

## Chapter 1 - Wide Open Spaces

Cassidy Parish stepped down from the Greyhound with her suitcase thumping behind her and guitar case snug across her back. February in Nashville carried a smell that was part rain-soaked pavement, part exhaust, and part something warmer she could not quite name, as if the city itself had been simmering all day and was letting off steam now that the sun had gone. She paused on the sidewalk, letting the rumble of buses fade behind her, the traffic lights overhead blinking from red to green in a slow rhythm, casting colors across wet asphalt. The skyline stretched in front of her like a half-finished song, buildings rising in uneven chords against a darkening sky. Somewhere down the block, the faint twang of a guitar slipped through the air, weaving itself between the thump of passing tires and the hiss of brakes. It felt as if the music was stitched into the city's seams, impossible to avoid. Her heart gave a quick, uncertain jump.

This was it. She had imagined this moment for years, standing barefoot on the front porch in Liberty with her guitar balanced across her knees, telling herself that one day she would trade quiet backroads for streets that never seemed to sleep. Now she was here, and the idea of it all pressed against her chest so hard she had to take a deep breath just to steady herself. The Holiday Inn she had booked for the first three nights was only a few blocks away, though every step felt like it took her deeper into something she was not entirely ready for. The wind whipped at her single braid, causing some of the auburn strands to spring loose as she tried not to get too lost in her surroundings. The hotel stood on a corner with an unassuming brick façade, the kind that said it was built for people passing through rather than settling in. Taking a minute, she imagined the guests inside. She could see the tired salespeople rehearsing their pitches in front of the bathroom mirror, families trying to keep kids quiet after a long drive, maybe even another dreamer or two wondering if this city would have room for them. Inside, the lobby lighting was warm but thin, stretching shadows along the corners. A muted TV played the news, the sound barely audible over the soft hum of the heater. The front desk clerk, a man with deep creases around his eyes, gave her a polite nod as she approached. "Checking in?" His voice was even, practiced. "Yes. Reservation for Parish," she said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. He tapped a few keys on the computer and slid a keycard across the counter. "Room 412. Elevator's on your right." His tone held the weight of someone who had said those same words hundreds of times, and Cassidy wondered if he ever noticed who he was handing keys to, or if they all blurred together into one long shift. "Thank you," she said softly. The elevator doors closed behind her, and for a moment, she again couldn't believe what she was doing. She thought about the songs she had written back home, about the ones she still carried in scraps of paper tucked inside her guitar case, and wondered which of them might find their voice here. When the elevator chimed, she stepped into a hallway lined with identical doors and a faint trace of detergent in the air. The carpet muffled her footsteps as she made her way to 412, the key sliding into the lock with a quiet click. The room smelled faintly of old smoke beneath a layer of floral cleaner, a tired mix that spoke of too many guests and too many quick turnarounds. She set her guitar gently on the bed, fingers brushing over the worn leather handle, and let out a slow breath. It was not perfect. It was not even particularly nice. But it was Nashville. And she was here.