanna scare anyone.”

“Good call. Folks around here could use some music. Good music.”

He handed me two bags of coffee with a little label that read Mandi’s reserve and pulled me into one of those real hugs — the kind that feels like home.

Right then Jo showed up, her analog camera hanging from her neck and her phone clenched in the other hand.

“You look cute,” she said, fixing a strand of my hair. “Light’s perfect tonight.”

“Watch the flash.”

“Relax, the analog’s just for the collection. Official photos are on the phone.” She winked. “Content, baby.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rick Carter.

He was sitting at a table by the window, staring at his phone.

We never really talk — not because we don’t want to, but because things between our families never went back to normal after what happened.

The blame they threw at my dad still hangs over us, even when no one’s saying it out loud.



Rick has always been the good-guy type — friendly without trying. He works hard at his family’s place, Carter Ranch, at the end of the old Whispering Pines road. After his brother’s accident, he got quieter, like he’d learned how to tuck away anything that might hurt.

But he’s still good. A simple, steady kind of good. And for a reason I don’t love admitting... every time he shows up, the air feels different.

I stepped onto the little stage and gave Nate a quick grin.

“Going with Taylor tonight?” he asked.

“Always.”

“Then go knock ’em dead, sweetheart. Do what you were born to do.”

The mic let out a soft hiss.

I started with *Love Story* — a classic.





Half the bar sang the chorus with me.

Then came *You're Still the One* — the kind of song that makes everyone remember someone.

I closed with Strawberry Wine — voice shaky at first, steady by the end.

Light applause, glasses tapping on tables.

When I opened my eyes, he was there — Rick.





Watching me from his seat.

His expression wasn't curious.

It was nostalgic.

Like the music had dragged up something he'd tried to bury — something sweet and painful at the same time.

And that's when Scarlett Hayes walked in.

Pretty as always.

Golden blond hair, a slim frame, and the posture of someone who's been ready for a photo since birth. She wore a cropped denim jacket, a plaid skirt, and boots far too clean for a wooden floor.

Scarlett is the kind of person who steps into a room and the room shifts.

Instant charisma.

But behind her smile, there's something too bright to be just light.

It's calculation. It always has been.

We used to be close when we were younger, but she pulled away from me — and my family — after Jay's accident.

Now she's practically a celebrity around here.

A few thousand followers and a full-blown mission to become a national country influencer.

She sees opportunity everywhere and turns anything into a showcase... or better yet, a post.

“Oh my gosh, look who's here!” she said to her phone, already recording. “The incredible Mandi June killing it at the Rusty Spur!”





Then she stopped filming and walked up to me.

“Mandi, seriously, you’re sounding amazing tonight. Taylor would be jealous.”

“Thanks, Scarlett.”

“I’m thinking we should do a collab for the festival. You sing, I record, we post — boom.” She snapped her fingers. “Everyone’s gonna see it.”

“Jo handles that stuff for me,” I said.



“Jo is sweet,” she replied, with this tiny laugh. “But I know how to make things grow. You’ve got the talent — you just need visibility.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think hard. You’ve got the right vibe.”

Jo stepped up behind her.

“Hey, Scarlett.”

“Hi!” Scarlett answered, looking her up and down. “Love the vintage camera. Super aesthetic.”

“Thanks.”

“But you should record more on your phone. People love behind-the-scenes.”

She shot me another smile. “Anyway, I’ll talk to you later. I’ve got a live in ten minutes.”

And she walked out like the floorboards were her runway.

Jo gave me a look — the *told* you so one.

“She’s like solar energy,” Jo said. “Pretty from afar, burns you if you get too close.”



“You’re being dramatic.”

“Just wait.”

Nate came over, drying a glass.

“You were great tonight, Mandi. The Spur feels lighter when you sing.”

“Thanks, Nate.”



“And hey, don’t let your dad hide in that station forever. We miss him. Tell him I’m stoppin’ by tomorrow so we can talk.”

“I will.”

“And if you need anything, you let me know. Y’all are family.”

I grabbed the coffee bags, said goodbye, and headed out with Jo.

Outside, the air was warm, and you could hear crickets singing across the fields.

Rick was still there, leaning against his truck, messing with his phone.

He lifted his head, saw me, and gave a small wave.

I waved back.

Nothing more than that.

But somehow, it was enough to send my heartbeat stumbling.

On the way home, Jo said,
“I opened that festival photo again.”

“And?”

“It’s corrupted, but... I saw two silhouettes at the base of the tower. That’s it.”

“Who?”

“No idea. Too blurry.”



“Then drop it.”

“Not happening. I’m gonna try to fix it.”

“Fine. Do whatever you want — just don’t tell me anything until you’re sure.”

She grinned.

“Deal.”

I dropped Jo off and headed home.

Banjo met me at the gate, gave me that tired little look of his, and walked in beside me like he was saying, *Long day... let’s call it quits.*

My dad was in the kitchen, sorting through radio papers.

“You get the coffee?” he asked.

“Got it. Nate sent two bags and said he’s stopping by the station tomorrow.”

Dad nodded, worn out but relieved.

“Nate’s a good man. The world needs more folks like him.”

“He misses you over there.”

Dad smiled — a little sad.

“I think I miss it too.”

I went upstairs, set my guitar in the corner, and turned on the radio.

KWCX was on the air.

This Kiss by Faith Hill was playing.



Her voice filled the room with a kind of nostalgia that doesn't hurt — just presses gently on the places that remember.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

My phone buzzed.
Scarlett again:

*“Loved seeing you on stage. ❤️
Let's do something together for the festival.
Trust me ;)”*

I left the message unopened.
No need to respond.

I glanced out the window.
The Rusty Spur's sign flickered at the top of the street.

And for a second, it felt like something was shifting —
even if I had no idea what it was yet.

Chapter 3

The Girl on Screen





I woke up to Banjo scratching at my door and my phone buzzing nonstop. Notifications. Tags. Comments.

I opened Tik Tok. Then Instagram. And there it was on both: Scarlett Hayes had posted a reel — a snippet of me singing **Love Story**, the crowd clapping, and her at the end smiling into the camera:

“Guys, look at this amazing collab! Mandi June is coming in strong for the festival and I’m so happy to be part of it 💕”



Caption: “Collab vibes ✨ #WillowCreek #CountryGirls #FestivalTime”

My @ was there, tiny.

I took a deep breath.
It wasn’t exactly a lie... but it definitely wasn’t the truth.

She showed up, filmed, posted — like we’d planned it together.

I headed downstairs. My dad was already in the kitchen with the coffeemaker going.

“This stuff Nate sent is the real deal,” he said.

Then he read a text out loud, grinning:

“Mandi crushed it last night. You should’ve been there. I’ll stop by the station early afternoon with some pork cracklings so we can catch up.”

“See?” he said. “Nate’s your second-biggest fan. After me and your mom, obviously.”

“He’s just being nice.”

“Kindness doesn’t pretend, sweetheart.”





I sat down, looked at him, and said,
“Scarlett posted a video of me. Sort of making it look like
a collab.”

“And is it?”

“No.”

“Then make that clear — without picking a fight.”

I nodded. Sometimes he oversimplifies... but he's right.

Banjo rested his head on my leg.



“One day at a time, buddy,” I whispered. “Our turn’s coming.”

The doorbell rang.
Jo walked in, camera around her neck, phone in her hand.

“I saw Scarlett’s reel,” she said. “Half the comments think you two are partners already.”

“Great,” I muttered.

“Relax. We’ll fix it our way.”





She opened her editing app.

“Go put on a cute top. Good lighting. Honest smile.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

We filmed quick cuts: me brewing coffee, tuning my guitar, Banjo begging for pets, my dad heading to the radio station with his KWCX folder tucked under his arm.





At the end, I looked into the camera and said,

“Hey, friends! Just a little piece of my day. Share it with anyone who loves country music and the everyday life of a true small-town cowgirl. :)”

Jo edited and posted it instantly.

“There. Now let it breathe.”

A little while later, my dad texted:

“Nate’s here at the station. Brought cracklings and a ton of stories. Says he’s proud of you.”

I smiled.

I spent the whole afternoon serving coffee at the Rusty Spur, and as soon as my shift ended, Jo and I set up a tiny recording corner near the café window.

Nate — who’d spent the afternoon with my dad — walked back in and came straight to us.

“Saw your new video,” he said. “Looks great. You two know what you’re doing.”

“Thanks, Nate.”

“And ignore the internet noise. What matters is knowing who you are, Mandi. And you do.”

“I’m trying,” I said.

“Keep at it. Truth shows up on its own.”

We sat by the window. While Jo adjusted the camera,



I stared out at the street, caught somewhere between thoughts.

We spent the early evening organizing my content: clips from the Spur, a black-and-white photo carousel Jo had taken last week, and little pieces of my daily routine.

Comments were good. Lots of new people showing up.

Jo gave me that smile — the one that’s sweet and challenging at the same time.

“What if we recorded a bit of *Southern Blue Sky*?” she suggested.

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

She smiled like someone who knew exactly what she was doing.

“Just the chorus. Pretty window light. Keep it soft and real.”

Southern Blue Sky is one of my originals.

I wrote it a while ago and recorded it in a tiny room at my dad’s radio station — the “studio,” as he insists on calling it — with help from a few local musician friends.

It turned out pretty good, honestly. One of those upbeat country songs that gets stuck in your head and makes you want to roll the windows down and just drive.

Even without real promotion, it got a decent number of streams on Spotify and a few YouTube comments.

I grabbed my guitar and sat in a chair near our makeshift



stage.

The lighting was soft, warm. For some reason, I thought of Banjo — like he was right there cheering me on.

I sang quietly, letting the words come out with the kind of certainty you don't have to force:

“Southern blue sky, warm and breezy
Southern style, free and easy
Southern blue sky, we're comin' alive
Southern style, we know we're doin' it right.”



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify

♪ Southern blue sky,
warm and breezy... ♪



Jo recorded it, smiled, and posted it straight away.

“There,” she said. “That’s the real Mandi.”

A notification popped up almost immediately: Scarlett tagged me again.

I opened it.

She’d made a reaction video to my chorus — watching it, smiling, saying,

“This girl is pure talent. I love seeing authentic people rising.”

Caption: *“Reacting to my friend Mandi June 🍷 Can’t wait for the festival!”*

The comments were exploding: “Queens!” “Collab queens!”

Like we were some kind of duo.

I rolled my eyes.

“She moves fast,” I said.

“And you’re way too patient,” Jo replied.

This time, I couldn’t just ignore it.

I grabbed my phone and sent Scarlett a voice message:

“Hey, I saw the video. It’s pretty. But you gotta let me know before posting stuff like that, okay? I’m building my set with Jo. Let’s sync what we’re saying, please?”

She saw it.



Started typing.
Stopped.
Typed again.

Then:

“Girl, I’m so sorry if it felt invasive! It came from love for your music, I swear. Let’s film something together tomorrow? Willow Creek loves us as a duo.”

I showed Jo.

She rolled her eyes so hard it hurt to watch.

“‘Girl’ is what she calls someone she’s trying to win over.”

“Yeah... I noticed.”

I didn’t reply.
The notification just sat there — and I let it.

By the time I got home, it was nearly ten.

My mom was sipping tea, already in her wind-down mode, and the radio was playing Luke Combs low in the background.

My dad was there too, lighter than I’d seen him in a long time.

“Nate’s visit was good,” he said, cheerful. “He brought cracklings, we ate, laughed, recorded a few promos for the Spur... The station hasn’t had a day like that in ages.”

I sat down; Banjo curled up at my feet, waiting for crumbs.

“I’m betting it was because of the cracklings,” I joked.



“That too,” he laughed. “But mostly the conversation. We remembered the old days... It felt good.”

“I’m glad, Dad.”

He nodded, with that look that mixes pride and exhaustion.

“Your music’s waking things up around here, Mandi. Even the radio feels different.”

We let the quiet settle between us.
Just the whisper of *Fast Car* playing softly.





These small, ordinary things — my home, my parents, the radio humming, Banjo's heavy sigh — made Willow Creek feel like the center of everything.

And for a second, it was easy to believe everything was going to be okay.

Chapter 4

The Gazette Effect





I woke up without even checking my phone.
I Got dressed slowly, like the day was patiently waiting for me.

LOL — it wasn't.

When I walked into the kitchen, my mom was already coming toward me with news:





The *Willow Gazette* had posted another piece — a photo of me at the Spur, guitar in hand, warm yellow lights glowing behind me.

Caption: “*Local voice gains spotlight at the Willow Creek Peach Festival.*”

In the comments:

“Love seeing hometown talent shine.”

“She sings SO well! Can’t wait for the festival 🍑🎵.”

“Is this the girl from Rusty Spur? She’s amazing.”

“This year’s gonna be beautiful — the festival’s looking promising.”

“Willow Creek’s overflowing with talent!”

I breathed in deep.

It felt good seeing my name there — but it also sent a cold flutter straight through my stomach.

Small-town buzz is like warm wind: it shows up fast, but shifts directions in two seconds.

My dad already had the coffee going; my mom was stirring something in the skillet.

“Sleep okay?” he asked.

“More or less.”

“Then eat before anything else,” he said, sliding a mug toward me. “The mind works better after bread and coffee.”





Banjo sat beside me, staring like he was saying: *good morning, doll.*

Sometimes I swear that's what he calls me.

“Morning, handsome,” I told him, laughing.

I finally checked my phone.
Message from Jo:

Jo: “You saw the Gazette? Everyone’s hyped for the festival.”



Me: “Saw it. Guess it’s starting to feel real now.”

Jo: “Good. Let’s use the momentum.”

A second later:

Jo: “Today we’re posting ‘a day with Mandi.’ Behind the scenes, routine. Nothing repetitive. Natural, light, just you being you.”

Me: “Done.”

A little after that, my phone buzzed again — Scarlett had tagged me.

“Willow Creek fam, topic of the day: are we READY for the festival? ❤️ ”

Then her stories rolled on:

“Guys, I’m bringing you EVERYTHING — backstage, music, local talent from our own land, and the whole vibe of the city! Stay with me, my loves!”

Afternoon at the Spur

The Rusty Spur was calm.
Coffee and wood in the air.
The ice machine humming softly.

Nate showed up with his usual sunshine energy.

“Didn’t think I’d see you ‘til tonight,” he teased.



With the slow afternoon, I sat at the counter and remembered the song I'd started writing days ago — *Front Porch*.

I grabbed a pen and a napkin.

Started a new verse:

*Sun's droppin' down at the edge of town,
Dusty roads calm and the day winds down.
The dog's layin' where the cool wind blows,
On the front porch, by the moon's glow...
Where everything goes slow.*



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify





I smiled at myself and tucked the napkin into my pocket.

Nate leaned in.

“You singing again tonight?”

I was still riding the happiness of the verse.

“Yeah.”

“What’s on the setlist?”

“The Bones, Follow Your Arrow, and Heart Like a Truck. I’m closing with *Southern Blue Sky*. I want to play something of my own.”

“Good. Mix of new and classic. I’ll love it,” he said, always trying to lift me up.

While we were talking, someone walked in.





Rick Carter.

I didn't run into Rick often, and somehow — twice in one week — we crossed paths at the Spur.

He sat alone in the corner. Ordered something I didn't even catch.

Suddenly I was... off-balance.

A feeling I didn't recognize — and honestly didn't want to.

But feelings don't ask for permission.

They just show up and do what they want.

He finished eating, stood up, paid at the counter.

Said hi to Nate.

And before leaving, he gave me a small nod.

A half “hey,” shy and wordless.

Just a gesture.

Nate caught my expression and changed the subject:

“Oh, about the festival — the main square mic glitches whenever it's windy.”

“I'll grab the one from the station,” I said. “The one with the KWCX logo.”

“Perfect. Show them where you come from.”

My phone buzzed — message from the *Willow Gazette*.

“Hi, Mandi! Saturday cover: ‘Willow Creek Festival — New Voices.’ Could you answer two quick text questions?”



And send us an exclusive photo?”

I replied kindly:

“Of course! Thank you for inviting me. Send the questions and I’ll answer today.”

That’s when Scarlett walked into the Spur.

Light jacket. Practiced smile. Phone already in hand.

“Mandi! Can we film a little clip together? It’ll look gorgeous on stories.”





“Not right now,” I said. “I’m working — I don’t think Nate would love that.”

Perfect excuse.

“Oh, it’ll be quick...” She already had the phone half-raised.

I tried being polite, but clear:

“I can send you a video or a photo of me playing later. Or we can film something another time. I’m kind of a mess right now, okay?”

Scarlett forced a smile — recovered fast.

“Of course! No big deal.”

She turned to the counter and opened a live, pointing her camera at the Spur sign.

“Guys, live from the Rusty Spur! I’ll show you EVERYTHING during the Peach Festival — backstage, artists, this town’s whole vibe! Stay tuned!”

I thought:

She never wastes time.
But neither do I.

By late afternoon, like I’d promised Nate, I grabbed my guitar, turned on the mic, and did what I love most:
I sang.



Night at Home

It was after 10 p.m. when I finally got home.

My dad was at the laptop, editing a radio spot.

“Listen,” he said.

KWCX presents: voices of our town, stories that touch. This Friday, live music at the Rusty Spur.

“That’s great, Dad.”

“Simple but honest,” he said, smiling. “That’s enough.”

My mom came in carrying a dish, glowing with pride.

“Sweetheart, about the Gazette article... your photo looked beautiful.”

Her eyes watered.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling back.

“The whole town’s rooting for you, Mandi. Even the priest mentioned you.”

“Well... then it must be official.”

We laughed.

Dinner was warm, light, easy.
For a moment, the house felt fuller.

Later I went to my room, sat with my guitar and lyric notebook.



Rick's look kept replaying in my mind.

I picked up my pencil and wrote at the top of the page:

"Waitin' on Love."

As if I already knew love wasn't for now — but maybe someday.

I sang softly what I'd just scribbled:

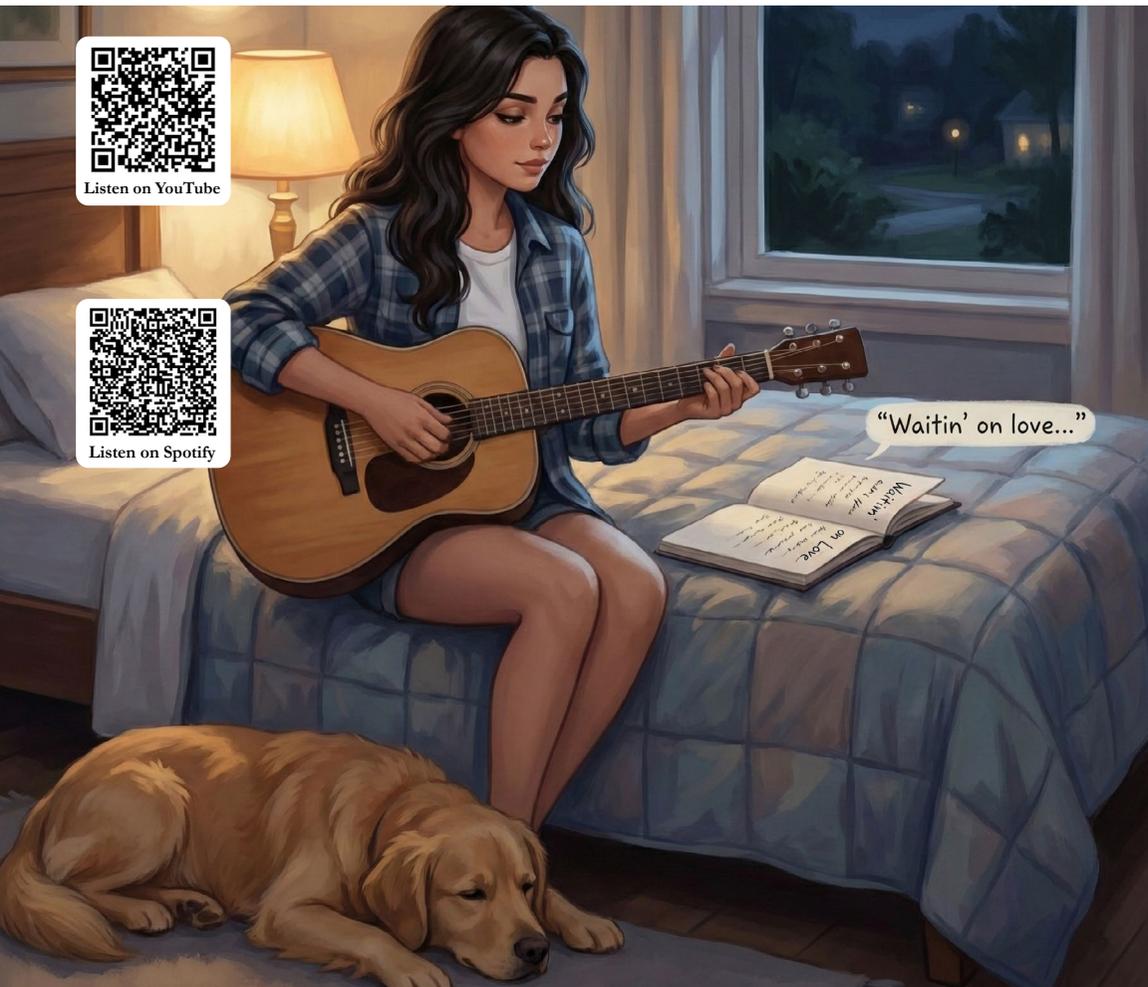
*Waitin' on love, livin' for tonight,
Singin' under the sky, it feels just right.
Got my girlfriends around and we're dancing all night,
You'll find me someday, but for now, I'm alright.*



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify





I set the guitar aside.

My phone buzzed — email from the festival committee.

“Slot confirmed: Stage B, Saturday, 6:30 p.m.

Note: Due to strong audience response, the sponsor suggests exclusive digital coverage with a local creator (suggested name: Scarlett Hayes). Please confirm participation and communication alignment.”





I stared at the screen.

Then I sent Jo a voice message:

“They confirmed my show. And they want Scarlett covering the festival — backstage, socials, everything.”

She replied immediately:

“Breathe. The show’s yours; the coverage is hers. We’re setting very clear boundaries.”

Minutes later, Scarlett posted a story — she was in her room, holding a tiny lapel mic.

Caption:

“Counting down... Do we announce today?”

Followed by a poll:

“Ready for the Festival?” — Yes / *Absolutely* ❤️

Banjo let out a long sigh, like he’d seen this movie before.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at my phone.

“Okay,” I said out loud.

“Then we play this right.”

Chapter 5

The Weight of Silence





Wednesday woke up looking like festival season in Willow Creek — flags fluttering on light poles, the smell of peach cobbler drifting down the street, people sweeping sidewalks and painting curbs. The whole town felt like it was getting ready for a photo.

I stopped by Mrs. Mae’s flower shop to pick up an arrangement for my mom.

“Well, look who came to brighten my store!” she said, separating a bunch of daisies. “Saw your picture in the Gazette. And I’ve been keeping up with Scarlett’s posts



too — she’s helping put Willow Creek on the map. You two have been the talk of the week. Homegrown talent.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling.

Her warmth was genuine.

The problem was the “partnership” that had fallen into my lap without me asking — and, apparently, without any way out. Everyone assuming me and Scarlett were working together, or comparing us, or pairing us like some matching set.

People talking about me felt good — like real recognition — but this fake duo storyline made even the compliments taste a little strange.

“Take this one,” she said, handing me a tiny flower. “For good luck.”





I thanked her and kept walking down Main Street. The printed *Willow Gazette* was in every window, and their online comments floated around like windblown gossip:

Proud of our town this year.
The program looks beautiful.
That new stage is gonna be a hit.

At the corner, I stopped by Frosty Spring — the oldest ice cream shop in the city. The sweetness practically spilled out the door.

Tommy, the owner, stood behind the counter.

“One chocolate-peanut-butter sundae for Willow Creek’s rising star,” he said, sliding the cup toward me. “On the house. Good luck at the festival, Mandi.”





“Thank you,” I said, a little shy.

He smiled like someone watching a kid grow up too fast.

Walking home with the ice cream, thoughts kept circling. Without meaning to, my posts — and all the noise online — were making the local businesses look at digital ads and influencers like Scarlett.

And that squeezed something inside me.

My dad was fighting to keep the radio alive, and somehow everything *I* did online — even unintentionally — felt like it was speeding up the fall.

Each step home felt heavier than the midday heat.

KWCX — the station

I brought my dad a coffee at KWCX. He was in the booth, spreadsheets open, envelopes stacked on the desk.

“Brought backup,” I said, leaving the cup beside him.





“My lifesaver,” he replied with a tired smile. “Town’s talking about you.”

I looked at the papers piled up.

“Dad... is everything okay?”

He didn’t answer right away.

“People who used to advertise with us are going online. A lot of folks are signing with Scarlett too. It’s the new way to sell.”

“The station still matters,” I said — more to myself than to him.

“It does,” he answered. “But the numbers don’t close like they used to.”

A knot tightened in my chest.

“It’ll get better, Dad. I know it will.”

“If you say so,” he replied, squeezing my hand for a moment.

FLASHBACK — FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Raven Ridge.

The highest point in Willow Creek. The KWCX tower cuts the sky like a memory nobody can scrub clean.

Jay was the oldest Carter boy — sixteen.



Rick was fourteen.

The two of them were inseparable. They'd stop by the station sometimes, asking my dad to play a song or just talking about the artists they liked. My dad loved them; called them "the golden boys."

That year, on the night of the Peach Festival, the music carried all the way up the ridge. The lights of Willow Creek flickered like they were breathing.

Jay supposedly had a reckless idea: he wanted "a picture of the whole town glowing."

At least, that's the version people repeated until it hardened into something like truth — even though the investigation closed as an accident, with no conclusive evidence.

The next morning, they said the gate was unlocked and the cameras were off.

And that was all it took for the town to write its own ending: negligence from the station owner, Thomas June.

What happened up there was quick and cruel — a wrong step, a slip.

And the whole town went quiet.

After that, Carter Ranch — out at the end of the old Whispering Pines road — kept its doors open but closed its heart.

The land stayed alive, but the laughter and long Sunday barbecues vanished. It was like the place had lost its warm spirit overnight.

Rick's parents — good people, the kind who helped



everyone without making noise — were never the same. Now they show up only for Sunday service at the Baptist church, together but silent.

And Rick grew up trying to fill a space that wasn't fillable. He works hard, takes care of the land, does what's needed — but you can see the weight of trying to make his parents proud while carrying a loss no one will name.

In our families, a quiet canyon opened.

No one talks about it,
but everyone knows where the ground is thin.

Porch — late afternoon

Jo arrived with her laptop and camera.
Banjo flopped onto the floor like he was head of production.

We decided to film something different — a black-and-white video, just voice and guitar, me sitting on the porch swing.

Jo adjusted the focus and gave me a thumbs-up.

I played and sang the opening of *Southern Blue Sky*:

*Fired up,
Rollin' down this road
Telling stories in my dad's truck
Never grow up, never slow down
Back to settle in this little town.*



Jo smiled behind the lens.

“That’s it. Honest and simple.”

We posted it. Within minutes, comments started rolling in:

This song has soul.

So good seeing Willow Creek come alive.

Her voice matches the sunset.

And for a moment, everything felt light.



Digital pressure

Another email from the festival arrived:

Confirmed: Stage B, Saturday, 6:30 p.m.

Also confirmed: exclusive digital coverage by local creator Scarlett Hayes.

I told Jo:

“They confirmed. And now it’s official — Scarlett has exclusive coverage.”

“Okay,” Jo answered. “But we set boundaries: she covers on her account, doesn’t use your content without permission, and doesn’t interfere with your set. Any backstage stuff is scheduled and agreed on.”

I sat down and wrote the email exactly the way we planned.

Before I hit send, one more notification:

Willow Gazette:

“We need an exclusive photo of ‘Mandi & Scarlett’ today. Cover confirmed for Saturday.”

I looked at Banjo, who lifted his head.

I replied:

“You can have my photo. For Scarlett’s, please ask her directly.”

Sent.

Jo was heading out, so I walked her to the car and stayed



outside for a minute. The end-of-day heat made the radio tower pop and crack.

To most people, it's just metal.

To me, it's a chapter of our family story.

Banjo nudged my leg.

“Thanks, partner,” I said, scratching behind his ear. “We’re getting there.”

I stepped inside and closed the curtain.

I already knew Thursday wasn’t going to be easy.



Chapter 6

Thursday Shift





Thursday woke up with Willow Creek glowing full-on festival mode.

The town square buzzed like a beehive — trucks unloading speakers, cables snaking across the ground, kids darting between fresh pennant strings, and that warm peach-cake smell drifting from the vendor stalls.

The whole town was breathing anticipation.

At the Rusty Spur, I was reviewing my setlist while Nate checked inventory.



The door opened, the bell chimed, and in walked Rick Carter carrying a crate of fresh milk.

The Spur's been buying milk from the Carter family since the café opened.

Nate trusts their work — talks little about the family, but they deliver like clockwork.

Usually a ranch hand makes the drop-off.



But today, for whatever reason, Rick came himself.

“Delivery,” he said, setting the crate on the counter.

Nate thanked him and headed to the storage room to check the order, leaving us alone.

Rick looked at the photo wall — the one everyone in town knows by heart. Old festival snapshots, vintage KWCX posters, smiles that feel like they belong to another lifetime.





I noticed the way he lingered on a photo from the last festival before the accident — like someone staring at a memory that’s equal parts longing and anger, trying to understand why things turned out the way they did.

I think he caught me doing the same — stuck on the same pictures, trying to decode the same past Willow Creek refuses to talk about.

“Heard you’re playing Saturday,” he said, still looking at the wall.

“Six-thirty. Stage B.”

“I’ll be there.”





“I thought you avoided the festival.”

“I did. Haven’t gone in years. But... sometimes you gotta change something in yourself if you want things to change after. The past, well... most of it you can’t touch.”

I nodded. Simple words, but true.
The kind of truth someone only says when they’re carrying something deep — plain on the outside, heavy underneath.

Nate returned, scribbled the delivery receipt, and mentioned something about the weekend rush.

Rick gave a short nod goodbye and stepped out.

Nothing dramatic — but the Spur felt noticeably quieter after he left.

The afternoon stayed busy.
The square was a storm of rehearsals, stacked equipment, and people arguing about tent sizes.

Jo rushed past with a clipboard. She was doing a freelance gig for the festival production crew — scheduling, sound checks, stage transitions.

“Your soundcheck’s tomorrow at four,” she said. “They want you to use the radio mic if you still have it.”

“I do.”

“Take it, then. It’s part of your story. Use it.”

She winked and disappeared into the noise.

By late afternoon, I was packing up to leave the Spur when



Scarlett strode in. She sat at the counter, twirling her hair with that effortless “I know you’re watching” aura.

She laughed at something Nate said — a little too lightly to be real.

Then she smiled at me with her usual half-smile — the one that feels halfway between a compliment and a dare.

“Mandi June,” she said. “Town’s a mess, but it’s gorgeous, right?”

“Yeah,” I answered simply, folding my apron.

The door opened again.

Rick walked in — the second time today, which was unusual enough to feel almost suspicious. Same clothes, but now holding his cap in his hand.

Scarlett turned instantly. Fast.





They've known each other forever — small town, same school, same Sunday hangouts. Never close, because Rick is quiet and she is... not.

But the way she straightened her posture told me everything: she wanted to be noticed.

“Well, look who decided to show up,” she said with a practiced smile. “Haven't seen you around in forever.”

“Been busy,” he said simply.

“I bet. Festival changes everything, doesn't it? New energy, new faces.” She spun on the stool, fully facing him. “Is the ranch participating this year?”

“No. Just supplying milk to the vendors who ordered from us.”

“Of course,” she said, leaning in slightly. “Nate practically lives off your milk.”

Rick offered a polite half-smile. He didn't pull away — but he didn't invite anything either.

Scarlett pushed on.

“You going to the festival?”

“I am.”

“Great. I think this year's gonna be special.” Her eyes stayed on him a beat too long.

I stayed quiet, just watching.

It wasn't jealousy — it was instinct.



You can feel Scarlett’s kind of interest a mile away: intentional, calculated. The same spark she gets whenever she spots opportunity — or advantage.

Nate came back holding a rolled-up poster, breaking the tension

“Mandi, the festival schedule came in. They’re posting these around town.”

“Let me see.”

I unrolled it.

Stage B — Saturday, 6:30 p.m. — Mandi June

And right below, in smaller letters:





Presentation conducted by Scarlett Hayes

My stomach locked tight.

The “collaboration” I never asked for was now official.

Scarlett smiled — the kind of smile that sounds like a message.

“It’s gonna be beautiful, Mandi. We’re gonna crush it together.”

“Yeah. It’ll be... unforgettable.”

She grabbed her bag, flashed Rick a quick wave, and swept out — leaving behind the scent of expensive perfume and intention.

Rick stayed quiet.
He adjusted his cap and said only:

“Looks like the festival’s gonna be lively.”

“Yeah.”

He nodded politely and headed out.

Nate let out a grumble.

“That girl... Scarlett... always had a nose for trouble.”

“I know,” I said.

I stood there, staring at the poster — my name and hers side by side.



It wasn't anger.
It was that feeling you get when the ground shifts under
you, and you have to learn where to place your feet all
over again.

The knot in my stomach tightened.

A silent certainty settled in:
Saturday, I was going to sing.



Not for visibility.
Not for likes.
Not for someone else's storyline.

But to remind myself who I am — and where my voice
comes from.

Outside, the sunset turned the sky gold and dusty.

The town was getting ready to celebrate.

And I was getting ready not to be swallowed whole by it.

Chapter 7

Friday Warm-Up





Friday started at full speed.

Stage A was pounding through drum checks, Stage B was tweaking the lights, and a line of food booths opened one by one. It was the first official day of the festival — good energy, but everyone clearly saving their batteries for Saturday.

I spent the day at the Rusty Spur booth helping Nate.





Special menu: cakes, sweet and savory pies, local desserts, coffee, tea, and those pretty fruit drinks in clear cups with slices floating on top.

The square filled up, and with every order came a compliment:

“Saw you on the poster.”

“I’m waiting for you tomorrow.”

“We’re proud of you, girl.”

“Remember,” Nate told everyone at the booth, clapping his hands like a coach, “smiles on, attention on the orders, clean counter, focused service. The rest takes care of itself.”





He always talks like that, and somehow, it works.

Jo rushed past, production badge swinging.





“Your soundcheck’s still at four,” she called out. “I’ll let you know if it changes.”

“If?” I asked.

“It always changes,” she laughed. “But I’ll fight for it.”

Then she disappeared to go wrestle cables, outlets, and stage order.

I was serving when I saw Rick across the street. Baseball cap, Dark shirt, the look of someone who’d had a long week.

He hesitated for a second, then headed over to the booth.

“Can I get an orange-apple-carrot juice?” he asked. “They say it’s good for immunity.” He said it like he was trying to start a real conversation.

“With ice?”

“Sure.”

I handed him the cup. He stayed. Didn’t rush off.





“Tomorrow, right?” he asked.

“Tomorrow. Stage B. Six-thirty.”

“You feeling confident?”

“I’m trying.”

He took a breath like he’d decided to say what he’d actually been thinking.

“Mandi, can I ask you something? I really like ‘Colder Weather,’ from Zac Brown Band. Means a lot to me. Would you play it for me?”

“Yeah, I know it. I’ll add it in. Thanks for the suggestion.”

“For real?”

“I love sneaking in songs sung by guys. We flip ’em and they sound great. People usually only ask for Taylor, Carrie, Lainey...”

“True.”

“I adore the girls, but it’s good to mix it up.”

He smiled more than usual.

“Deal.”

The conversation drifted easily after that — music already playing from the stage, parking lot full, pie line stretching down the sidewalk.

Rick was different today — more open, meeting my eyes, not in a hurry.



Out of the corner of my vision, I caught Scarlett watching.
Far enough not to hear, close enough not to miss anything.

Sunglasses, styled hair, light outfit.

She saw the scene. Then came straight toward us.

“Festival’s gorgeous this year, right?” she said, sliding right into the moment like she’d been there the whole time.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Hey, Rick. So glad you finally decided to show up.”

“Yeah, I missed this,” he said, polite.

“Mandi, I’m intro-ing you onstage tomorrow. I’ve already practiced your name like ten times.” She laughed. “And now... Mandi June!”

“Cool.”

“Rick, you coming to watch?”

“I am.”

“Perfect. I want to hear that cheering section.”

“You will.”

Her tone was friendly, but there was something else humming underneath.
I saw a different kind of smile aimed at Rick — not just polite. It was interest, slow and deliberate.



“How’s the juice?” she asked him.

“It’s good.”

“Then I want one too. Rick, you want another?”

“I’ll take one.”

I made them and passed the cups across.

“Thanks, Mandi,” she said. “Later I wanna talk about your intro. Just a quick thing.”

“Talk to me after,” I answered, neutral.



She waved and floated off into the crowd.

Rick finished his juice, lingered for another minute, then left too.

The crowds grew.

I took orders, smiled, wiped the counter, made change.

On my break, I met Jo near the production base and told her about Rick's request.

She gave me the kind of best-friend smile that understands everything you're not saying.

"About 'Colder Weather'— we can slide it in before your last song," she said. "We stretch the slot a little. Easy."

"If it works, perfect. If not, it's okay."

"I'll make it work," she said, already texting the stage team.

I went back to the booth.

Later, Rick showed up again.

People loop around festivals all day, so it's normal to run into the same faces.

Still, it felt like he'd come over just to say hi.

Or maybe that's just what I wanted to believe.

My brain: *Mandi, what is happening with you?*

I broke the silence.

"Have you tried the salted caramel pie yet? It's part of the



festival menu.”

“Not yet.”

“You’ll like it. Promise.”

“Then I’ll take one,” he said, and asked for it to-go in a box.





He stayed a second longer.

“You look good today,” he said.

“Better than yesterday.”

“I’m sure you’re gonna kill it tomorrow,” he added. Then he left.

The day sped by.

When night settled in, Stage B started running short, upbeat sets — local bands, cover songs, family vibe. The booth finally slowed; Nate went to grab more cups and sugar.

I breathed.

Really breathed.

I took a second to actually look at the square — how pretty it was. String lights overhead, kids running with balloons, people laughing.

Right in front of us, I spotted Rick leaning against a railing, eating the pie — definitely cold by now.

He found me in the crowd and lifted the little box like he was saying, *approved*.

I gave him a thumbs-up and smiled.

A moment later, Scarlett appeared again — now wearing an “Stage Access” badge around her neck. She wasn’t on staff, but someone had clearly handed her that pass.

She slipped into the tech area, leaned in close to one of the sound guys, and talked quietly.



I couldn't hear a word — but I could feel something being... adjusted.

Tweaked.

You know when the energy just shifts? That.

She came over later, all fake-rushed and sugar-sweet.

“Mandi, I was thinking — tomorrow, before your first song, I could ask you something quick. Like, ‘What does



Willow Creek mean to you?’ One sentence, then you start.”

I swallowed the discomfort. I didn’t want to be interviewed onstage. But it was the festival, and I wasn’t about to start a war before my set.

“Okay. One sentence. Short.”

“I promise it’ll be quick,” she said, smiling. “It’ll look beautiful.”

She left the same way she always does — sure of herself.

And I was left wondering if I’d just agreed to the wrong thing.

Later, my phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number:

UPDATE — STAGE B (SATURDAY)

Schedule change confirmed.
Your performance has been moved to 4:00 p.m.
Evening slots prioritized for guest attractions.

I read it three times.

My show had been bumped from prime-time evening to late afternoon.
That in-between hour — people still arriving, the stage barely warmed up.

I sent Jo a screenshot:

“New time: 4 p.m. You knew about this?”



She answered almost instantly:

“No. I’m checking now. Meet me at base.”

I told Nate and he let me slip away for a few minutes.

On the way, I saw Scarlett again, walking along the side of Stage B, talking to the same sound guy as before.

She noticed me noticing.
Gave me a quick little smile.
Kept walking.

I got to production base.

Jo had the tablet open, schedule grid glowing on the screen.





She frowned, swiped, compared two versions.

“This was changed outside our workflow,” she said, her voice going flat. “This didn’t come from the team.”

“Can we move it back?” I asked.

She took a breath, thinking, and the tablet refreshed like someone else was editing in real time.

“Someone’s forcing this,” Jo said, lifting her eyes to mine. “And we’re gonna find out who.”

Saturday at 4 p.m., I’d be playing for a crowd still finding its seats — calling people in instead of riding the peak.

If they messed with my time slot to make me smaller, they miscalculated.

Because now?

I wanted this more than ever.

Chapter 8

The Afternoon That Turned Into Night





Saturday — Stage B, Peach Festival

Yeah. They really did it.

My time slot was moved to the middle of the afternoon.

I was still upset — that kind of quiet, heavy upset that sits in your chest.

It was obvious someone wanted me pushed to the side — far from the prime crowd, far from the hour when the whole town would be watching.

Even so, the square was already packed: families settling onto the grass, people dragging chairs, friends arriving with colorful drinks, kids bouncing from tent to tent. All of Willow Creek seemed to have stepped outside today.

Nate rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Deep breath, June. Today’s your day.”

I nodded. I wanted to believe him.

Scarlett showed up soon after — hair pulled back, perfect makeup, badge swinging from her neck.

“Lucky you, playing first,” she said while adjusting a mic, like she had to get ahead of the narrative.



This wasn't luck.
It was manipulation.
And it was meant to drag my audience numbers down.

I swallowed it and answered,

"Lucky to have people in Willow Creek who support me.
Feels like playing a home game."

And while I said it, something shifted.

My frustration about the schedule melted into something warm.



Even in the late afternoon, the square was filling fast — people stopping, people arriving, people calling others over.

It felt like they were here *for me*.

Like the whole town was wrapping around me.

Rick was there.

Leaning against the railing, hat on.

Our eyes met — just long enough to replay last night's conversation.

He stepped closer.

“That Zac Brown song... it's happening?”

“Depends,” I teased. “You singing along?”

“I will... just afraid I'll scare people away,” he laughed.

My mom and dad were also there, near the Spur booth, talking to Nate.

My whole body steadied just seeing them.

When they're nearby, it's like my bones and my heart fall into alignment.

Love and support feel real — like you could wrap yourself in them on a cold night.



It was almost four when the sound tech gave the thumbs-up.

My turn.

The announcer stepped onstage, wearing the grin of someone who'd rehearsed.



“Folks, exciting news! All performances today will be streamed live on Scarlett Hayes’ channel! And they’ll stay saved there afterward!”





The crowd cheered.
Her badge caught the light like it was part of the script.

Scarlett grabbed the mic.

“Mandi, real quick before you start — what does Willow Creek mean to you?”

We’d agreed to the question, but my stomach still flipped.

“It means home,” I said. “People who know each other, help each other, and make this town feel one-of-a-kind. I was born and raised here, and I’m grateful for it.”

“That’s beautiful.” She smiled at the camera and pivoted. “Our town is special. It always finds a way to rebuild — even after tragedies... or bad harvest seasons. Our people always rise again.”

My stomach snapped tight.
Tragedies.

The tower.
She’d let that shadow crawl right into the middle of the afternoon.

She knew exactly what she was doing — a soft jab, disguised as sentiment.

Still, I breathed deep and stood steady.
That’s what she wanted: to rattle me.

“And nothing better to kick off this afternoon than an incredible talent from our hometown. Everyone, give it up for... Mandi June!”

I stepped forward, adjusted the strap on my guitar,



signaled the tech —
and went straight into Stronger by Kelly Clarkson.
My version. Countryed up. I'd been doing it for years, and
no matter the stage, it always woke a crowd.

The first chords came out sharp and intentional.

People recognized it instantly.

When the chorus hit, I barely had to sing.

The lights shifted.

And the festival —
my festival —
turned into one giant, unexpected choir:

**“What doesn’t kill you makes you
stronger, stronger
Just me, myself, and I
What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger
Stand a little taller
Doesn’t mean I’m lonely when I’m
alone...”**



It was electricity — joy and release and pride and freedom
all tangled together.
For those minutes, the festival felt like mine.

Every verse brought more faces smiling, more people
jumping, more phones pointed up at the stage.
The band's sound mixed with the wind and for a second,
Willow Creek really did feel like the center of the world.



Between songs, Jo appeared behind the rigging and waved, making quick gestures only I could understand.

She pointed at Scarlett.
Then at the production tablet.
Then gave me a full thumbs-down.





I got it instantly.

Confirmed:

The schedule change had come directly from Scarlett's request.

I kept playing like nothing happened.

Another song. Another wave of cheering — people reacting like they'd been waiting months for this exact moment.

When I started *You're Still the One*, the mood softened. Couples swayed. The whole square breathed slower.

And while I was singing, I caught it:

Scarlett stepping up to Rick, leaning in to say something against his ear, her fingers barely brushing his arm.





He laughed.

He laughed!! 😬

I pulled myself back into the chorus like nothing happened, but Jo saw it — and her expression turned to stone.

Next song was mine to choose.

I glanced at Rick before speaking into the mic.

“This next one was a request.”





And I started *Colder Weather* by Zac Brown Band.

The crowd settled.
The air eased.

I sang slowly — letting the lyrics carry the things I didn't know how to say out loud.

When it ended, silence bloomed before the applause.

Rick stepped toward the side of the stage, slipped me a folded piece of paper, and disappeared back into the crowd.

I opened it between sips of water:

“You were incredible. Thanks for playing it. Seriously — you're gonna blow up. Charts soon.”





I smiled. Tucked it into my pocket.
Simple, but it felt like something more.

I finished the set, thanked the crowd, and stepped
offstage.

The light had softened.
Another band was tuning their instruments.

I grabbed my phone, opened my socials — still smiling the
smile of someone who'd won the day.

Notifications everywhere.
Beautiful messages.
“I love you!”
“Perfect voice!”
“You crushed it!”

And then one comment froze me:

“Everybody remembers the tower.”





Ice dropped into my stomach.

Suddenly it was clear — this wasn't just about music.

It was about what people wanted to do with my story.
Stir what still hurt.
Dig up what never healed.

Jo appeared beside me, serious:

“We need to talk about Rick and Scarlett. I saw.”

I lifted my eyes — found them both in the crowd.
Rick, distracted.
Scarlett laughing with someone from the production team,
like nothing had happened.

It wasn't a coincidence.

Now I knew exactly who had tried to sabotage my
showtime.

And apparently... not just for clout or attention —
but for something personal.
Very personal.

On my screen: *Everybody remembers the tower.*

Across the square: Scarlett and Rick laughing.

And me, standing in the middle of the noise, realizing the
night in Willow Creek was far from over —
and nothing from here on out would be simple.

Chapter 9

The Night Speaks Softly





Saturday — late afternoon into night

My set was over, but the sound of the festival was still buzzing under my skin.

In the end, getting pushed into the late-afternoon slot hadn't hurt me — not at all.
If anything, it had done the opposite.



Crowd: "Mandi June!"

Mandi (thought): "That didn't hurt me at all."



The crowd had packed into the lawn in front of Stage B, and because it was after four, I still caught the families, the kids, the teens with phones raised high and energy to burn.

People dancing.
Laughing.
Filming.
Posting.

Within minutes, videos were everywhere. My name was climbing, views rising — and, of course, so were the views on Scarlett’s livestream channel.

What was meant to stall me had somehow fueled both of us.

Willow Creek was buzzing.

I stayed at the festival after my show. People hugged me, asked for photos, cheered me on. I saw old classmates, chatted with the folks from the market, then sat with my parents to eat buffalo-style wings and extra-tender ribs drenched in BBQ sauce at one of the wooden tables.



For a few minutes, I forgot everything else.

But between laughs, my mind kept circling the same unsolved list:

- Scarlett's dig before my set.
- The time-slot switch.
- The comment about the tower in the livestream chat.



The more I tried to connect the dots, the less they seemed to belong to the same puzzle.

I didn't catch Jo that night — she was everywhere at once, juggling tech cues and production content. But every time she passed with the tablet in her hand, I wanted to wave her over and say: *Something's wrong. I can feel it.*



The festival kept glowing — lights flickering, music blasting from the main stage.

And that's when I saw Rick.

He was on the opposite side of the square, leaning against a wooden post, talking to a friend. Every now and then he glanced in my direction — the kind of half-attempt at not being obvious that fails completely.





I pretended not to notice.
But I noticed.
And so did he.

We could both feel something happening.
Nothing spoken — just a quiet connection that felt
confusing, delicate... and maybe dangerous.

Because underneath it all:

He was Jay's younger brother.
And I was the daughter of the man the town blamed for
Jay's death.

We never talked about it.
But we lived with it.

There was an invisible wall between us — and every look
felt like we were trying to see if we could cross it.

I spent the rest of the night like that: acting normal,
smiling, greeting people — while a small part of me stayed
tethered to whatever it was that kept pulling my attention
back to him.

Meanwhile, Scarlett moved through the festival like she
owned it.
Hair down, smile polished, phone always up.
She knew exactly where the cameras were, who was taking
photos, and what to record to look effortlessly candid.

Every so often, she'd pass near Rick, toss him a comment
with a bright little smile, and he — polite as always —
would answer.

She'd laugh too loud, lean her shoulder in just a bit, say
something close to his ear.



And I pretended not to see it.
Again.

Jo saw, though — her eyes cutting through the crowd
toward me with a message:
She's playing a game.



The night rolled on.
The main stage pulsed with another band, lights spinning,
people dancing.

Rick and I crossed paths again near the food booths.
He smiled — that shy, small smile — and I smiled back.

We didn't say anything.
But the silence between us felt fuller than anything we



could've said out loud.

Later, when the crowds finally started thinning, I spotted Scarlett again.

She was near the parking area — talking to Rick.

She was far enough that I couldn't hear, but I saw her flip her hair, laugh, and say something that made him look down, embarrassed.





I read her lips:

“Heading out alone?”

He answered, too low for me to catch. I stepped a little closer, unseen, and caught the rest:

“Well, my team already left... I was gonna call an Uber, but if it’s not a bother, mind giving me a ride? It’s on your way, I promise I won’t steal the wheel.”

He hesitated.

I saw it.

But she knew how to ask — light, sweet, impossible to refuse.

Rick nodded, trying to look casual.

“Yeah, I can take you.”

They started walking toward his truck.

Scarlett walked beside him... but right before leaving the square, she turned back.

Her eyes met mine.

And then came the laugh — soft, sharp, triumphant.

Rick didn’t see it.
But I did.

I stood there, the noise of the band drowning out a feeling I didn’t even have a name for: anger, jealousy, or just that fear of losing something that technically isn’t yours at all.

“It shouldn’t mean anything... but what if it does?”



The festival stayed bright and loud.

But for me, the night dimmed a little.

Scarlett climbed into Rick’s truck.

The red glow of the taillights stretched across the road out of the festival.

And I stayed there — still, trying to convince my heart it meant nothing...

while knowing, deep down, that it meant everything.

Chapter 10

Sunday, Silence, and Noise





I slept like a rock.

After a Saturday that felt like three stacked on top of each other, my body shut down and my mind finally took a vacation for a few hours.

When I woke up, the sun was already slicing through the curtains and stretching across my bedroom floor. The clock on my nightstand blinked something after ten.

“About time, Sleeping Beauty,” I heard without really hearing.





Banjo was at the foot of my bed, staring at me with a look that said *finally*.
He “smiled”—or at least that’s how I interpreted it.
We communicate in our own language. Sometimes it feels like he’s part human.

And before the first sip of water, before any sensible thought, the picture hit me:

Scarlett turning back at the edge of the festival, smirking, then climbing into Rick’s truck.

It cut through my Sunday like a silent lightning bolt.

Jealousy? Of what, exactly?

Maybe of what I wished had happened... but didn’t.

I went downstairs.

Mom was reaching for mugs, Dad cutting fruit, and the radio played its usual Sunday-morning rotation of ‘80s and ‘90s country — the soundtrack of my entire childhood.

“Sleep well?” Mom asked, smiling that smile that always seems to know the answers.

“I passed out,” I said, grabbing a mug.



“It was beautiful, Mandi,” Dad said. “People wouldn’t stop talking about your show.”

I sat with them.

We laughed about festival stories, remembered folks we hadn’t seen in years, repeated all the compliments I’d heard.

For a few minutes, it was a parallel universe: no drama, no



schemes, no tension.
Just home.

My phone lit up on the table.

Reality lit up with it.

Post-festival talk had swallowed the whole town.

I opened my socials: clips of my set everywhere, reels with my songs, people tagging me, a flood of new followers.

And, inevitably, the other side of the coin: Scarlett's channel rising right along with mine — videos of her introducing me, clips of her “tragedies...” moment, glossy posed photos with perfect lighting.

It felt like she and her team were rewriting the entire night in whatever version worked best for them.

And then came *the* video.

Someone — definitely her team — had filmed the moment in the parking lot: her walking beside Rick, that sideways smile, and the caption in giant letters:

**“Willow Creek’s new five-star couple??
What do YOU think?”**



The algorithm did the rest.

In minutes, a tidal wave of comments:
“ship,” “childhood friends,” “my new OTP,” “noooo
guys,” “I saw this coming.”

Noise.

So much noise.



Noise loud enough to drown you without making a sound.

I stayed home all morning, texting with Jo.

We tried to stitch together what we knew:

- Scarlett’s jab before my show
- The time-slot switch
- The livestream from her channel
- The “car ride” video...

Everything pointed in the same direction.

— *The goal is to push you out of the center, Jo wrote. And boost her numbers using your name.*

— *Why?* I typed. *Scared of losing her hometown-darling crown?*

— *Maybe, she wrote back. Or maybe it’s just what she does. She turns everything into a stage.*

After a while, Jo video-called me.

“No ‘hi’ today,” she said. “I wanna see your face.”

“I look half-asleep.”

“You look like someone who carried an entire show. Big difference.”

I laughed despite myself.

She took a breath and cut straight to it:

“Her moves on Rick were real, you know. During your set, she glued herself to him. Whispering, leaning in, too many giggles for someone with ‘zero intentions.’”



I didn't say anything.

"You never admitted it, and I never pushed," she added gently, "but it's obvious. You've got a crush on Rick."

"I... I don't know when it started," I said. "I just know I





can't stop thinking about him lately.”

“The ride was probably just courtesy,” Jo said. “Those two don't match.”

“But she's gorgeous,” I answered quietly. “And people love her. That's just true.”

“Charisma isn't character,” she shot back. “And Rick notices that stuff. Can you maybe trust yourself a little more?”

“I'll try,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Love you, okay?”

“Love you too.”

We hung up.

It was lunchtime.

We ate in the kitchen — light conversation, easy laughter, Banjo sprawled under the chairs like he was part of it.

After we finished, Dad grabbed his phone, opened the local news, and... his face shifted.

I knew that face.

Worry.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he tried, shutting the page — but I'd already seen the headline:



“Local businesses migrate ad budgets to digital partnerships; influencers dominate the spotlight.”

Below it: Scarlett’s photo onstage, mic in hand.

“The radio will adapt,” he said, moving on too quickly. “It always adapts.”





I wanted to believe him.

I really did.

Later, I tried to write.

I picked up my guitar and notebook, scribbled two lines, erased both.

Too much noise in my head.

Then my phone buzzed.

Rick.

“Thanks for yesterday.”

My heart jumped.

Thanks for what?

The song?

The show?

Our small moments?

Or something he didn't know how to say?

I breathed and typed:

“It was a great day. Have a good Sunday.”

His answer came so fast it felt pre-written:

**“Listening to Colder Weather right now.
Thinking about your show.
Thinking about you.”**



My chest lit up.

My heart jumped so hard Banjo lifted his head again like,
you good?

And then — just as quickly — a window slammed shut
inside me:

Scarlett's laugh.



The truck door closing.
The red taillights driving off.

I swallowed the joy whole.

I sent nothing but a 😊 and a 👍 .

Polite.

Bare.

Unmistakably distant.

I couldn't hide the discomfort.

And I stood there thinking that what hurt most wasn't
what had actually happened —
but what everyone was *saying* had happened.





The assumptions.
The versions.
The whispers.

...

Last night during my show, Jo had been pacing — that restless detective energy she’s had since we were little.

During a break between songs, she struck up a casual chat with one of the tech guys and mentioned — in that “just making conversation” tone — that she’d found some corrupted files from past festivals.

The tech shrugged like it was no big deal and said:

“Yeah, for that stuff, there’s this guy in Dallas... Mark. He recovers anything — photos, videos, whatever looks lost.”

Jo saved the name and the contact right away.

As soon as she had a minute alone, she sent him the corrupted file she’d found — the one that seemed to show the radio tower on the night of the accident.

Mark replied the next morning, in an audio:

“No promises, okay? This kind of recovery is a lottery. But I’ll try.”

And Jo — steady as ever — answered:

“Okay. Just tell me if there’s even a chance.”



A moment later:

“I’ll run a texture-recomposition tool. First attempt only — just a test. I’ll send a preview.”

But she didn’t tell me that part.

Not then.

I only found out much later.

She didn’t want to raise my hopes.

Back home, the radio was playing some old ‘90s hit.
Banjo slept beside the couch.
And the sounds of the town drifted in through the window like a faraway hum.

I stayed there, quiet, trying and failing to understand whatever it was beating inside my chest.

Chapter 11

The Edit





Monday morning.

I woke up early and headed straight to the Rusty Spur.

After a weekend that felt like an entire month, the place looked like a post-festival battlefield: chairs crooked, posters folded and leaning against walls, jars out of line, half the stock displaced like it had survived a tiny tornado.

Nate was already there, rag over his shoulder, wearing the expression of someone who hadn't stopped moving since Saturday.

“Morning, superstar,” he said — no sarcasm, just pride. “Ready to resurrect this place?”





“Let’s do it,” I replied, forcing a kind of energy I definitely did not feel yet.

The first hour was pure cleanup: chairs back in formation, napkin holders aligned, mugs counted, inventory updated. Slowly, customers filtered in — and with them, the comments:

“Saw you onstage.”

“You lit it up, sweetheart.”

“Willow Creek is proud of you.”

I served, smiled, nodded... and felt this warm little coal glowing in my chest, like Saturday had left a light on inside me.





I was gathering a tray when the door chimed — and Jo walked in with her laptop.

“Look who it is,” I said. “Double?”

“Double,” she answered, climbing onto a stool and flipping open the laptop, the bluish glow washing her face.

“You notice how Scarlett posts?” Jo asked, pretending to sound casual and failing completely. “Everything turns into the perfect cut for her feed. Local partnerships, follower boosts, the whole town talking... she’s editing the festival like it was hers alone.”





“I noticed,” I said. “She’s good at it.”

Jo smirked — the kind of smirk that meant *‘good at it’ isn’t the whole truth and we both know it.*

Then the bell rang again.

Rick.

Light shirt, worn hat, steady eyes — the same as always, but with a quiet confidence that hadn’t been there a few days ago.





He nodded at me from across the room, smiling, then walked to the counter — but turned to Jo first.

“Hey, Jo. Mind if I sit?”

“Go ahead,” she said, sliding a stool out for him.

Rick took off his hat, resting it on his knees. He had that thoughtful posture he gets when he organizes his words before speaking.

“The festival was really great,” he said sincerely. “Mandi crushed her set. Actually, you both killed it — production was tight. Everything worked. Congrats.”

Jo smiled — genuinely — the kind of smile you give when the compliment hits home.

They talked for a few minutes about tech stuff: sound checks, stage timing, cue lists — all the invisible things that held my show together without me ever noticing.

And then Jo, with the most suspicious casualness imaginable, dropped:

“So... the video. You and Scarlett leaving together at the end. You’ve seen how that’s blowing up, right?”

She said it almost jokingly... almost.

Rick lowered his eyes — embarrassed, but not guilty. The embarrassment of someone who never asked for a single spotlight that suddenly decided to land on him.

“It was just a ride,” he said, rubbing the rim of his cup. “She said she was alone, was gonna call a car. I’ve known her since we were little. I wasn’t gonna leave her there.”



It was just a ride.

Sure. And Willow Creek will still rewrite it.

He sighed.

“Didn’t think it’d become a whole story.”

“Willow Creek turns every sentence into a soap opera,” Jo said. “You know how it is.”

He nodded, leaning his elbows on the counter.

“I know.”

He stayed quiet for a second. Then added something heavier:

“And... there’s someone else in my head. All the time.”



He didn't say a name.

He didn't have to.

His eyes flicked — just once, almost too quick to notice — in my direction.

Jo saw.
I felt it.

We said nothing.

“I see,” Jo replied simply — with the tone of someone storing that information in a very important mental file.

Rick finished his coffee, left the cash on the counter, put



his hat back on, and stood.

Before leaving, he turned to me:

“Have a good day, Mandi.”

“You too,” I said.

The bell jingled when the door closed behind him — and somehow took one heartbeat longer than usual to settle.

Jo stayed quiet, fiddling with her laptop, like she was trying to assemble a puzzle with moving pieces.

Among the files open on her screen, she pulled a folded sheet from her bag — an enlarged print of the preview image the tech had sent.

The corrupted photo.

She studied it for several seconds, trying to decode it: two silhouettes, a metallic glint in someone’s hand... something important, but still blurry, like a memory you almost remember.

She folded it carefully and slid it between notebook pages — the place where she kept things that were not allowed to fade.

The Spur slipped back into its usual rhythm: a kid asking for a cookie, the espresso machine hissing, Nate muttering about a supplier.

Then a notification blinked on Jo’s laptop.

Mark.



“Starting another reconstruction attempt. New AI model, beta phase. It can fill in missing areas.”

Jo stared at the message for a few seconds.

Her expression changed — not fear, not excitement, but that sharp, rare look she gets when she knows something is shifting.





She didn't know *what* truth was coming.

Only that something was.

And truths — even the buried ones —
always find their way back.

Chapter 12

Front Porch Rumors





The Willow Gazette found me before Tuesday morning even bothered to begin.

The printed edition — the classic one, the paper half the town still reads mostly for the social column — was folded on our doormat.

The headline, oversized and taunting, practically winked at me:

“Willow Creek’s New Couple?”

“This isn’t a photo.
It’s a script.”



The photo underneath was too perfect to be real —
because it wasn't.

An AI-generated image of Rick and Scarlett standing side
by side, caught in that fake “accidental” moment.
Matching smiles, festival lights blurred behind them like a
movie still.

It wasn't just a picture.

It was a narrative.
A crafted story with one goal: engagement.



A lie that didn't mention me directly... but still hit me dead center.

Hours later, the online version was everywhere — pushed by the Gazette's social feeds, gaining traction in the comments.

People split into teams: cheering, speculating, shipping — as if real life were some weekend reality show you watched with popcorn.

And of course, Scarlett stepped in with her perfectly rehearsed act: a short story, golden filter, voice sweet and pretend-shy.

“Guys, this is sooo embarrassing... I didn't expect this! It's not what it looks like 😊”

Within an hour, her video was everywhere.

She looked flustered, but I knew the script by heart.

She sent the photo in.

She wanted to measure reactions.

She wanted to measure *him* — Rick.

...

After lunch, I sat on the porch with Dad.

He had the paper open, glasses slipping down his nose.

“Mandi,” he said without looking up, “your friends are dating?”

It took me a full second to catch up.



“What friends?”

“Rick and Scarlett.” He flipped a page. “It’s in the paper.”

I laughed softly, without humor.

“No, Dad. It’s a lie. They’re feeding it for clicks. Likes. Comments.”

“And the paper runs with that?” he asked.

“Everyone runs with it. Like culture doesn’t have a filter. Half the time it isn’t even ethical... or kind.”

He lifted his face, surprised by my tone.

“You talk like someone who got hurt by this.”

“Because I did,” I said without thinking.

He folded the newspaper slowly.

“A lie repeated by enough people, for long enough, becomes truth,” he said. “And that’s dangerous.”



I looked at him.

And I knew he wasn't talking about Rick and Scarlett.

He was talking about the tower.
About himself.

I nodded, feeling the weight of an old ache.

Mom stepped out with two cups of tea.

“Not every injustice needs an immediate defense,” she said, handing me one. “Sometimes time answers for us.”

We sat in silence, staring at the backyard like the afternoon



had paused there.

I folded that conversation and tucked it into my heart — like a note you save for when the noise returns.

...

Later, upstairs, Banjo curled at my feet while I scrolled through comments on the Gazette post.

“MY SHIP!”

“I knew it!”

“She’s Texas Barbie!”

“Rick is such a gentleman!”

The words went down like sand.

Jo had already told me everything from her talk with Rick at the Spur:

It was just a ride.

He had someone else on his mind — someone he couldn’t stop thinking about.

But it still stung.

Because Dad was right:

A lie, repeated loudly enough, eventually becomes the only version people hear.

...

That evening, I met Jo at Frosty Spring.

The place smelled like strawberry syrup and nostalgia — neon sign flickering, a Tuesday hush in the air.



I ordered cookies & cream.
She got pistachio.

“You saw the headline?” I asked.

“Oh, I saw,” she said, rolling her eyes. “AI with a telenovela stamp.”

“Whoever controls the story controls the version.”





“Then publish *yours*,” she said. “Talk about your music, your festival. Show what actually happened.”

Headlights flashed against the storefront.

Rick.

He parked, took a breath, got out, and walked over to us.

“Hey,” he said, awkward in that endearing way, like the “hey” was actually an apology. “Saw you two here. Mind if I sit?”

“You can,” Jo said, moving over on the wooden bench.

He hovered for a second, unsure if he should.

“How are you two? Your parents good? Nice night. Ice cream’s always the right answer.”

“We’re fine,” I said.

He smiled — small, genuine.

A short silence.

Then the unavoidable:

“About the newspaper...”

“Rick,” I cut in gently, “you don’t owe us any explanation.”

He nodded, staring at the floor.

“But there *is* something you should do,” I added. “Don’t let your name get dragged around in a lie.”

“I know,” he said quietly.



“Then do something. Say something. Post. Speak up. Don’t let people tell your story for you.”

He lifted his eyes — part wounded, part grateful.

“I’m not good at that stuff.”

“Learn,” I said with a small smile.

He nodded.

Ordered a vanilla cone.

Said goodbye — with the look of someone who’d already



made up his mind.

“He’s gonna do the right thing,” Jo said, stirring her pistachio until it was practically soup.

“I hope so.”

...

I was already home when Scarlett posted her “thank you” video.

She spoke straight to the camera, voice syrupy, framing flawless.

“Guys... about that post everyone’s talking about. I wanna thank Rick for the ride on Saturday. Such a gentleman. My team disappeared for a few minutes and he saved me. Thank you sooo much 💕
And please, no hate. Let’s choose kindness, okay?”

The comments were exactly what she wanted:

“GORGEOUS!”

“I ship it SO much!”

“Couple of the year!”

“Scarlett + Rick = perfect match.”

But at the top — pinned above all the noise:

Rick Carter:

“Anytime. Doesn’t hurt to give a ride to a FRIEND.”



The capital letters hit like a clean, sharp period at the end of a long sentence.

And for the first time since Saturday, something inside me loosened — that quiet relief that comes when someone finally says what you weren't allowed to.

...

Back in my room, I opened my notebook.

Wrote at the top: *Waitin' on Love*.

The words came easier this time:



*I know you're there, I am believin',
I'm waitin' for that sunset to give me a reason,
My hopes are up, and you'll find me someday.*



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify

Banjo padded over, nudged the page, and flopped down right on top of the lyrics.

“You can stay there,” I whispered. “It’s getting good.”

My phone was face-up on the table, the screen dark.

The black screen reflected my face back at me, and in my mind, the word **FRIEND** echoed — bold, uppercase, meant for me even though it wasn’t said to me.

No notifications.

Just quiet.

And in that quiet, something inside me started to settle — slowly, carefully — like my heart was finally trying to learn the rhythm of waiting.



Chapter 13

Under the Static





At the Carter Ranch, the day starts early.

Six a.m., the sun barely stretching behind the silo, the kitchen radio mumbling the weather like it was still waking up. Evelyn Carter — Rick’s mom — was cutting melon into perfect cubes, lining up breakfast. Sam Carter sat with his coffee and the printed edition of the Gazette, just like he had every morning for the last thirty years.

Rick slid into his seat, hair messy, poured milk and a splash of coffee into his worn Dallas Cowboys mug, grabbed a piece of bread. Everything was the same as always.





Until it wasn't.

He cleared his throat.

“So... Mandi June's show,” he said slowly, like he was asking permission to say the name. “It was big. She's got something that holds people. She's talented. Pretty. Feels ready. Did you guys see it?”

There was a shine in his eyes when he said “Mandi” — a shine his parents caught instantly.

Sam didn't move, but his eyes cut toward his son. Evelyn set the knife down a little too gently — the blade touching the cutting board with a small, sharp click. The air tightened.

“Thomas never apologized,” she said, as if the comment had been about the tower from the very beginning.





Sam added, blunt, ignoring the compliment entirely, “And that’s not the behavior of an honorable man.”

Anything connected to the June family weighed heavy in that kitchen.

Rick’s face shifted — he loved his parents, and he had loved his brother.

Even so, he tried to build a bridge:

“Mom... Dad... the June family has always treated me right. Treated everyone right. It’s been years. Maybe we could... turn the page.” He drew a breath. “What people say about Thomas was never proven. It was rumor the town turned into truth.”

He softened his tone.

“That night was late. No one was around. We don’t know why Jay went up the tower. The area was restricted. He went where he shouldn’t have.” His voice caught when he said his brother’s name. “We carry the pain every day. But blaming Thomas doesn’t bring Jay back.”

Evelyn wiped her hands on a dish towel — slowly, much longer than necessary.

“Why bring this up now?” she asked. “Rick, why talk about that girl first thing in the morning? We’ve got nothing against her, but all of this brings too much pain. Leave that girl alone. Talking about her or her family is talking about that radio station. And the tower.”

Rick stared down at his plate.

No answer came.

Sam had already figured out what the gleam in his son’s



eyes meant: feeling.

“Son, don’t get close,” he said — not scolding, just afraid.
“It’ll only bring more hurt. For you. For us.”

Rick nodded with his eyes instead of words.
His appetite disappeared.

He excused himself with the kind of politeness people use when they’ve lost the argument before speaking, and left the table.

The hallway felt like a long, empty road.





...

Later, he drove into town for work off the ranch — the bank, dropping off eggs and cheese orders, two conversations about rainfall and corn prices that he didn't remember afterward.

He didn't notice someone had seen him from across the street — someone waiting for the right moment.

When he returned to his truck, he spotted Scarlett reflected in the window of a shop, pretending to look at a dress.

“Rick!” Her smile was already loaded. “What a lucky coincidence. I love this dress. Do you like it?”

“I do,” he said out of politeness, not even glancing at the window.

She didn't bother with small talk.

“Can I steal you today?” she asked, smoothing a strand of hair that didn't need fixing. “I had such a great idea for my channel — and especially for the Carter Ranch.”

She launched into her pitch:

“A day on the farm — stories, a little live stream, you showing how everything works, the animals, the land. It's beautiful. It's real. It brings visibility. Helps sales. It's a partnership waiting to happen.”

Rick thought about saying no.

His stomach tightened, like he was betraying someone without having the right to.



He thought of his parents. Of the business potential.
Of that “don’t get close” from breakfast.

His head made calculations. His heart hissed.





...

Back at the ranch, the porch light hit just right — the kind of light that looked designed for filming.

Scarlett lifted her phone.

“Hi, guys! Look where I am today — the Carter Ranch! Here the day starts before the sun and ends full of stories. Come see a little piece of this place with me!”

Evelyn appeared in the frame — pretty, steady.

“Behind every strong family, there’s a special mom,” Scarlett cooed. “Mrs. Carter, your home is beautiful.”





Evelyn blushed, embarrassed but flattered.

Sam wandered over, curious.

“Mr. Carter, tell us about the history of this land...” she asked sweetly.

Sam — a man of short sentences — actually answered. Two, three simple responses. He was polite, reserved, allergic to attention... but he even smiled.

Scarlett guided the whole thing like she’d rehearsed.

Rick stepped away for a few minutes. When he came back, he saw her between his parents — camera snapping, a boomerang looping, all three laughing.

“Don’t post that,” he said gently, trying to catch something that had already slipped away. “Ask them first.”

Scarlett grinned.

“Oh, it’s already up, cowboy. They loved it. They approved it. Don’t worry.”





Something inside Rick twisted.

That wasn't their world.

But he tried to act natural — if his parents were comfortable, then “everything was fine.”

He told himself that until it almost sounded true.

After filming and taking countless pictures, Scarlett said goodbye to his parents like she'd been part of the family forever.

On the drive back to town, she talked and laughed, touching his arm whenever she found an excuse.

He kept his responses short — polite, steady — like he didn't notice the intention.
Or chose not to.

Back at the ranch, Evelyn and Sam were lighter than usual.

They talked about the day, about the “generous young woman,” about Scarlett's “charm and beauty.”

At dinner, Evelyn said — half-joking, half not:

“Scarlett's a good girl. I wouldn't mind having her as a daughter-in-law.”

She laughed softly, but there was truth laced in it.

Rick dodged the comment, smiled awkwardly, didn't say yes or no, and went upstairs.



He didn't know what to think.

...

I saw their entire day through Scarlett's eyes — and through her filters.





She tagged the Carter Ranch in thirty minutes of curated content.

Evelyn glowing in a heart-eye story.

Sam laughing naturally.

Rick... different.

I couldn't explain how — just different.

At the Spur, the day felt wrong on my skin.

I messed up orders, got change wrong, nearly dropped a glass.

Nate caught on instantly.

“Mandi, more focus, please. A customer already said their order came out wrong.”

“Sorry,” I said. I tried to smile, but it felt crooked.

Near the end of my shift, he pulled me aside.

“Mandi, sweetheart... what's going on? You look sad. You look tired.”

“Just a bad night,” I said. “I didn't sleep much. I'm sorry about today.”

He hugged me — instinctively, gently.

“Whatever it is, it'll pass. Things always settle, Mandi.”

He kissed my forehead. “Go home early, okay? Get some rest.”

I nodded.

On the walk home, my thoughts refused to quiet.



It hurt.

And the worst part: Scarlett was moving forward... and I wasn't.

...

In his room, Rick stood alone.

He opened the window — the ranch humming with animal sounds, creaking fences, drifting wind.

He turned on the radio; classic country filled the air.



He thought about breakfast, the filming, his parents' smiles, everything he didn't say.





Then it started playing.

“Southern Blue Sky — Mandi June.”



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify

My father added it to the programming every chance he got — proud as always.

The song filled the room.

Rick leaned against the doorframe and replayed Saturday in his mind: the stage, the crowd singing.

He heard “don’t get close” again.

He thought of Scarlett.

He thought of his parents’ joy.

He thought of me.

He tried not to.

He failed.

When the song ended, the radio returned to normal — livestock ads, the county fair reminder, 10% chance of rain.

He picked up his phone, fingers hovering over the screen.



Then he set it down.

...

Later, at home, I opened social media the way you open a window during a storm — hoping it helps, knowing it won't.



A new post from Scarlett:

“Country heart meets real cowboy life
Thank you, Carter family, for opening your home and your hearts...”

Perfect cuts.
Evelyn hugging her.
Sam smiling.
Rick tagged.

I stared at the screen, feeling my heartbeat slip out of rhythm.

The story was being written in real time — fast, loud, curated.

And if I wanted to tell mine,
I would have to learn to speak
over the static.



I won't let this speak for me.



Chapter 14

Storm Signs





The KWCX always smells like burnt coffee and the kind of dust that clings to old tapes. Like a memory you can't scrub out, full of stories that outlived their decade.

This morning the coffeemaker made three different choking sounds before giving up entirely and hissing a final breath of steam — just like my dad at seven a.m.

“Holding on for one more month,” he said, stirring his coffee with a wooden stick from a box of leftover promo supplies from 2022. “If we land two ad spots by Friday, we can pay the light bill without being late again.”





There was a time downtown businesses fought for air time on the station.

Now they film dances with Scarlett, invest in online ads, and their phone numbers show up on screen with glitter effects.

I looked out the studio window just as one of the Carter Ranch trucks rolled by. It wasn't Rick driving, but even so, my stomach jumped and then dropped.

"I can call Pete's Market," I told Dad. "They've always been ours."

"Call him. Tell him I'll honor last year's rate, plus thirty percent off if he books two months."

I picked up the receiver, breathed in, and dialed.

Pete answered in that rushed way he always does. Said he loved the station and sent his greetings to my dad — but his ad budget was tight and this month he was doing online only.

"Maybe next month," he added kindly.





“He sends his greetings.” I said after hanging up. “This month he’s advertising online only.”

Dad forced half a smile.

“That’s okay. Life’s got its ups and downs. We’ll bounce back. I’ve got faith.”

I looked at him and felt that sting of pride buried under the ache — the kind that comes from watching someone you admire fight with the little strength they have left.

My hero.

...

I had the afternoon shift at the Spur, and the day hadn’t even started before I felt wiped.

I love my days there. They’re tiring in a physical, predictable way — but mentally light. It feels like a second home.

Low country music, crossed conversations, mugs clicking gently onto saucers.

Nate greeted me with a chin lift.

“Hey there, superstar.”

“Running on low today,” I said, trying to muster a smile.

“The light’s yours,” he said. “Nobody can turn it off. You shine even in the dark, sweetheart.”



I worked straight through until late afternoon. Clocked out, washed my hands, and headed back to the station. Dad needed help recording a commercial.

The script was for Dawn Pharmacy — “caring for you, just like always.” He asked me to read the tag with a smiling voice. I did.

“That was good,” he said. “You’ve got a gift for speaking clear.”



“I’m grateful for the gift — and for my voice, Dad. But sometimes I feel like I inherited it for nothing.”

He looked straight at me, steady.

“One day the whole country’s gonna hear you. When God gives a voice, He gives it so no one can silence it. Everything has its time, Mandi.”

I nodded, swallowing the knot, and forced a smile.

“Wanna eat that cranberry pie Nate sent over? It’s your



favorite and I'm starving."

"That's practically poetry," he laughed. "That pie of Nate's is the best. Thank him tomorrow for me."

His laughter was small and warm — the kind that shows up rarely and matters every time.

...

I stepped out onto Willow Creek's main street, wandering with no destination.

Window-shopped. Chatted with a couple folks passing by.

Before heading back to the Spur, I called Mom. It was already dark; the streetlights glowing soft. Dad had just gotten home.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He seems okay, sweetheart — with that worried look that insists on living in his face. He seems tired even before dinner. But he's a fighter. He always gets back up, and I know this time won't be different."

"That's right, Mom. We'll figure it out. We always do."

"I know." She paused. "Is there open mic tonight?"

Open mic — two or three songs for anyone willing to get up there.

"There is," I said. "I promised two."

"Then go shine, my girl. You're the pride of this house, the biggest blessing your father and I could've asked for."



My mom has this tenderness you can't explain.
Like a permanent hug.

...

By 8:30 p.m., I was back at the Spur fulfilling my promise.

The warm yellow lights flickered, and the mic squealed like it always did. I sang two songs, wanting to stay longer — but stepped off the stage anyway.



I stood behind the counter rolling napkins, listening to people chat.

“You see Scarlett today?” someone said at the next table.
“She posted with Rick’s mom. So sweet.”

“Oh, Scarlett’s a blessing for this town,” another replied.
“Brings movement, makes things happen.”

Blessing.

I swallowed the word like saltwater.

It’s not that I hate her.

I hate the *way* she does things.



She doesn't measure anything she does to get what she wants.

Nate noticed immediately that I was one frayed thread away from breaking. He tossed the towel onto his shoulder.

"Hey," he murmured. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"That's not what your eyes are saying, Mandi. Take ten outside. Breathe. Come back when you can. It's not even your shift. Go get some air."

So I did.

Out back, the alley behind the Spur smells like old trash, but at least it's quiet.

I leaned against the cool brick, breathed enough to not *look* like I'd been crying.





Then I cried anyway — without even knowing exactly why.

I cried just to unclog everything I'd been swallowing all day.

I wiped my face and went back in.

Sang one more request someone had dropped in the tip jar. Helped shut down the soundboard. Gathered the mics.

It was nearly ten when I got home.

Dad was asleep in the recliner, glasses crooked. Mom was folding laundry.

“I’ll make you some warm oatmeal in five minutes,” she whispered.

“No need, Mom, thanks,” I said. “I’m not hungry.”

Upstairs, Banjo lifted his head, wagged his tail, and dropped it again.

I picked up my guitar — played the two lines of *Waitin’ on Love*, abandoned them.

Started something else. Quit halfway.

Not a night for finished songs.

I opened the window. Warm wind drifted in with dust and the faint smell of storm.

Far off, the radio tower blinked twice.

Like it was trying to talk to me.

I grabbed my phone.



Another story from Scarlett with the Carter family.
Does she post anything *else* now?
Only pictures with *his* family?

My chest tightened for something I wished I could one
day have —
and knew, deep down,
I probably never would.

Chapter 15

Willow Lake





The sun was already slipping down when I grabbed the car keys and headed toward the lake.

Willow Lake sits about ten minutes outside town, down Whispering Pines Road — a stretch of red dirt and gravel that winds past the farms on this side of the county, including the Carter Ranch.

Dust rose behind the car like it was trying to chase me.

The lake is fed by the creek that gave Willow Creek its name.

The place is wide open — a long sweep of grass and one



massive willow tree that looks like it's been standing there since the beginning of time. It's what makes the whole clearing feel like a postcard someone forgot to mail.

I parked near the old gate, still creaking the same way it did when I was little.

The field around me was brushed in gold, the willow swaying slow.

This place settles me. It pulls me back to the ground, makes me breathe differently.

Every time I'm sad or overwhelmed, I end up here.





It's my open-air spa for the soul.

Evening was hovering — not day, not night.

I sat in the grass with my guitar across my lap.
Banjo wandered in lazy circles before flopping beside me.

I opened my notebook. The words for the song I'd been shaping for days suddenly made sense — like they'd been waiting in line inside my chest.

I played soft at first, stumbling over myself until the melody found its place. Then it happened: one line, then another, and then everything clicked.

I sang the chorus under my breath:

*Waitin' on love, livin' for tonight,
Singin' under the sky, it feels just right.
Got my girlfriends around and we're dancing all night,
You'll find me someday, but for now, I'm alright.*



Listen on YouTube



Listen on Spotify

Banjo rested his head on his paws.

When I finished, the silence that settled wasn't empty — it was the kind that completes things.

A quiet happiness warmed me, like the song had always belonged to me and I'd finally opened the right door.



It was ready.

Tires crunched over gravel.

I turned.

Rick's truck rolled to a stop a little ways back.

He climbed out slowly, like he didn't want to disturb the place.

Light shirt, sleeves pushed up, hair a little messy from work.





The last bit of sun hit his face just right, and for a second I wished the world had a slow-motion button.

“Hey,” he said, half-smiling. “Figured it was you.”

“Who else comes out here with a guitar and a dog?” I tried to say lightly.

He laughed.

“Can I join?”

“Yeah.” I nudged the spot next to me.

He sat.

The small sounds of the lake stepped into the silence between us.

“I like it here,” he said. “My dad taught me to swim in this lake.”

“I’ve been coming since I was little. When my head gets heavy, this is the only place that holds me without asking questions.”

He glanced sideways at me.

“And it’s heavy today?”

“Yeah.” I exhaled. “Sometimes it feels like Willow Creek already told all the stories I’m allowed to live.”

Rick dropped his gaze, picked up a pebble, tossed it into the water.

“Mandi... I think we’ve still got a lot of stories left to live



here.”

The word snagged in my chest:

We.

What did he mean by we?

I smiled a shy, clumsy smile and brushed my hair back, not knowing what to do with my hands.

I set the guitar over my knees.

“I finished something just now. Been working on it for days.”

He nodded, quiet.

I played *Waitin’ on Love* from start to finish.





My voice came out steady, the way it does when a song finds its home.

While I sang, he watched — not like someone listening to a performance, but like someone who understands the place the song came from.

When the last chord faded, he drew a breath and looked out at the lake.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. A beat. “Sometimes I think... things could be simpler than we make them.”

His words hit straight through me.

I knew exactly what he meant.
I felt exactly what he was feeling.

He kept going, voice low:

“Mandi, I think the heart has its own reasons... even when it goes against our head. Sometimes it feels like it’s thinking for us.”

We were inches apart.

He lifted a hand and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.





The touch was soft, almost too soft. A warm, fragile electricity grew in the air.

My whole body seemed to know what was coming — goosebumps everywhere.

The space between us shrank until it was all breath and heartbeat.

He leaned in.
I did too.

His eyes met mine like a question.

And then —
his phone rang.

Once.
Twice.

Rick blinked, dazed, and pulled it from his pocket.

He looked at the screen.

“My mom,” he murmured, apologetic.

He answered.

I heard her clearly, even without speakerphone:

“Son, did you stop at the store? The meat for dinner... are you coming? I’m waiting on you.”



The moment broke like someone unplugged the whole scene.

He nodded at me, slid his phone away, and stood.

“Sorry. I...” He trailed off, lost for the right words.

I shook my head, trying to smile.

“Go, Rick.”

He looked at me for a second that felt like a whole minute.



Then he stepped back, turned, and walked toward his truck.

Banjo let out a soft bark, almost like *goodbye*.

The engine started.

He drove off down Whispering Pines, the sound fading around the bend.





I sat again.

Ran my fingers over the strings without really playing —
just enough to hear a ghost of the melody.

The sky had turned copper, leaning into night.

I stared at the lake.
Wind ripples shimmered, trembling on the surface.

The silence after an almost-kiss is deafening.

I recorded a voice memo of the song and saved it:

“Waitin’ on Love.”



Chapter 16

The Angel Carousel





I woke that morning with a kind of longing for something that hadn't even happened. A missing piece I could feel in my body.

My mind went straight back to Willow Lake — every word, every glance, every almost. Especially the *almost* that got interrupted by Rick's ringing phone.

God... how that moment kept replaying.

I got up like I was late for something. Threw on whatever clothes, hair in a messy knot, grabbed my phone before I even had coffee.





Everything looked normal.

Until it didn't.

A post slid onto my screen — a “tribute.”
My entire body went cold.

It was a carousel.

Slide one: JAY CARTER, white letters on a black background.

Then eight photos in a row — Scarlett with Jay at the Second Chance Ranch. Perfect lighting, perfect smiles, hands on rescue dogs, folded blankets, water bowls, soft glances.





Movie stills, practically.

The caption was long — too long.

It read like someone had spent hours cutting and sanding each sentence:

“Today I break a silence out of respect:

Jay loved animals — everyone knows that.

What few saw were the donations he made, the late-night visits, the volunteer work...

He taught me that real love doesn't need a spotlight.

He cared for our abandoned and sick paw-friends with no expectation, just heart.

He told me about his visits, and I admired him even more.

Jay Carter — an angel who went home too soon.”





My stomach flipped.

The slides kept going, whether I wanted to look or not.

Comments were already flooding in:

“Crying at work 💔”

“He was pure light. Thank you, Scarlett.”

“What a beautiful tribute. God bless you, sweetheart.”

“Jay deserves to be remembered like this.”

The like counter jumped:
2,103 → 3,987 → 5,412...

Shares.

Mentions.

Stories with shaking-heart emojis.

The entire town was carrying the post forward like it was a candlelit vigil.

I walked downstairs without looking where I was going.
My mom said something about oatmeal and brown sugar.
I didn't answer.

I sat at the kitchen table with my phone in hand, trying to breathe like a normal person, failing miserably.

Locked the screen.

Unlocked it.

Looked again.

Eight carefully sewn images, designed to hurt in all the right places.



...

Across town, the Carter house was quiet enough to echo.

Rick's mom sat on the edge of the bed, phone in one hand, the other pressed to her chest.

His dad stood behind her, reading the caption slowly.





When he reached “an angel who went home too soon,” he bowed his head.
Pressed the phone to his heart.
Cried silently.

His mother shared the post with a simple line:

“Thank you for remembering with love.”

Rick was in the kitchen.
The post had already climbed to the top of his feed, like the whole town had synchronized it.

He scrolled:
photo one, photo two, photo three...





The caption hit deep and stayed.

Confusion, grief, pride, guilt — everything tangled together.

His heart tugged one direction — toward Jay, toward loss, toward the ache of everything gone.

His mind tugged another — toward caution, toward truth, toward not letting someone rewrite what they didn't live.

And in between the tugs, a new thread formed:

Scarlett.

The way she knew exactly what people wanted to hear.
The way she arranged pain into something palatable.

Rick's mom walked in and showed him her phone.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?”

Her eyes glimmered.

“It is,” he said quietly.

She rested a hand on his arm.

“God chooses certain people to bring us comfort. Today, it was her.”





Rick swallowed whatever he didn't know how to say.

Thought of me.
Thought of Willow Lake.
Thought of the almost.

...

Back in our kitchen, my coffee sat untouched and cold.

Banjo nudged my knee, looking up at me like he knew English.

“You didn't like it either, huh?” I said, scratching between his ears.





He let out a sigh — the kind that sounds like a whole sentence.

I opened the comments again.
Saw Rick's mom's name.
His dad's too.

My chest shrank.

I felt distance —
from him,
from myself,
from anything that looked like a future.

I went to my room and shut the door.
The guitar leaning in the corner,
the open notebook on the bed —
none of it mattered.

I sat on the floor, my back against the mattress.
Breathed in for five, out for five.





When I checked again, the carousel was everywhere:

shared by people from school,
the pastor,
my old English teacher,
the woman from the produce section,
the Second Chance Ranch account.

My phone buzzed:

Jo: “Did you see it?”

Me: “I did.”

Jo: “Do you want to come over?”

Me: “Not today.”

I didn’t want anyone looking at me like I was breakable.
At the same time, I wanted someone to pull me up by the hand.

Banjo laid his head on my foot.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I whispered. “Just life... being life.”

Outside, Willow Creek was resurrecting an old story —
and creating new ones just as fast.

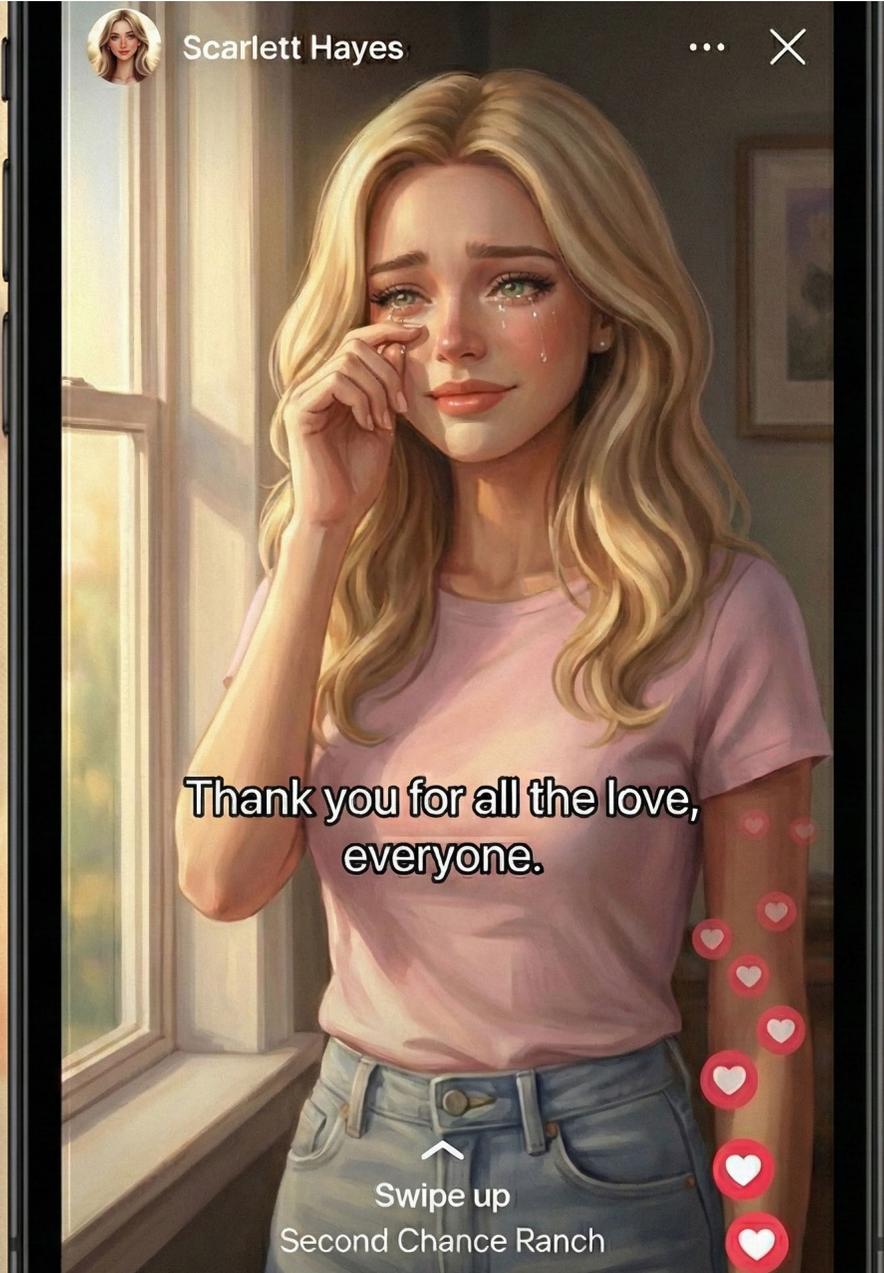
At the barber shop, whispers.
At church, a prayer shared in the caption.
At the Spur, two girls hugged each other after seeing the post.
Nate read the tribute and paused, wiping down the counter slower than usual.

By late afternoon, Scarlett appeared in her stories with a



soft, tearful voice —
except not a smudge out of place.

“Thank you for all the love, everyone.
This post is for Jay. Always will be.
Please keep donating to the Second Chance Ranch.
He would’ve wanted that.”





Swipe-up link.
Hearts spilling up the screen.
All the right words.
Perfect lighting.

I watched the whole thing without blinking.

Her face fit perfectly into the story she built for herself.

For a moment, I felt small inside my own life —
like a background character in someone else's plot.

I turned my phone off.
Turned it back on.
Did that over and over.

...

At the Carters', Rick's dad lit the grill earlier than usual.
His mom brought out a tray of meat covered in foil.

Memories had stirred up their grief —
but also a strange kind of joy,
a pride in their son who wasn't here anymore.

"Your brother would love this," Evelyn said, smiling at Rick.

"He loved a good cookout."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, tapping the tongs on the metal tray.

Rick stood between them, not knowing where to put his hands.

His phone buzzed:

Scarlett: "I'm here if you need anything."



He typed: “Thanks.”
Deleted it.

Typed: “It really affected my parents.”
Deleted that too.

His mom rested her head briefly on his shoulder.

“She’s a good girl,” she said softly. “I’d be happy to have someone like her in the family.”





It wasn't pressure.
It was hope — wrapped in pain.

Rick looked at the sky turning orange.

Thought of me.
Then of Scarlett.
Then of the life he could slip into if he wanted — neat,
easy, approved.

No past to reopen.
No guilt to navigate.
No tower.

He opened the carousel again.

Scrolled slowly, like he was searching for a sign that said go.

Notifications buzzed nonstop.

People tagging him:
“Thinking of you.”
“Jay was light.”
“We're with you, Rick.”

And then the thought came — quiet, dangerous, almost
gentle:

Maybe I should give this a chance.

The words barely formed.
They hovered between his chest and his throat, refusing to
settle.

He opened his chat with Scarlett.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Chapter 17

Frosty Spring





The next morning, that post was still being passed from hand to hand all over town, but at home the day started like every other cleaning day.

I got up early to help Mom. We opened all the windows, dragged the rugs out to the porch, and I filled a bucket with warm water that smelled like coconut soap.

She took the bathrooms, I took the kitchen — mop on the floor, dishes dried and stacked, cabinets wiped down and straightened. Then we vacuumed the bedrooms, changed all the sheets, and laughed when the fitted sheet almost beat us.

“Hold that corner, Mandi,” Mom said, smiling with the tip of her tongue between her teeth.





“Go, Mom,” I answered, and by some miracle the sheet snapped into place.

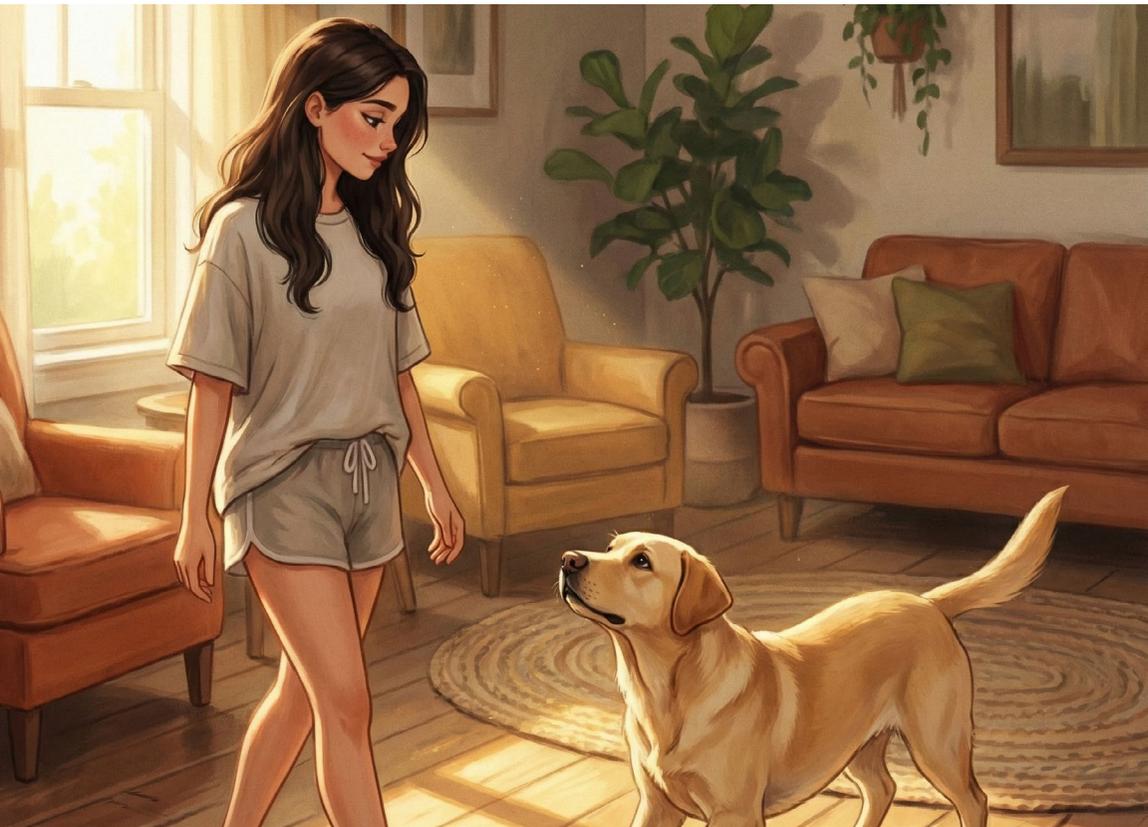
In between chores, we talked about small things — the grocery list, the Peterson sisters’ piano lessons, the last slice of Nate’s pie still waiting in the fridge.

Nothing about the post.
Nothing about the lake.

It felt like breathing clean air. A pause you don’t know you needed until you get it.

The house slowly started to shine, and this soft, simple peace settled over everything.

Banjo followed us from room to room, stretching out wherever the sun hit the floor, getting up again when we moved on. Sometimes he brushed against my leg like he was saying, *I’m here*.





After lunch, I tied on my apron and headed to the Rusty Spur.

The bell over the door jingled, and the smell of fresh coffee wrapped around me.

Nate was wiping down the counter with his favorite striped red dish towel.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite star,” he said, same as always.

“Hey, boss,” I answered.

“Take the register today and help out on tables when you can. Mr. Bowman’s in one of his talkative moods.”

“Got it.”

That was it.

Normal shift. Normal conversations.

“How’s the family?”

“Want ice in your refill?”

“Need more napkins?”

I tried to move through the day like everything was fine, forcing my body forward every time my mind tried to drag me backward.

Discouragement, sadness, frustration... I swallowed it all in small sips, with water and air.

Middle of the afternoon, I grabbed my phone from behind the counter for a quick look:

Scarlett’s carousel was still climbing — more comments,



more story reposts, more screenshots.

I set the phone down and went to the window table.

“One unsweet iced tea for you, ma’am,” I said, and the woman smiled her thanks.

...

Across town, Rick spent the day unable to keep his thoughts on a single track.





He washed the truck, helped his dad move hay bales,
rearranged supplies in the barn.

His body worked.
His mind spun.

Scarlett kept returning with the image of that carousel.
His mom, fragile but grateful.
His dad, quiet.
His brother.
The past.
Me.
The lake.
The almost.

All of it crowded in together.

He thought about giving something with Scarlett a chance.

A chance at a path that fit neatly into his life.
No pushing against anything.
His parents' blessing.

A relationship that came pre-wrapped in peace, that didn't
drag Jay's memory into every corner.

By late afternoon, with the sky sliding toward orange, he
picked up his phone.

He wrote a short message:

“Can you meet me at Frosty Spring today? I wanted to
talk.”



Can you meet me at Frosty Spring today? I wanted to talk.

Scarlett's reply came in seconds:

"Sure. 7 p.m. okay?"

"Okay."

...

By six-thirty, the Spur was filling up — people off work, people who liked to linger before going home.

A baseball game played silently on the TV in the corner.

I took orders, swapped out straws, smiled on autopilot.



At seven sharp, the Frosty Spring hummed with the sound of soft-serve machines and '90s songs playing low.

The light there was bright and clean, bouncing off the checkered floor.

Scarlett arrived first: light dress, thin jacket, hair pulled back with a bow that looked freshly tied.



She ordered a small sundae with two cherries.

Sat at a table, pulled her phone from her bag, checked her reflection in the little wall mirror.

She looked especially put-together.
Beautiful. Composed.

Rick walked in a few minutes later in his ranch shirt, hands in his pockets.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey, Rick,” she answered, voice sweet. “Sit. I ordered this



for both of us, okay?”

“Okay.”

He sat across from her, slightly turned, like he still wasn't sure what the conversation was supposed to be.

They covered the basics —
the week, their parents, the heat that wasn't letting up.

Their sentences got shorter, the small talk running out,
until Scarlett lowered her voice.

“I wanted to say something,” she began, tracing the edge of her napkin with one fingertip. “These days with your parents... they made me feel at home. Like I fit. I really care about your family, and I think they like me too.”

Rick nodded, quiet.

“And more than that, Rick... I like you,” she said, simply. “I like the way you take care of people. How you think before you speak. I think we've got a connection I can't really explain. Maybe it's timing. Maybe it's... just the right moment.”

She smiled — a small smile meant to pull him closer.

There was warmth in her eyes that carried a kind of peace, even if it was temporary.

Rick stepped forward and backward at the same time.

He thought about his mom smiling in the kitchen that morning.

His dad clinking tongs against the pan.

His brother.



He thought about doing the thing that looked right when life places a choice in front of you.

He leaned in.

Scarlett leaned in too.

The kiss happened right there between clinking spoons and the song playing overhead.





It was short.
And public — for anyone who happened to be watching.

A server saw it.
People at the other tables saw it.
Everyone in there saw it.

When they pulled apart, Rick smiled — a picture-perfect smile, like one you'd hold for a camera.

Inside, something sank.

Guilt?
But for what?

He took a long breath and pretended it was just a sigh.

“You okay?” Scarlett asked gently.

“Yeah,” he answered automatically. “Yeah... I'm good.”

They stayed a few more minutes.
Light conversation.
The world outside already on its way to carry the news off and spread it thin.

The story traveled faster than either of them.

...

The news hit the Spur before eight-thirty, carried in on whispers that didn't need subtitles.

I found out in a group chat — during a tiny pause between orders.

A message from a girl I knew from school:



“Did you see?? Scarlett and Rick together?? Like, full-on kiss!!”

I read it.
Read it again.

It was real.
They’d kissed.

The whole room tipped sideways for a second.

It hit me so hard I couldn’t seem to pull air all the way into my lungs.

The floor under my feet went soft.

I had never felt anything like it.

The pain was physical —
a mix of heartbreak, sadness, not being enough, jealousy,
everything all at once.

A customer’s glass slipped in my hand and tipped against the saucer.

It shattered.

I apologized, not even sure to who.

I tried to breathe.

Couldn’t hold back anymore — the tears started falling on their own.

My world was cracking open.

“Mandi, take five outside,” Nate said, catching it all in a



second. “I’ve got you.”

I slipped out the side door.

The alley was its same old quiet.

I leaned my back against the cold brick and cried.





Really cried.

After that, there was no going back to work.

I texted Nate, apologizing, telling him I needed to go home.

I don't remember the drive.

...

When I got there, I went straight upstairs without anyone seeing me.

I didn't want to worry my parents.

I closed my bedroom door and sank to the floor with my back against the bed.

I cried until my eyes ran out of tears on their own.

Then I stared at the ceiling.

I thought about Rick.

About my dad.

About the station.

The tower.

Jay.

About all of Willow Creek singing along to a story that wasn't mine.

Banjo padded in slowly, rested his head on my knee, and stayed.

I ran my hand over his fur without looking — just to remind myself there were still things in my life that were



mine, and real, and soft.

Mine.

My Banjo.

I grabbed my notebook.

Flipped to a blank page.

Wrote two words and erased them.

Then I wrote a different sentence:

what if I go?





It wasn't a threat.

It was a thought.

A door at the end of a very long hallway.

I closed the notebook gently.

Maybe... maybe I really *should* leave Willow Creek.

Even if just to find out if my life works somewhere else.

I stayed with that thought until sleep finally found me — like I was holding an invisible suitcase, testing its weight in my hand.

What if I go? stayed written in the dark of my mind.

And for the first time,
the idea felt
possible.

Scarlett thinks she won.

That's cute.

→ Dive back into the story and get ready to be surprised

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