**If You Close Your Eyes**

**Chapter One**

 I clamped my hands over my ears as the answering machine went off for the second time, its piercing scream tearing me away from my latest manuscript, and calling into question my long time allegiance to my best friend, and publicist, Adison Wilkes.

 “….oh, and another thing. I KNOW you are screening your calls. Maaaa-dee. I, I, I, Maaaaaa-dee. See, I can do this allll day long, and for a long time, too, which is why I am the best publicist IN THE WORLD. Pick up the damn phone, sister, ‘cause I’m not going away.”

 The machine beeped to signal the end to Adison’s diatribe. I peeled my hands from the side of my head and refocused my attention on the third book in my series, *A November to Remember*. My fans were wonderful but the daily digs about not having the next book out were beginning to give me migraines and I’d begun losing sleep. As a self-published author, you just couldn’t take it easy. And then there was all the fan-mail that needed answering. Each day more than a hundred emails to answer. Some of them were flattering, others not so much. It was truly insane.

 The phone rang again. Adison wasn’t going away.

 After the irritating tone, Adison continued her ranting. “I’m only saying this because I have known you for practically your whole life and it is my solemn sworn duty to make sure that you surface long enough to live in the REAL WORLD sometimes. You are SO not ignoring me. Pick up the phone. Pick it up. Pick it up. Up. Up. Up. Up. Up.”

 I refused to reinforce the bad behavior and stood from my desk sighing heavily. Henry, my cat, named after O’Henry the writer, leapt from the back of the computer chair, where he was the self-appointed time keeper, and followed my exit strategy. Adison’s rant and continued repetition of the word ‘UP’ carried into the bedroom where I flopped down, face first onto the unmade bed. Henry jumped onto the bed next to me and instantly began the ‘mushy paw’ dance that he does, kneading the bed linen into submission.

 “Oh, my God,” I screamed, placing my hands over my eyes in frustration. “Shut up, Addie!”

 “Up, up, up, up, uuuuuhhhhhh-ppppp……Okay, you’ve forced my hand, Madison Renee James. I’m coming over there. Be ready to go out and enjoy some Philly night life, ‘cause once I get over to your apartment, you will have no choice. And don’t even think about pretending not to be home when I get there. All the locks in the world won’t keep me out.”

 I hurriedly rolled off of the bed, and tripped on discarded clothes scattered all over the floor in my haste to get to the phone to stop my friend. I sighed in frustration as the beeping machine signaled that my determined friend/soon to be kidnapper had, indeed, hung up already. Henry padded up next to me and I looked up at him from the floor. “I’m toast, Henry. Just. Toast.”

 I pushed myself up from the floor, and with great resignation, I walked over to my closet, a number of questions racing through my poor confused mind. Clubbing? What did I have to wear that would even look remotely cool? What was even considered cool these days? How long had it been since I’d done something like that, anyway? Weren’t most 22 year olds supposed to be out partying a few times a week?

 I slid the closet door over to where a full length mirror hung and pulled my tangle of red hair on top of my head. I observed the transformation. Maybe if I managed to secure it in that sophisticated yet messy look, then I could get away with not having to actually wash it (which would take more than a couple of hours to dry and flat iron). And the jeans I had put on after coming home from work were in decent shape, right? I arched a brow critically as I turned myself around to look at the jeans from all angles. They would do. But the shirt? Not happening. It was, of course, my favorite graphic tee-shirt declaring that I was a writer and therefore subject to flights of fantasy and living outside of the real world. It would hardly work tonight, given that I was forcefully being pulled into the real world.

 By the time Adison pounded on my apartment door, promising to break into a chorus of Annie’s Broadway hit, *Tomorrow*, unless I opened it promptly, I was dressed in what I knew would be ‘good enough’.

 Adison had other ideas and wagged a finger at me after only being in the apartment for two seconds. “Oh, no. You are so not going with me wearing that. What I have in mind will take a little finesse.”

 “Oh, and where would that be, phone stalker, Adie?” I laughed as I followed my friend’s disappearing form around the corner and into the bedroom. Even in high school we’d been labeled Adie and Maddie, and so it had stuck.

 Adison stopped abruptly and surveyed the chaos that was my bedroom, hands on her hips. “Seriously, you live like this? No, don’t even answer that. It’s rhetorical at best.” And with that she began sifting through the mounds of clean, unfolded clothing that was perched on a lone easy chair in the corner of the room. Finally, finding what she was looking for Adison pulled out a checkered camp shirt with embroidered designs on the front. “Voila. Put this on, and wear that white lacy camisole that I got you for your birthday last year. I know you still have it.”

 I stripped off the long sleeved blouse I’d chosen, saying, “It’s a good thing we’re such close friends, you know. I don’t let just anyone tell me to take off my shirt.”

 “And that’s just your problem. Maybe you should,” said Adison preening my hair in the closet door mirror. “As your freebie publicist, it’s my duty to make sure that you live up to the branding we’ve done to push those Madison James books of yours. What good is being a successful self-pubbed author,” she turned to place her finger in the air, “an author, I might add that everyone said didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell because she WAS self-published, when you don’t ever go out to be around the very public that have rocketed you to the best seller’s list in a scant two years?”

 “Well,” I said as I buttoned up the shirt, “there’s just so much time in the day. I do still have my day job. And Best Sellers list is just for self-published people. You know I can’t compete with the big guns.”

 Adison snorted and rolled her eyes. “Semantics. That’s going away soon. We’ve done a really awesome job of putting you out there, then Graham makes the insides of your books rock. Between the three of us, your books have taken off. We’re a crack team, even if we’re just donated serfs.” She smiled broadly.

 I impetuously threw my arms around my friend. “And that’s why I love you both. I couldn’t have done any of this without you guys.”

 “Right,” said Adison, slightly calmer. “Which is why you owe both of us this night out on the town.”

 “Is Graham meeting us at this mystery establishment?” I asked as we climbed into Adison’s compact car, Adison having finally given my outfit and hair her approval.

 “No, he said something about avoiding places like this like the plague.” Adison cranked the engine into life and pulled out into the traffic.

 “Right, which gives me such confidence in this evening.”

 “Don’t sweat it. When have I ever steered you wrong?”

 I refused to answer that as I knew that there had been more than a few times that she’d ‘steered’ me wrong. But as a good friend, and someone who’d used her degree in marketing and sales to make my book popular (for FREE), I was willing to take the good with the bad. What could it hurt to go out a little, right? Maybe I was taking things too seriously.

 As we moved through the snarl of traffic, the grease rainbows reflected the slight mist that had begun to fall. I thought about poor Graham, my freebie editor. He’d been one of my best friends since college, where we’d met in journalism class. It had been Graham who’d offered to edit my first attempt at fiction writing, even suggesting that I write romantic comedies as a way to get in touch with my inner muse. A bit of good advice, for sure.

 Adison, turned left on Houston Street and made toward the park. “Adie, where in the hell…?”

 As Adison pulled into a parking spot just outside of the Lone Horse Saloon and Dance Hall, I had my answer. “A honky-tonk? You kidnapped me to take me to a fucking honky tonk? I don’t think so,” I said, defiantly crossing my arms.

 “Two words,” said Addie. “Grow. Up.” She grabbed my elbow and gave it a friendly pull grinning broadly. “I have it on good authority that many of the city’s literary types, like publishers and agents, like to blow off steam here on Friday nights. And guess what night this is? Exactly,” she said without waiting or even giving me the chance to offer up a reply.

 If the loud country music bass was already loud out on the sidewalk, it practically bowled me over when we walked into the place. A brightly lit dance floor was covered by shifting and sweeping couples, stomping their feet, doing heel-to-toe steps like real cowboys and cowgirls (for a night at least that is), while a live country band pounded out the latest from the top forty country music countdown. It definitely wasn’t where I expected to spend my Friday evening, and if it weren’t for Addie’s insistence I would have been long gone.

 A large 25-foot lone horse, reared up on its hind legs, was pawing the air, its nostrils flared, eyes looking fiercely over the dancefloor at the far end of the room. The floors were wooden, surrounded by corral style fencing. Tables surrounded the dancefloor, and lights flashed in time to the music. It was crowded and I could already tell that with this many people in it, that it was going to be hot in there. A man caught my attention briefly at the end of the room. When he tilted back his hat with a single finger acknowledging my glance, I quickly looked away, totally embarrassed. For a second I contemplated whether or not I’d be able to make it to the door without Adie pinning me to the floor. I decided it would be best not to test her.

 “Well,” said Adie laughing at me. “You’ve sure made an impression.”

 “No,” I said, “I wasn’t looking at him…I was just….” I tried to stammer out a proper explanation but the words just wouldn’t come out.

 Dragging me over to the bar, Adie continued. “Uh-huh. Look, I brought you here to have a good time, to meet people.” She giggled and ordered two long-necks from the bartender and handed one to me.

 “You are bad. Very, very bad,” I said laughing, taking the beer from her. I pulled down half of the bottle before I realized that Adie had vanished from my side and had jumped into a line dance on the floor. I chanced a glance toward the far end of the room, but the man from before had moved on somewhere else. Thank God, I thought, downing the rest of the beer. That had just been so junior high.

 “I admire a girl that can knock down a bottle like that,” said a man’s voice suddenly from over my right shoulder.

 Turning around I felt the blood instantly rush back to my face, my temples throbbing. “Oh, um…thanks, I think,” I said to my mysterious man from the back of the room.

 “My name’s Damon,” he said offering me his hand.

 I swiveled around on the bar stool and took shook his offered hand. “And, I’m, well, quite frankly, I’m just embarrassed.”

 “Well, Ms. Embarrassed. Why are you embarrassed?”
 “Oh, I don’t think you need to know that.” I quickly motioned for the bartender.

 “No, no..,” he said grinning mischievously. “I’m totally interested, you know, in what would embarrass a redhead.”

 “What’s my red hair got to do with anything? You know stereotyping is so lowbrow and completely unattractive, right?”

 “Ouch,” he said putting his hand over his heart. “So, note to self, don’t reference Ms. Embarassed’s hair color. Got it.” He addressed the bartender who arrived with a jovial tone. “Luke, bring us some Jaeger-bombs. Ms. James doesn’t think your beer is up to standards.”

 My jaw dropped as the bartender laughed and went to make the drinks. “What? I never…. Look, you had no right to…. I’m just fine with….Wait,” I said, pointing a finger at him. I took a second to try and collect my thoughts, my cheeks turning a brighter shade of red as I found myself stammering once again. “You know who I am?”

 He waved off my protestations. “I think two thirds of the room knows you, Ms. James,” he paused to make a panoramic wave of his arm “The writer who’s taken the book world by storm and made the ‘big guys’ regret not signing you.”

 “Madison. My name is Madison. And, I don’t know about the whole ‘storm’ bit.” I was still trying to fight off the surprise from being identified. Despite what Addie said earlier about my fame I hadn’t taken her seriously.

 “Madison. Awesome…first name basis works for me. Look, Madison, I get that you probably don’t come to places like this, although this is a pretty upscale country bar as far as that goes. And I get that coming here probably was your blonde friend’s idea, but I can help you get through the night and maybe have a little fun too while you’re at it. If you’re game?”

 “May-be.” I said accepting the Jaeger-bomb drink when it came. I looked at him and smiled, the hint of a flirt in my tone. Now that I’ve had some time to gather my thoughts I was actually beginning to feel a little confident “I’m game. I’m the gamest game person I know.”

 He paused as the band struck up a tune called, “If you close your eyes”, the country version of it, of course. Damon inclined his head toward the band. “Love this song…though haven’t quite heard it done this way before.” He held his hands up as if in self-defense, and continued. “I’m just saying that I am here in much the same situation as you, so why not make the best of it together? Hey, we can sit here and dis our friend’s insensitivity all night if you want.”

 I laughed and loved the effect that my laughter seemed to have on Damon. His eyes danced and the lights from the dancefloor seemed to linger around the boyish grin that played across his face. “Why not?” I said tossing back the drink. “Let’s make a night of it.”

 Adison waved from the dancefloor and motioned to us to join her as she continued her boot-scooting.

 “So, she’s your friend?” asked Damon, signaling to the bartender for another drink.

 Nodding, I thanked the bartender and took a small sip. “Oh, yeah. That’s Adie, best friend and also my publicist. She’s gotten it into her head that were we’re here to ‘network’,” I said making air quotes. “Supposedly, there are a bunch of literary types here that we need to speak with.”

 Damon rolled his eyes. “Yeah, my business manager said pretty much the exact same thing to drag me out here.”

 “Wait,” I said, my eyes widening. “You’re not some big shot literary person are you?”

 “Me?” he said laughing and shaking his head. “Hardly. I’m more of a businessman than any sort of literary agent or anything like that. But I do appreciate a good book; don’t get me wrong.”

 “Maybe you’d like my books,” I said boldly as I finished off the last of my drink.

 His eyebrows arched over playful blue eyes that begged the question, but never quite asked. “Maybe,” he said quietly, placing his elbow on the bar, resting his chin on his hand and looking at me intently. “They’ve certainly made an impression on, what? Last count 30,000 readers and counting?” Our gazes locked and for a minute, or maybe two minutes, I considered throwing caution to the wind and just kissing him right there…spontaneous and completely not me. I was definitely warm again, but this time it wasn’t from embarrassment. The moment was broken when a very drunk dancer who spun out of control almost landed in my lap. Squealing, and not in a good way, I instinctively took Damon’s hand and suddenly found myself out on the dancefloor. I tried to avoid Adie’s gaze, but failed, getting a thumbs up gesture from my friend. She had a happy smile on her face, as if she knew that Damon and I were going to end up together on the dance floor. I could just imagine her saying, “I told you so,” when we got back into the car.

 The night passed by in a fevered honkey-tonk, and Jaeger-bomb induced whirlwind. In the center of the storm was Damon, whose way around the dancefloor didn’t fail to impress me. He wasn’t a muscle bound jock type, but he definitely worked out. Broad shoulders, gave way to a tight set of abs (I might have bumped into them a few times), and he was just the right height, as my head could rest conveniently in the cradle of his shoulder. I might have tried that a few times, too.

Though I’d insisted that I didn’t dance, and especially didn’t dance country, he’d managed to make even my awkward ‘duck’ steps look sexy. I found him easy to talk to and laugh with, and at some point noticed that my hair had come out of its scrunchy and was bouncing in happy abandon on my shoulders, a hot red mess my mother would have said. I also shed my long sleeved camp shirt, trusting the cami that I had on underneath to cover my modesty. But, honestly, after the fourth or fifth Jaeger-bomb I’d ceased to care.

 “Okay, solider,” said Adison in my ear, loud enough to be heard over some rendition of “Exes in Texas”. “We’ve got to get you home before we ruin what reputation you already have.”

 “What? Me?!” I shouted, swiveling my hips and tossing my hair over my head.

 “Uh, yeah, exactly you, Ms. Twinkle Toes,” said Adison taking me by the elbow.

 “Oh,” I said, starting to leave the dancefloor with Adie. “My date left. I wanna say goodbyes to his eyes.”

 Adie snorted, rolled her eyes, and laughing continued to ferry me to the door. I don’t think it was lost on her that I might have had just a little too much to drink.

 And that’s when it happened. All at once. Just like they say your life flashes before your eyes when you are dying. It began as a slow rolling, boiling, and hot sensation in the pit of my stomach. Then I began to sweat profusely.

 “Oh, Adie,” I heard myself mumble as we made it to the doorway. “I’m not as good as I think I feel anymore.” The world around me was starting to spin and become a mismatched blur of dancing cowboys and cowgirls.

 Adie laughed, my plight apparently amusing to her. “I’ve got you. Just one foot in front of the other. Just don’t puke in my car. It’s not much, but it’s paid for. Okay?” She spoke with the confidence of someone who was used to escorting their friends out of clubs.

 I put my arm around Adie’s shoulder as she helped me out of the bar and back into the parking lot. The cold air against my flushed skin managed to sober me up just a tiny bit. “You’re a good friend.”

 “Yes, yes. I’m a good friend.”

 “Oh, wait!” I said trying to straighten up. “I didn’t hand out any business cards, or get any numbers.”

 “I got them in spades,” Adie said as she propped me against the side of the car and showed me four business cards she’d shoved in her jeans. The cool night air felt really good on my face. Part of me was glad that Adison had been on point in getting numbers and making contacts. The rest of me was disappointed that I hadn’t been as successful, especially since there was only one number that I really cared about getting.

 I ignored her continued questions, because the front door of the Lone Horse Saloon had opened and Damon had come running out. Seeing me, he waved and jogged in our direction. My prayers were answered.

 “My date!” I happily said as I slapped Adie on the shoulder to get her attention. Not that she needed it, she had already seen the two of us dancing together, plus there was nobody else in the parking lot that he would be running to.

 “Damon meet Adie. Adie this is Da-maaan. He *really* likes books, you know.” I slurred in a not so elegant fashion.

 “I’m sorry, but my friend doesn’t get out much and she’s clearly had too much to drink. No thanks to you, I’m sure,” said Adie taking a defiant stance near me.

 “Uh, no. I tried to cut your friend off after a couple,” he said removing his cowboy hat and holding it in his hand. His tone was defensive, but at the same time he wasn’t trying to outright challenge Adie. Smooth as ever. I noticed business cards shoved into the interior hatband, but dismissed that thought as another wave of nausea hit me and I groaned. I was having trouble focusing my thoughts, but even in my stupor I was pretty confident that throwing up on Damon would ruin whatever flirting we had previously done.

 “Here, let me help you guys,” Damon offered, moving forward.

 I reached out for him, but at that moment the Jaeger part of the drink met the bomb part of the drink and the ensuing chemistry experiment was complete and ready to launch. Without thinking I grabbed for Damon’s hat, which made an excellent receptacle.

 Above me I heard Adie’s laughter, Damon’s gasps, and my own pathetic moaning as I released his hat, and fell back into the opened car door. Slamming it shut for me, Adie quickly dodged around to the other side of the car and we sped off, leaving Damon standing with an unexpected gift in his is oh-so-expensive Stetson. Curiously, he was smiling at me as we drove away. Maybe I hadn’t ruined the evening after all.