

SLOW BURN

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“CPA, huh? You don’t think slogging around with a band will be too low-brow for you?”

Beth sat up straighter and looked Stu Mirsky in the eye. “This is exactly the sort of thing I’ve been looking for.” This wasn’t strictly true, since the idea of touring with a band had never occurred to her. But the spirit of it was true. As soon as she’d seen the post from another Ohio State alum on Facebook, she’d wanted the job.

“Plus,” she went on, “I have skills you can use. You won’t find anyone as detail-oriented or organized as me. If you wanted I could keep track of expenses and make sure you stay on budget. I can do everything you need, and I’ll get to see some of the country while doing it. It’s a perfect fit.”

Stu signaled the waitress for more coffee and sat back against the vinyl seat. A big man in his mid-to late-thirties with curly brown hair, he seemed weary, as if this were the first rest he’d had in days. The interview was taking place in a diner, but Beth was too on edge to eat anything. She hadn’t even known about this job until three days ago, but now that she was here, it seemed like the only thing worth doing.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Stu said, rubbing at the dark circles under his eyes. “But I can’t afford to be picky. I also can’t afford to hire someone and have her run off in the middle of the tour.”

“You run that risk with anyone, but I can tell you I’m the last person who would do that. Besides, I can take anything for four weeks.”

He sat back in his seat and gave her an appraising look. “You’ll be doing a lot of lifting. Helping with equipment and gear, that sort of thing. Not to mention driving long hours with guys who might not be your cup of tea and running errands that are way beneath you.”

“That won’t be a problem. The whole point is to try something different. And as you can see, I’m not exactly frail.”

He didn’t dispute this. She was five foot ten with broad shoulders and decent muscle tone. No one considered her dainty.

“Bringing a pretty woman into a band is probably the dumbest thing I could do,” he said, as if reminding himself. He took a sip of coffee and winced, then drank some more. He looked her in

the eye. “The guys are going to hit on you, I guarantee it. You may even want to take one of them up on it. I need you to promise me you won’t.”

“The thought of hooking up with a guy right now literally turns my stomach. I’m at the beginning of a very long break from men.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” he said, looking doubtful. “What kind of car do you drive?”

“Uh, I drive a Subaru Outback,” she said, embarrassed to admit she had a station wagon. But a co-worker had been selling it for a great deal.

His eyes narrowed. “How many miles on it?”

“Fifty-six thousand.”

“Fine, you’re hired.”

Beth burst through Cheryl’s door. “I got a job,” she squealed.

Cheryl was sitting on the couch grading papers. Or she had been. Beth’s abrupt entrance had surprised her, and now the papers were scattered across the floor and under the coffee table. Beth got down on her knees and helped pick them up.

“That’s amazing,” Cheryl said, giving her a hug. She stacked the papers and sat back down.

“What will you be doing? Is it another accounting firm?”

Beth took a seat, then popped right back up again, too excited to sit still. “Well, no. I decided I needed a little adventure first. It’s just a month-long thing, though, so even if it’s crazy, it won’t be forever.”

“What is this mystery job?”

“A while back I friended a bunch of random alums on the Ohio State Facebook page. This one guy, Will Rogowski, is in a band, and a few days ago he posted that one of the guys touring with them had broken his ankle and they needed someone with a car who could travel with the band and help out. I wouldn’t have thought anything of it, except that they were playing Las Vegas tonight. I emailed Will and he helped set up my interview today with the band’s manager.”

“Wait a second. Are you saying you’re going *on the road*?”

“Yes. I’ll finally see some of the country, and I’ll get paid to do it.” She paused. “Well, not paid exactly, but they’ll take care of my room and board and reimburse me for gas.”

“What will you be doing exactly?” Cheryl asked, looking doubtful.

“I’ll be helping sell stuff at shows, sending out press kits, making sure they have food. That sort of thing, plus a lot of driving. It’s not exactly rocket science. The guy who was doing it was an alcoholic high school drop-out.”

“When do you leave?”

“Um, tomorrow morning.”

“Seriously?” Cheryl sat up straight, her pretty face falling.

“I know. I’m sorry it’s so sudden.”

She could see Cheryl was trying to be excited for her, but it was costing her. They’d been friends since elementary school and were more like sisters. Cheryl had even lived with Beth’s family through high school after her own family fell apart. Both of them had been thrilled by the prospect of living in the same city again, and now Beth was taking off.

She sat down next to Cheryl, exhausted by the ups and down of the day. “It’s only for a little while. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a downer. It’s just that you’ve only been here a week.”

“I know. But I think I need this. I feel like if I don’t do something drastic, I’ll end up with the exact kind of life I left behind.” She looked down at her capable hands, the nails short and unpainted. “I’m just so tired of being careful all the time.”

Cheryl blew out a long breath and moved closer, wrapping an arm around Beth’s shoulders and hugging her close. “Funny, I always envied you all that stability, but I guess it has its downsides.”

“Yeah. Maybe I should have followed you here and gotten a job stripping, too.”

“Oh my God, your parents would have had heart attacks. *I* would have had a heart attack.”

“You don’t think I can be wild?” Beth asked, trying not to look disappointed.

“Being wild isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Besides, I always liked having you as an example of the life I wanted to have. Something good and real, something to be proud of.”

Beth blinked away tears. “Well, now you’re the shining example for me. You certainly have better taste in men.”

Cheryl smiled, but it was an inward smile, and Beth could tell she was thinking of Jason. “Just better luck.”

“Maybe some of it will rub off on me.”

Cheryl heaved a sigh. “So where will you be going?”

“They’ve already been out east, so after we leave here we’ll be working our way up through California and into the northwest. We’ll even have a few stops in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming before coming back through Utah and New Mexico. We finish in Austin. Stu said they’d pay for me to fly back and get someone to drive my car here.”

“Huh. I’ve never been to any of those places, either. I must be getting old, because I’m not even jealous.”

“Since your spectacular boyfriend lives here, I’m not surprised.”

Cheryl’s smile could have lit up the city. “You haven’t said what band it is. Have I heard of them?”

“I hadn’t. Jesse Rhodes is the songwriter and lead singer and he’s got a backing band. A few of his songs are getting a lot of play right now,” Beth said. She stood up and grabbed her laptop.

“They’re looking for his new album to do big things,” she said, typing his name into a search.

“Jesse Rhodes. That sounds kind of familiar.”

“I was so excited about the idea of traveling, I never even checked out his music. Let’s hope I don’t hate it.”

“He’s got a Wikipedia page,” Cheryl said, pointing to the screen. “Click on that.”

It wasn’t much, just a paragraph with his basic bio and a description of his music as Americana and alt-rock. “Scorpion Dreams” was his third album. He was twenty-nine and born in West

Texas. Back on the search page she clicked on one of the videos that popped up. Some appeared to be concert footage, others were of him playing at a radio station.

“Try that one,” Cheryl said, pointing to one of him sitting in a studio, a wall of tapes behind him.

They were silent as Jesse started to play acoustic guitar, his gravelly voice clawing its way out of his throat as he sang a ballad about growing up in the desert, dreaming of snakes and scorpions.

He wore a cowboy hat, black jeans and a dark blue western-style shirt. The hat partially hid his face, but they could see enough.

“He’s seriously hot,” Cheryl breathed, leaning closer to the screen. “I like the song, too,” she said, almost as an afterthought.

“Stu made me swear not to sleep with the band. If only he knew me.”

“I don’t know. Even a nice girl like you might want to drop her panties for this guy. I mean, look at him. And that voice.”

“I can see that he’s hot, I’m just saying that’s not the kind of guy I would go for. I’m off *all* men right now. The last guy I’d ever sleep with is some semi-famous musician who probably sleeps with a different woman every night. I mean, please.”

“You could enjoy looking at him, though. Nothing wrong with that.” Cheryl looked back down at the screen. “Can we watch another one?”

The next day at ten minutes before noon Beth drove to the Holiday Inn and parked next to a white van, as Stu had instructed. She was early, though, and there was no sign of Stu or anyone else that might be in the band, so she sat in her car with the engine running and the air conditioner doing its thing. She was still getting used to the fact that even in early October the temperature hit the eighties in Las Vegas.

Her phone rang as she was sitting there staring off into space and she looked at it in dismay. Her mother. No way could she tell Deborah Levine that her twenty-eight-year-old daughter was running off with a band. Her mom was upset enough that she’d left their hometown of Gulliver, Ohio, for Sin City. This would send her over the edge.

She ignored the call and tried to ignore the surge of guilt at the thought of essentially lying to her parents for the next month.

Her stomach was turning itself inside out as the reality of what she'd signed up for sank in. What had she been thinking? Surely there were other ways to find adventure. She couldn't even remember the last time she saw a band live, and now she was supposed to help *run* one?

She was so immersed in her doubts she didn't realize anyone had shown up until there was a knock on her window. She gave a stifled yelp, feeling like a fool as she looked up at what had to be the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on.

Jesse Rhodes, in the flesh.

Dark, mussed hair under a beat-up cowboy hat, dark eyes bright with amusement, and a smile that could have curled a nun's toes. And she was no nun.

"Hey, honey. You waiting for us?" he asked, his deep, raspy drawl like a match against sandpaper.

Hearing it through her laptop's tinny speakers had been enough to spark discussion of panty-dropping, and it was nothing compared to the real thing.

The real thing coming out of the real man.

Her gaze dropped, unable to hold those laughing eyes, and she found herself looking at a tattoo of a rattlesnake coiled around each finely muscled forearm. They were artful, almost delicate, the black ink shading lighter and darker in a realistic diamond pattern.

Here were the snakes, just like in the song. Would there be scorpions inked onto the lean muscles hiding under that t-shirt of his?

This man was too good-looking, too sure of himself. She could feel the pull of him through glass and metal. He seemed to be waiting for her to get out of the car, or at least roll down the window.

Part of her wanted to remain in the safety of the car, maybe even drive away and forget the whole thing. Then she pictured the alternative – sitting in a cubicle at another accounting firm without having tried anything new – and she got out of the car.

Heat billowed up from the parking lot's freshly tarred surface, and instantly she was drenched in sweat. Jesse stepped back and looked her up and down without even trying to hide it. His smile widened.

Maybe she should have worn something else. Like a potato sack. Her sporty aqua tank dress wasn't cut low or overtly sexy, but standing next to this man she was suddenly aware how much of her skin was on view.

"You must be Beth," he said, holding out his hand.