

DOLLY PARTON AND JAMES PATTERSON

She's a star
on the rise,

She's a singer
on the run.



"Warm, feisty.
Like having Dolly in
the room with you!"
VAL McDOWD

Run
Run
Run

ALSO
AVAILABLE

ALBUM OF 12 ORIGINAL DOLLY PARTON SONGS MADE FOR THE NOVEL!

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Run Rose Run

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RUN, ROSE, RUN

DOLLY PARTON
AND
JAMES PATTERSON



Little, Brown and Company
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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Eleven Months Earlier](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Chapter 63](#)
[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Chapter 81](#)

[Chapter 82](#)

[Chapter 83](#)

[Chapter 84](#)

[Chapter 85](#)

[Chapter 86](#)

[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)

[Chapter 89](#)

[Chapter 90](#)

[Chapter 91](#)

[Chapter 92](#)

[Chapter 93](#)

[Chapter 94](#)

[Chapter 95](#)

[Nine Months Later](#)

[Chapter 96](#)

[Songbook](#)

[Discover More James Patterson](#)

[About the Authors](#)

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

Prologue

The Louis Seize–style mirror in the bedroom of suite 409 at the Aquitaine Hotel reflected for little more than an instant a slim, fine-featured woman: wide blue eyes, clenched fists, dark hair streaming behind her as she ran.

Then AnnieLee Keyes vanished from the glass, as her bare feet took her racing into the suite’s living room. She dodged the edge of the giltwood settee, flinging its throw pillow over her shoulder. A lamp fell with a crash behind her. She leaped over the coffee table, with its neat stack of *Las Vegas* magazines and tray of complimentary Debauxe & Gallais truffles, her name written in chocolate ganache flecked with edible gold. She hadn’t even tasted a single one.

Her foot caught the bouquet of Juliet roses and the vase tipped over, scattering pink blooms all over the carpet.

The balcony was up ahead of her, its doors open to the morning sun. In another instant, she’d reached it, and the hot air hit her in the face like a fist. She jumped onto the chaise longue and threw her right leg over the railing, struggling to push herself the rest of the way up.

Then, balanced on the thin rail between the hotel and the sky, she hesitated. Her heart beat so quickly she could hardly breathe. Every nerve ending sparked with adrenaline.

I can’t, she thought. *I can’t do it.*

But she had to. Her fingers clutched the rail for another split second before she willed them loose. Her lips moved in an instant of desperate prayer. Then she launched herself into the air. The sun flared, but her vision darkened and became a tunnel. She could see only below her—upturned faces, mouths open in screams she couldn’t hear over her own.

Time slowed. She spread out her arms as if she were flying.

And weren't flying and falling the same?

Maybe, she thought, except for the landing.

Each millisecond stretched to an hour, these measures of time all she had left in this world. Life had been so damn hard, and she'd clawed her way up only to fling herself back down. She didn't want to die, but she was going to.

AnnieLee twisted in the air, trying to protect herself from what was coming. Trying to aim for the one thing that might save her.

Eleven
Months Earlier

Chapter 1

AnnieLee had been standing on the side of the road for an hour, thumbing a ride, when the rain started falling in earnest.

Wouldn't you know it? she thought as she tugged a gas station poncho out of her backpack. *It just figures.*

She pulled the poncho over her jacket and yanked the hood over her damp hair. The wind picked up, and fat raindrops began to beat a rhythm on the cheap plastic. But she kept that hopeful smile plastered on her face, and she tapped her foot on the gravel shoulder as a bit of a new song came into her head.

Is it easy? she sang to herself.

*No it ain't
Can I fix it?
No I cain't*

She'd been writing songs since she could talk and making melodies even before that. AnnieLee Keyes couldn't hear the call of a wood thrush, the *plink plink plink* of a leaky faucet, or the rumbling rhythm of a freight train without turning it into a tune.

Crazy girl finds music in everything—that's what her mother had said, right up until the day she died. And the song coming to AnnieLee now gave her something to think about besides the cars whizzing by, their warm, dry occupants not even slowing down to give her a second glance.

Not that she could blame them; she wouldn't stop for herself, either. Not in this weather, and her probably looking no better than a drowned possum.

When she saw the white station wagon approaching, going at least twenty miles under the speed limit, she crossed her fingers that it would be some nice old grandpa pulling over to offer her a lift. She'd turned down two rides back when she thought she'd have her choice of them, the first from a chain-smoking lady with two snarling Rottweilers in the back seat, the second from a kid who'd looked higher than Mount Everest.

Now she could kick herself for being so picky. Either driver would have at least gotten her a few miles up the road, smelling like one kind of smoke or another.

The white wagon was fifty yards away, then twenty-five, and as it came at her she gave a friendly, graceful wave, as if she was some kind of celebrity on the shoulder of the Crosby Freeway and not some half-desperate nobody with all her worldly belongings in a backpack.

The old Buick crawled toward her in the slow lane, and AnnieLee's waving grew nearly frantic. But she could have stood on her head and shot rainbows out of her Ropers and it wouldn't have mattered. The car passed by and grew gradually smaller in the distance. She stomped her foot like a kid, splattering herself with mud.

Is it easy? she sang again.

No it ain't

Can I fix it?

No I cain't

But I sure ain't gonna take it lyin' down

It was catchy, all right, and AnnieLee wished for the twentieth time that she had her beloved guitar. But it wouldn't have fit in her pack, for one thing, and for another, it was already hanging on the wall at Jeb's Pawn.

If she had one wish—besides to get the hell out of Texas—it was that whoever bought Maybelle would take good care of her.

The distant lights of downtown Houston seemed to blur as AnnieLee blinked raindrops from her eyes. If she thought about her life back there for more than an instant, she'd probably stop wishing for a ride and just start running.

By now the rain was falling harder than she'd seen it in years. As if God had drawn up all the water in Buffalo Bayou just so He could pour it back

down on her head.

She was shivering, her stomach ached with hunger, and suddenly she felt so lost and furious she could cry. She had nothing and nobody; she was broke and alone and night was coming on.

But there was that melody again; it was almost as if she could hear it inside the rain. *All right*, she thought, *I don't have nothing. I have music.*

And so she didn't cry. She sang instead.

Will I make it?

Maybe so

Closing her eyes, she could imagine herself on a stage somewhere, singing for a rapt audience.

Will I give up?

Oh no

She could feel the invisible crowd holding its breath.

I'll be fightin' til I'm six feet underground

Her eyes were squeezed shut and her face was tilted to the sky as the song swelled inside her. Then a horn blared, and AnnieLee Keyes nearly jumped out of her boots.

She was hoisting both her middle fingers high at the tractor trailer when she saw its brake lights flare.

Chapter

2

Was there ever a more beautiful color in the whole wide world? AnnieLee could write a damn ode to the dazzling red of those brake lights.

As she ran toward the truck, the cab's passenger door swung open. She wiped the rain from her eyes and looked at her rescuer. He was a gray-haired, soft-bellied man in his fifties, smiling down at her from six feet up. He tipped his baseball cap at her like a country gentleman.

"Come on in before you drown," he called.

A gust of wind blew the rain sideways, and without another second's hesitation, AnnieLee grabbed onto the door handle and hauled herself into the passenger seat, flinging water everywhere.

"Thank you," she said breathlessly. "I thought I was going to have to spend the night out there."

"That would've been rough," the man said. "It's a good thing I came along. Lot of people don't like to stop. Where you headed?"

"East," she said as she pulled off her streaming poncho and then shrugged out of her heavy backpack. Her shoulders were killing her. Come to think of it, so were her feet.

"My name's Eddie," the man said. He thrust out a hand for her to shake.

"I'm...Ann," she said, taking it.

He held her fingers for a moment before releasing them. "It's real nice to meet you, Ann." Then he put the truck into gear, looked over his shoulder, and pulled onto the highway.

He was quiet for a while, which was more than fine with AnnieLee, but then over the road noise she heard Eddie clear his throat. "You're dripping all over my seat," he said.

“Sorry.”

“Here, you can at least dry your face,” he said, tossing a red bandanna onto her lap. “Don’t worry, it’s clean,” he said when she hesitated. “My wife irons two dozen for me every time I head out on a run.”

Reassured by news of this wife, AnnieLee pressed the soft bandanna to her cheeks. It smelled like Downy. Once she’d wiped her face and neck, she wasn’t sure if she should give it back to him, so she just wadded it up in her hand.

“You hitchhike a lot?” Eddie asked.

AnnieLee shrugged because she didn’t see how it was any of his business.

“Look, I been driving longer than you been alive, I bet, and I’ve seen some things. *Bad* things. You don’t know who you can trust.”

Then she saw his big hand coming toward her, and she flinched.

Eddie laughed. “Relax. I’m just turning up the heat.” He twisted a knob, and hot air blasted in her face. “I’m one of the good guys,” he said. “Husband, dad, all that white-picket-fence business. Shoot, I even got a dang *poodle*. That was my wife’s idea, though. I wanted a blue heeler.”

“How old are your kids?” AnnieLee asked.

“Fourteen and twelve,” he said. “Boys. One plays football, the other plays chess. Go figure.” He held out a battered thermos. “Got coffee if you want it. Just be careful, because it’s probably still hot as hellfire.”

AnnieLee thanked him, but she was too tired for coffee. Too tired to talk. She hadn’t even asked Eddie where he was going, but she hardly cared. She was in a warm, dry cab, putting her past behind her at seventy miles per hour. She wadded her poncho into a pillow and leaned her head against the window. Maybe everything was going to be okay.

She must have fallen asleep then, because when she opened her eyes she saw a sign for Lafayette, Louisiana. The truck’s headlights shone through slashing rain. A Kenny Chesney song was on the radio. And Eddie’s hand was on her thigh.

She stared down at his big knuckles as her mind came out of its dream fog. Then she looked over at him. “I think you better take your hand off me,” she said.

“I was wondering how long you were going to sleep,” Eddie said. “I was getting lonely.”

She tried to push his hand away, but he squeezed tighter.

“Relax,” he said. His fingers dug into her thigh. “Why don’t you move closer, Ann? We can have a little fun.”

AnnieLee gritted her teeth. “If you don’t take your hand off me, you’re going to be sorry.”

“Oh, girl, you are just precious,” he said. “You just relax and let me do what I like.” His hand slid farther up her thigh. “We’re all alone in here.”

AnnieLee’s heart pounded in her chest, but she kept her voice low. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Sure I do.”

“I’m warning you,” she said.

Eddie practically giggled at her. “What are you going to do, girl, scream?”

“No,” she said. She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out the gun. Then she pointed it at his chest. “I’m going to do *this*.”

Eddie’s hand shot off her leg so fast she would’ve laughed if she weren’t so outraged.

But he got over his surprise quickly, and his eyes grew narrow and mean. “Hundred bucks says you can’t even fire that thing,” he said. “You better put that big gun away before you get hurt.”

“*Me* get hurt?” AnnieLee said. “The barrel’s not pointing at me, jackass. Now you apologize for touching me.”

But Eddie was angry now. “You skinny little tramp, I wouldn’t touch you with a tent pole! You’re probably just another truck stop hoo—”

She pulled the trigger, and sound exploded in the cabin—first the shot, and then the scream of that dumb trucker.

The truck swerved, and somewhere behind them a horn blared. “What the hell’re you doing, you crazy hobo bitch?”

“Pull over,” she said.

“I’m not pull—”

She lifted the pistol again. “Pull over. I’m not kidding,” she said.

Cursing, Eddie braked and pulled over onto the shoulder. When the truck came to a stop, AnnieLee said, “Now get out. Leave the keys in and the engine running.”

He was sputtering and pleading, trying to reason with her now, but she couldn’t be bothered to listen to a word he said.

“Get out,” she said. “Now.”

She shook the gun at him and he opened the door. The way the rain was coming down, he was soaked before he hit the ground.

“You crazy, stupid, trashy—”

AnnieLee lifted the gun so it was pointing right at his mouth, so he shut it. “Looks like there’s a rest stop a couple miles ahead,” she said. “You can have yourself a nice walk and a cold shower at the same time. Pervert.”

She slammed the door, but she could feel him beating on the side of the cab as she tried to figure out how to put the truck into gear. She fired another shot, out the window, and that made him quit until she found the clutch and the gas.

Then AnnieLee grabbed hold of the gearshift. Her stepdad might’ve been the world’s biggest asshole, but he’d taught her to drive stick. She knew how to double-clutch and how to listen to the revs. And maybe songs weren’t the only thing she had a natural talent for, because it didn’t take her long at all to lurch that giant rig off the shoulder and pull out onto the highway, leaving Eddie screaming behind her.

I’m driving, she thought giddily. I’m driving!

She yanked on the horn and shot deeper into the darkness. And then she started singing.

*Driven to insanity, driven to the edge
Driven to the point of almost no return*

She beat out a rhythm on the steering wheel.

*Driven, driven to be smarter
Driven to work harder
Driven to be better every day*

That last line made her laugh out loud. Sure, she’d be better tomorrow—because tomorrow the sun would come out again, and tomorrow she had absolutely *no plans* to carjack an eighteen-wheeler.

Chapter

3

Ruthanna couldn't get the damn lick out of her head. A descending roll in C major, twangy as a rubber band, it was crying out for lyrics, a bass line, a song to live inside. She tapped her long nails on her desk as she scrolled through her emails.

"Later," she said, to herself or to the lick, she wasn't entirely sure. "We'll give you some attention when the boys show up to play."

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and already she'd fielded six pleading requests for Ruthanna Ryder, one of country music's grandest queens, to grace some big industry event or another with her royal presence.

She couldn't understand it, but people just failed to get the message: she'd *retired* that crown. Ruthanna didn't want to put on high heels, false eyelashes, and a sparkling Southern smile anymore. She wasn't going to stand up on some hot, bright stage in a dress so tight it made her ribs ache. She had no desire to pour her heart out into a melody that'd bring tears to a thousand pairs of eyes, hers included. No, sir, she'd put in her time, and now she was done. She was still writing songs—she couldn't stop that if she tried—but if the world thought it was going to ever hear them, it had another think coming. Her music was only for herself now.

She looked up from the screen as Maya, her assistant, walked into the room with a crumpled paper bag in one hand and a stack of mail in the other.

"The sun sure is bright on those gold records today," Maya said.

Ruthanna sighed at her. "Come on, Maya. You're the *one person* I'm supposed to be able to count on not to harass me about my quote, unquote, career. Jack must've called with another 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'"

Maya just laughed, which was her way of saying, *You bet your white ass he did.*

Jack was Ruthanna's manager—ahem, *former* manager. “All right, what does he want from me today?”

“He wouldn't tell me yet. But he said that it's not what *he* wants. He's thinking about what *you* really want.”

Ruthanna gave a delicate snort. “*I* really want to be left alone. Why he thinks he knows something different is beyond me.” She picked up her ringing phone, silenced it, and then threw it onto the overstuffed couch across the room.

Maya watched this minor tantrum serenely. “He says the world's still hungry for your voice. For your songs.”

“Well, a little hunger never hurt anyone.” She gave her assistant a sly grin. “Not that you'd know much about hunger.”

Maya put a hand on her ample hip. “And *you* got room to talk,” she said.

Ruthanna laughed. “Touché. But whose fault is it for hiring Louie from the ribs place to be my personal chef? You could've picked someone who knew his way around a salad.”

“Coulda, woulda, shoulda,” Maya said. She put a stack of letters in Ruthanna's inbox and held out the paper bag. “It's from Jack.”

“What is that, muffins? I told Jack I was off carbs this month,” Ruthanna said.

Not that Jack believed anything she told him lately. The last time they'd talked she'd said that she was going to start gardening, and he'd laughed so hard he dropped the phone into his pool. When he called her back on his landline he was still wheezing with delight. “I can't see you out there pruning roses any more than I can see you stripping off your clothes and riding down Lower Broadway on a silver steed like Lady Godiva of Nashville,” he'd said.

Her retort—that it was past the season for pruning roses anyway—had failed to convince him.

“No, ma'am,” Maya said, “these are *definitely* not muffins.”

“You looked?”

“He told me to. He said if I saw them, I'd be sure you opened them. Otherwise he was afraid you might chuck the bag in a bin somewhere, and that'd be...well, a lot of sparkle to throw away.”