

Chapter One

Sad eyes tracked Sherry's movements as she said good-bye to the man in her life.

Their relationship was new, only a few months old, but their bond had been immediate and profound. It hurt leaving him now, knowing that he didn't understand. But Sherry needed a break. Not from him. From life. From her sister's luminous honeymoon glow and her brother's new sappy love. From the constant internal question of when it would be *her* turn to be just as luminously sappy.

When an out-of-town catering gig for their restaurant's biggest client yet suddenly presented itself, she'd practically tackled Colby for the opportunity. Sherry loved adventure—she craved it—and the star-studded getaway provided the perfect out from her sucky role as the Robicheaux family fifth wheel. Even if it did involve country music.

The hard part, of course, was explaining her desertion to Elvis.

"It's just for the weekend, buddy," she promised, smiling first at Elvis, then at the cute boy behind the counter of Tootsie's Pampered Poodle Day Spa and Boarding. A stinging mix of bleach and *eau de wet dog* permeated the air—certainly unlike any day spa Sherry had ever been in—but it was homey. Cheerful. The perfect place to leave her baby. Pressing her face against her Shih Tzu's cool, damp nose, she vowed, "You won't even know I'm gone. I've heard there's a hot Maltese here, too. Right up your alley." Scratching behind her puppy's fluffy ears, she leaned back with a sigh. "At least one of us should get our freak on."

She glanced up when the cutie waiting to take Elvis's leopard-print leash made a choking sound under his breath. Shrugging, she pushed to her feet and turned to the woman standing beside him. "My return flight arrives late," she told the doggie spa's namesake. "So Angelle's gonna pick him up once she gets back from Bon Terre."

Yet another reason Sherry was glad to leave town for the holiday. Cane and Angie were headed to Cajun country, and Colby and Jason were doing the family thing with Emma. If Sherry had stayed in town, she'd likely be ringing in the New Year with Ryan Seacrest on the TV and a pint of Ben and Jerry's in her belly.

That truth was more depressing than an eight-pound canine being the man in her life.

Tootsie fluffed her gray hair and pressed her ample bosom against the counter with a grin. "Vegas for New Year's Eve. Goodness, to be young again. Flirting my ass off, getting into mischief." She gave her a knowing wink. "I expect a full report when you come home."

Sherry snorted. "The only mischief I'll see is if I accidentally put the wrong label on a heating tray." The spa owner raised an eyebrow, and Sherry explained. "We're catering the green room for a concert tomorrow night. A big new casino client we want to impress, so I'm going in to supervise."

"Concert, huh?" She bumped the file cabinet closed with her hip. "Anyone I might know?"

Sherry scrunched her nose. "Some country group called Blue?"

The name rang a slight bell, but she wasn't that up-to-date on the country music scene. Her style was more pop and dance, music she could shake her booty to at a club. Part of her felt guilty for not doing more research on her client, but really, she had a handle on the important things, like the number of people she was serving and if anyone had food allergies. As for the rest, she'd wing it. People and events like this were her specialty.

Too bad that doesn't transfer over to my love life.

Apparently, the name of the group more than rang a bell for Tootsie, as her big brown eyes grew even wider. "Blue? As in the ACM's Entertainer of the Year?" Sherry shrugged, her

guess being yes, and the woman surged forward. “As in one of *People’s Sexiest Men Alive*? Seriously, how can you not know who he is?”

“His name sounds sorta familiar,” she mumbled, a prick of unease tensing her stomach. Sexiest man alive? *Awesome*. Blue sounded just like the kind of guy she normally fell for. Hot, brooding, confident...and more than likely a man whore.

“You’ve *gotta* hit on him,” Tootsie ordered, her enthusiasm raising her voice to wince-worthy decibels. The cutie on dog patrol shook his head and took Elvis’s leash, smirking as he strolled toward the kennel door. Sherry blew her baby a good-bye kiss.

“If anyone has a shot with him, it’s you,” Tootsie continued. “You’re gorgeous and confident. Fun and spontaneous. Shoot, you’ll have him eating out of your hand! Just think...” Her eyes got a faraway look in them. “You’ll smile. He’ll come over. You’ll kiss at midnight, and then fall blissfully in love. The two of you will live happily ever after.” The woman giggled as a pinkish glow bloomed on her cheeks. “I read about that very thing in one of my romance novels.”

Sherry sighed. She had too, and it was shortly after *the end* that she’d concluded happily ever afters belonged exactly there—in her beloved smut. They didn’t exist in real life. At least not for her. Sure, her siblings were rocking it in the love department, but her luck flat out sucked. That was where her New Year’s resolution came into play.

“Not interested,” she declared, shoving a thick section of purple hair behind her ear. “Celebrities are notorious players, and I’ve had enough of that nonsense for two lifetimes.” She thought about it and then added, “But a little hot roadie action could be in the cards.”

She wiggled her eyebrows with a grin, and Tootsie chortled. “Now there’s the wild child of Magnolia Springs I know and love!”

Sherry fought to maintain her smile. Wild child, addicted to love, crazy chica—all names that fit her pretty damn perfectly...and traits that led to her current *loveless* state. Always the fling, never the forever, but she had a new game plan to change that status going forward.

Of course, not before one last weekend to sow her *wild* oats.

Waving good-bye, Sherry donned her dark sunglasses and took a deep breath of fresh, crisp, pine-scented air. She had yet to share her New Year's resolution with her sister or best friend, and she doubted she ever would. Knowing them, they'd just try to talk her out of it. Or worse, give her pointers. She didn't need them to say her love life was a train wreck. She'd already diagnosed that particular problem and found herself a cure.

Fall for someone boring.

It was the solution to her heartache. Her desire to feel wooed and loved meant she always went for the exciting, mysterious types—only to find out later that those guys were mysterious for a reason. They were hiding another woman. Nope, it was high time she settled down with someone stable. A man who wouldn't cheat or charm her with a quick smile and swoony line only to turn around and charm someone else. She was through with being swept off her feet. Forever more (or at least after this weekend was over), Sherry's feet would remain firmly on the ground.

Come Monday morning, her sights would be set on a guy like her brother-in-law. Jason Landry was the captain of the fire department and owned his own business. He was solid, dependable, hardworking, and loved her sister to distraction. Even Sherry's brother was an example. Sure, Cane liked to think he was big and bad with his tats and motorcycle, but inside he was just one big teddy bear. And that's what she needed. A *good* guy.

Someone like the nice, safe, dry-as-day-old-toast accountant who'd recently set up shop across from Robicheaux's.

Sure, Will Trahan wasn't her usual type—both conversations they'd had thus far somehow led to them discussing Roth IRAs—but then that was the point. Any man more interested in the health of her investment portfolio than the size of her rack had to be good people.

Sherry threw her car into gear and turned the radio dial, blasting Rihanna as she reversed out of the parking lot. Gravel crunched under her wheels as she nodded with conviction at the reflection in her rearview mirror. Yep, next year she'd be a changed woman. No longer would she be the sister always getting in scrapes or making a mess of her life. The pathetic, relationship-disaster of the Robicheaux clan would be a thing of the past. A brand-spanking-new Sherry was emerging—one with her head on straight and her heart safe and secure.

But first, one last adventure.

One fun weekend in Sin City to live in the moment, embrace her unfortunate fling status, and store up exciting memories for the dull years to come.

Then, bring on Mr. Boring.

Tyler's calloused fingertips brushed against the thin piece of paper in his jeans pocket. He grinned as his publicist fought to stay in stride beside him, her click-clacking heels half drowning out her rant about the latest *development*, and began soundlessly mouthing the words he'd written only a half hour ago. He'd finally nailed it.

Catching sight of his bass player in the crowded hallway, Tyler cut short Arianne's monologue. "Hey, man." Charlie raised his head, and Tyler withdrew the sticky note, wielding it as if it were a winning lottery ticket. "Got that last lyric."

His best friend immediately snatched the paper, and Arianne shot him an irritated smile. Oh, he'd pay for cutting her off. There'd be no escaping whatever had her bug-eyed and high strung—well, more high strung than normal. But for now, he'd gotten a reprieve. That damn line had been driving Tyler mad for a week, and Blue had an album to finish. Even the great Arianne Cruz, bulldog publicist to the stars, couldn't fault him that.

Charlie read the line and handed it back with a smile. "Hell yeah. That's it."

"Never doubt the power of a Post-It note, my friend." Tyler carefully placed the three-by-three square in the center of his wallet—that thing was pure gold—and blew out a relieved breath. "Back in the studio on Monday."

Charlie smacked his shoulder. "I'm there." His gaze shifted right, and the smile on his face altered. Tyler turned to find a smoking blonde in painted-on jeans standing along the wall, twirling her hair and eying his bassist. There went talk of their new album.

"Show starts in twenty," he called out as Charlie took off for the groupie. Really, he wasn't worried. A band didn't skyrocket up the charts, produce two back-to-back albums in as many years, and play to sold-out crowds in worldwide tours if the members weren't 100 percent committed. Especially as young as the two of them were.

But a reminder damn sure couldn't hurt.

Charlie shot him a wink in acknowledgment, and Tyler glanced back at Arianne. It was time to face the music. "All right. I'll listen to whatever it is that has you twitching, but can I at

least stuff my face while I do it?” Usually he ate after the concert with the rest of the band, but today’s rehearsals and interviews had run long, and he was starving.

Her thin lips pressed together, but with a curt nod, she led him down the hall.

As they made their way to yet another green room, the familiar buzz of adrenaline washed over him. The energy in the air was electric. Music, traveling the world, a new venue every night, this was Tyler Blue’s life, and he loved every bit of it. It was a dream he’d held since his parents gave him his first guitar when he was thirteen, and he wouldn’t trade it for anything. But as his stomach rumbled, he couldn’t help thinking it came with a few drawbacks.

Living on the road—in particular, eating the crap food they tried to pass as gourmet at venues like this—was beginning to wear thin. What he wouldn’t do for a bowl of his dad’s homemade gumbo or a steaming hot plate of boiled Gulf seafood. But his career didn’t leave much time for trips back home to Louisiana—a side effect of the industry that was both a blessing and a curse.

Brushing off the sudden sting of nostalgia and guilt, Tyler tried to psych himself up for another meal of pasta...only when he walked through the back room of the new Moonshine casino, he discovered a Cajun feast laid out in the middle of the desert.

“What the hell?”

The question, obviously, was rhetorical. But after years of surviving on every variety of chicken known to man, he was certain the spread before him was a mirage. His mouth watered as he inhaled deeply, and the scent of cayenne hit his nose. It had been years since he’d sat down at his grandmother’s table, and from the look of the heaping tub of jambalaya, this stuff was legit.

“Is there a problem?” Arianne surveyed the trays. “If you prefer something else, I can request it. But I’d think you’d be pleased. Isn’t this the food of your homeland?” She widened her eyes as she said it and smiled.

“Cute.” Tyler grabbed a Styrofoam tray, prepared to load that sucker down. “And hell yes, I’m happy. This is perfect. Just shocked to find it here of all places.”

Moonshine was a country-themed casino owned by several of his music buddies. It was no secret they wanted Tyler involved too, but tonight was his first visit to the Vegas resort. If food like this was a common occurrence, though, he might just be signing some papers after all.

“Well, they want you to invest, so of course they’re pulling out all the stops.” She shrugged, and the playfulness instantly fell from her eyes. “Now, fill your plate so we can talk strategy.”

He almost laughed. Instead, he did as the lady requested and filled his plate to overflowing before the crew wolfed it all. Then, satisfied he’d added as much as it could possibly hold, he nodded at a passing sound technician, plopped his ass in a chair, and said, “Go for it.”

“Tammy Paxton of *Country Music Weekly* has called your credibility into question.” Tyler choked on his bite of Andouille, and Arianne handed him a napkin. “I can’t say that I’m all that surprised. You flat out refuse to be linked with anyone in the press, Ty, and I warned you it could bite you in the ass. As it turns out, Paxton’s the snake for the job.” She furnished a folded, torn-out piece of paper from her purse and handed it to him. “This article has already gone viral, and fans are starting to talk.”

He set the paper down without reading it. He learned long ago not to read reviews or listen to critics. That was what he paid *her* to do. “Give me the highlights. What, exactly, does she claim I’m doing wrong?”

“Oh, the article starts off fine. She compares you to the greats. Johnny Cash, Tim McGraw, Keith Urban, Blake Shelton...”

That didn't sound bad. If Tyler had half the career they did, he'd be good to go.

But then Arianne continued. “Any guess what the rest of those men have in common?”

“CMA Male Vocalist of the Year Awards?” he replied helpfully.

“Wives.” He shot her a look and shoveled in a forkful of jambalaya to keep from responding. It always came back to this. Arianne sighed. “More and more country artists are settling down and getting married, Tyler, and the fans are eating it up.”

Spearing a plump Gulf shrimp, he asked, “Whatever happened to women loving the single celebrity thing? The mystery and ‘no comment’ about personal relationships spiel. The fantasy they love to spin that we're just sitting around, twiddling our thumbs, waiting for the right fan to rock our worlds?”

“Wrong genre.” She grabbed a nearby empty chair and dragged it in front of him.

“Country music is a totally different beast than pop or rock. With those clients, I actually advise them to do just what you do. Attend events solo. Remain an eternal bachelor in the press. Spin that dumb fantasy. But those artists sell a different *kind* of fantasy. You write and sing about forever love, and committed relationships lend credibility.”

Relationships. Tyler set down his fork, the once flavorful rice now bitter.

Arianne rolled her eyes. “For the love of money, will you relax? I see you getting all riled up and twitchy. I'm not suggesting you get hitched to the next woman you see, but I am asking if it would *kill* you to go to an event with a date? Or let me at least leak a possible secret romance?”

He shook his head in irritation. It was the same song, different day. His management had been riding his ass about this for the last year—and they could keep riding it, because it wasn't happening. Music and long-term relationships didn't mix. You could ask his dad.

Other than music, Tyler liked things in his life to be easy. When he did have time for women, he preferred his interactions to be casual and without complication. He was an instant gratification kind of a guy. When he saw a woman who interested him, he went for it. But that was just it. He was rarely interested. There was no shortage of women trailing him, and they were all the same. Vapid, clingy, and superficial.

Across the crowded room, a side door pushed open, and a tiny brunette with crazy curves, purple-streaked hair, and sexy-as-hell lips strode through the entry, hauling a towering bucket of ice. Tyler froze.

“So, tell me, Ty, why should Suzy Housewife download your album instead of Luke Bryan's, huh? He's not hard on the eyes, either, and *he's* married.”

Wisps of hair clung to the woman's forehead. She set the ice down and swiped at her bangs with the back of her hand, causing the hem of her white fitted top to lift. Smooth, tan skin beckoned.

“Tyler, are you even listening to me?” Arianne huffed. “I'm saying that the competition is stiff, and this reporter is questioning if you even know what the hell it is you're selling. We need a rebuttal!”

Looking up from that strip of skin, Tyler discovered a set of gorgeous hazel eyes. They widened, catching his stare before a lighting tech crossed the path between them, breaking the moment.

“Love is my life,” he said finally, transferring his gaze to his publicist. “Maybe not the act, but the feelings, the emotions. It consumes me when I’m writing. So, yeah, I’m a bachelor. So what? It doesn’t mean I’ve never cared about anyone.” He snuck another peek at the brunette, gratified to find her still watching him from across the chaotic room. “It doesn’t mean I don’t know what women want. And that’s what I give them. I don’t need to be in a relationship to do that.”

His publicist squeezed her forehead with a manicured hand. “It takes more than going on an occasional date to understand love. Real relationships are complicated. They’re messy. Something you would know if you’d ever actually been in one.”

At the sarcasm in her voice, Tyler’s jaw locked. Arianne winced. She was pushing it, and she knew it. Best in the business or not, this was his life she was talking about...and he controlled her paycheck.

The stirrings of a headache pulsed behind his eyes, which sucked, considering he had a show to do in less than twenty minutes. Rolling his shoulders back, he let out a breath and actually considered what she was saying. He wasn’t an idiot. Public perception could make or break a career, and if Arianne was this fired up, then that meant the article posed a real threat.

Unfortunately, this was one area where he refused to budge.

Complicated, messy, *love*...those three words had no place in Tyler Blue’s life. Especially since his life was his career. He’d done compromise and obstacles to overcome—that was his past. This right here was *his* time, and he planned to enjoy it.

“Look, I hear what you’re saying,” he told her. “But there weren’t any complaints on the last two albums, and there won’t be any on the next. This article will blow over, you’ll see.”

Pushing to his feet, he stuck the damn thing in his pocket and handed Arianne his plate. “Here, finish this. There’s something I need to do before the show.”

Her lips pursed in annoyance, but she took the plate without a word. As he walked away, he felt her sharp gaze following him across the floor, but only one set of eyes interested him at the moment—hazel ones, currently lit in challenge.

From opposite the long table of food, the brunette gave him a blatant once over as he came to a stop in front of her, twirling a strand of purple hair around her fingertip. When she reached his lucky belt buckle, her sinful lips twitched.

“If the words, ‘Come here often,’ leave your mouth, I swear I’ll laugh you straight back to roadie-ville.” Her words were harsh, but the smile that sprang free was playful, and Tyler found himself mesmerized by the familiar twang of her southern voice.

So much so that he’d almost missed what she said.

“Roadie-ville?”

“Sorry, do you prefer *techie*?” Her cute nose wrinkled as she stuck her hands in her back jeans pocket. “I heard someone else say that earlier, but I swear that sounds like a computer nerd.” She looked him up and down again, this time her gaze lingering around his hips. Slightly south of the belt buckle. *Hot damn.* “I think roadie fits you better. Sounds sexier.”

Tyler scratched the side of his jaw. Was she messing with him? He’d heard a hell of a lot of come-ons since making it to Nashville and had been propositioned in every way possible. But this was a first. The woman stared back, smiling that damn seductive smile, and he realized she honestly had no clue who he was. For some reason, he was in no hurry to correct that just yet.

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d gone anywhere without being recognized, much less his own concert. But since the room was swarming with crew, Tyler could understand the

confusion...*if* she weren't a hardcore fan, and clearly, this woman wasn't. Tyler swiped a hand over his mouth, hiding a smile.

"Sugar, you can call me anything you like," he drawled, laying it on thick even to his own ears. Her pretty lips parted, and he grinned. "And what can I call you?"

Her smile twisted into a smirk. "Who said you could call me at all?"

He laughed, shocked again, and for the first time in a long time, speechless.

She winked. "I'm Sherry." When she said her name, she looked right into his eyes as if he should remember it, and he had no doubt that he would. The confidence pouring off her was sexy as hell. "And...you are?"

"Tyler," he replied, glad she'd gone with just her first name so he could do the same. The rest of the world simply referred to Tyler as Blue, the front man for the band bearing his last name. Even so, he stood back and waited for a sign of recognition.

It never came.

When it became obvious she really had no clue who he was, nor would she guess any time soon, Tyler felt a knot of tension release between his shoulder blades.

"So, Sherry, you planning to watch tonight's show?"

She pulled a face. "I'm not much for country, other than the line dances. All those songs about trucks and trains and whiskey and dogs, though that last one I can forgive." Her smile softened and Tyler moved closer, wanting to be nearer the genuine warmth of it. "No offense to your boss or anything," she added with a slight grimace. "I heard he's pretty hot...even if he *is* the man-whore of country music."

A shocked laugh burst from his lips. "Excuse me?"

She waved her comment away, as if she hadn't just insulted him to his face—which, he guessed, she hadn't really. At least not on purpose. “Just a theory I have. I'm sure he's a perfectly adequate boss.”

Now, Tyler laughed for real. “Yeah, he's...adequate.” Shaking his head, he propped his hip on the table. This was the most fun he'd had with a woman in months—and they both still had their clothes on. “So tell me, if you don't like country, what *do* you like?”

“Mostly pop and dance music.” She bit her lip and studied him, lashes lowered as she scanned his body, before subtly nodding. Her smile took on a hint of seduction as she added, “And hot roadies.”

Breath left his lungs at the look in her eyes. Their message was clear. Tyler stared back, knowing he could easily lose himself for a night in the mesmerizing kaleidoscope of amber and green. In that sweet, southern voice that reminded him of home. And in the refreshing reality that this woman had no clue who in the hell he was.

With Sherry, he wouldn't have to be *on* all night. Wouldn't have to fulfill a celebrity expectation or survive another conversation with talk of the industry and his musical inspirations. With this tempting waitress, he could just be Tyler, a Louisiana native, lover of Cajun food, and a man extremely attracted to the woman beside him.

Funny. Until that second, he wasn't aware he missed that sense of normalcy.

Reaching out, Tyler brushed away a strand of dampened hair from her neck. The muscles under the silky skin of her throat moved against his fingertips. Chill bumps pricked her skin as she tilted her head back, eyes locked on his in a silent question.

That article in *Country Music Weekly* was right—he wasn't a serial monogamous. But he sure as hell wasn't a monk, either. The fiery glow in her eyes said that if he was interested, she would be his tonight. And he was definitely interested.

“Tyler!”

Sherry jolted at the intrusion, and the moment was gone. Reluctantly, Tyler turned toward the doorway, gritting his teeth. “Yeah?”

His bass player glanced back and forth between them. “It's show time.”

Of course it is. Any other night, Tyler was like an ADD kid hyped up on sugar before a performance. The wall of adoration that hit him smack in the face when he took the stage, the hot lights pouring from above—that was where he thrived. But tonight was proving to be far from ordinary. “I'll be right there.”

As if they could start without him anyway.

Charlie smirked as he nodded and retreated a few steps, waiting until he was out of Sherry's sight to flash an opened palm. Whether that was code for five minutes or some sort of distant high-five was up for interpretation. Ignoring his idiot best friend, Tyler returned his focus to the woman in front of him.

The heat in Sherry's eyes had dimmed, but it was there, and the air between them still snapped. “Boss man calls?” Her voice was slightly breathless, and there was no stopping the smile crossing his face.

“Something like that.”

He rocked back on the heel of his boots, delaying the inevitable. The feeling was apparently mutual because she asked, “Do roadies have to work the whole concert?”

A thrill of satisfaction warmed his blood as disappointment washed over her features. She didn't want him to leave. Glancing at the table, Tyler could tell only half the crew had eaten. There was plenty of food left over, which meant she'd still be here when the concert ended.

“Yeah, generally roadies are pretty busy during a show.”

A slight prick of guilt hit him for continuing the ruse. But from what she'd revealed, the playful, simple way they were flirting would end the minute she learned his identity. It was selfish not to correct her. She'd probably be pissed as hell when she found out. But he wasn't ready to relinquish that easy feeling just yet.

Knowing Charlie and the guys were waiting, Tyler slowly backed away. “But don't you go skipping out on me. I'll be looking for you after the show.” His gaze fell to her glossy mouth, and he almost groaned when Sherry bit the corner of one painted lip.

As excitement flared in her eyes, he turned on his heel. This was going to be the longest concert of his career.