

EMERY LORD

Open Road Summer

*Your heart will
lead you home . . .*



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CHAPTER ONE

Nashville to Charlotte

The fans scream for her, but they don't really know the girl on the magazine covers—the girl with the guitar and the easy smile. Her given name is Delilah, and they think she goes by Lilah. But anyone who really knows my best friend calls her Dee. They think she's seventeen, and she is. But she never acts seventeen. She acts either thirty years old, like a composed professional, in record-label meetings and interviews, or twelve years old, with me—giggling like we did back when she still had braces, back when our summer plans were nothing more than sleepovers and swimming at the pool. They think she wrote the songs on this album while getting over a breakup. But they're wrong. She's not over it. Not even close.

On the side of her tour bus, there's a ten-foot-tall picture of Dee surrounded by a field of wildflowers. The shot captures her hand midstrum against a twelve-string guitar.

Next to the picture, “Lilah Montgomery” is scrawled in a cursive font meant to mimic Dee’s handwriting. Fans wait in line for hours to get that same signature on posters and T-shirts. The newest album is called *Middle of Nowhere, Tennessee*, and the title song has been number one for two weeks already. It’s an upbeat song—a happy one, but it was written more than a year ago.

*Middle of nowhere, Tennessee,
Exactly where I want to be.
Our initials carved in the old oak tree,
And every road takes me back home.
Middle of nowhere, Tennessee,
Dancing on the porch, you and me.
This is where I was born to be,
No matter how far I may roam.*

The song, like so many others, was written for Jimmy.

I feel out of place here, in the expansive parking lot behind Muddy Water Records, outside Nashville. This is the starting point for Dee’s summer tour, and all three passenger buses are lined up, waiting to take us on our way. Dee wafts within the crowd, making cheerful introductions between the families of her band and crew, all here to say good-bye before the buses depart. I’m hanging back, waiting for her, when I sense someone in my peripheral vision. Someone who is not so subtly staring at my legs. There’s plenty to see, since my hemline is pushing the limits of public decency.

“Hey,” the guy says, eyeing me in an overeager way that makes me feel embarrassed for him. “Are you part of the backup band?”

“Sure.” This is a lie. I smirk, but it’s forced. I’m not in the mood, not after the month I’ve had. Besides, he’s not my type. Neatly trimmed hair, tucked-in polo shirt. One glance at him and I’m repressing a yawn.

“I’m Mark Tran,” he says. “I’m the assistant lighting director for the show.”

“Reagan O’Neill,” I reply. Then I launch the grenade. “I’m seventeen.”

It lands. Boom. My new friend Mark pinkens as he mutters something about it being nice to meet me. You can only have so many guys hit on you before it gets terribly, almost insultingly boring. My appearance and collection of tiny clothes are like flypaper, drawing in good boys and bad boys, boys younger than me and men old enough to be my father. Their reactions make it easier to tell the difference between the harmless guys and the ones who are venomous—the ones who will make it sting. But sometimes they fool me.

Dee greets her violinist’s mom with an enveloping hug. The woman looks startled, her eyes widening over Dee’s shoulder. My best friend is a hugger, with arms like an unhinged gate. At the mere thought of embracing strangers, I cross my arms, which triggers a splintering pain in my left wrist. I’m wearing my leather jacket despite the early June humidity, hoping that no one notices how tightly the left sleeve fits over my blue cast. The persistent ache feels like a

reminder that I can't keep making bad decisions without breaking more pieces of myself.

"Reagan," Dee calls, waving me over. "You ready?"

I walk toward her, my tall shoes thudding against the asphalt. This sound is my touchstone, and it follows me anywhere I go. Unless I'm sneaking out of the house. In that case, I use my bare feet to dodge the creaky stairs. Today I chose my heeled motorcycle boots to go with a summer dress made of thin floral-print cotton. Contradiction suits me.

Dee signs a few more autographs for the family members of her band and crew as we try to move toward our tour bus. One girl looks eleven or twelve, and she's trembling like she's had espresso injected into her veins.

"I think you're the prettiest person in the whole entire world," the girl says as Dee signs a photograph of herself, "and I listen to your music, like, every single day."

Though I've seen emotional fans with Dee before, my first thought is: *This is so weird*. Dee doesn't think it's weird. Without a moment of hesitation or a look of confusion, she squeals a thank-you and hugs the girl, who clutches on to her, stunned.

To her fans, Dee is the best friend they've never had, and I guess that part isn't so weird. Dee's the only real friend I've ever had—the one who comes running even though I'd never admit I need someone by my side. She jokes that she keeps bail money in her nightstand; I joke that she'd be my one phone call. Only I'm not joking. She would be.

Dee hooks her arm through mine as we walk toward her family. I already said good-bye to my dad, standing on the

porch of our farmhouse before Dee's mom picked me up. I didn't want to do the drawn-out, forlorn farewell, because neither of us is forlorn. We both know we need a break. He needs a break from my causing trouble and bickering with my stepmom, and I need a break from . . . well, from my whole life, really.

I stay back, crossing my arms again, as Dee hugs her dad—a long, clinging hug that reminds me that leaving isn't so easy for her. Mrs. Montgomery is hugging Dee's aunt Peach, who is our summer chaperone. After Peach boards the tour bus, Mrs. Montgomery waves me over, and I uncross my arms. The casted one aches, of course, but I don't let myself linger on that anymore.

"You girls are going to have such a fun summer." She clasps her hands against my shoulders. "I can't wait to hear about it."

To her credit, Dee's mom doesn't admonish me to behave or warn me not to get Dee in trouble. No, Mrs. Montgomery has never been like that, even though I probably deserve it. She hugs me as she always does, like I'm her own daughter.

"You call if you need anything, okay?" Dee's mom whispers as she releases me. This is such a mom thing to say when leaving a daughter at summer camp or at college or, I suppose, on a concert tour. It's nice to have someone say it to me.

Beside me, Dee crouches down, pulling both of her little brothers into one big hug. She whispers something to both of them, and they nod obediently in response. When she stands back, her eyes are glistening with tears.

“None of that,” her mom says. “We’ll see you opening night. You won’t even miss us.”

That’s not true. Dee would love to have her family on tour, but her parents think it’s important for her brothers to stay grounded in reality. They’re in elementary school, and they should have summers of cannonballs into the pool and makeshift lemonade stands. They should have a childhood that’s based on more than their sister’s fame—a childhood like Dee’s.

Now Dee’s mom holds her close and says something in her ear. Advice, I suppose, or an affirmation of how proud she is. Mrs. Montgomery is a songwriter for a big label on Music Row, but she’s never been a performer. She filled their house with Emmylou Harris and Johnny Cash, and she showed Dee by example that she could make her very own music. Dee’s parents never pushed her toward this career, but her DNA twists into bars of music instead of double helixes.

With one last squeeze, Dee untangles her arms from her mom’s neck. She exhales deeply, linking her pinkie with mine. “Let’s do it.”

So, with Dee glancing behind us one last time, we step into our home for the next three months. My laptop and camera bag are already on board, and my one massive suitcase is packed in the undercarriage of the bus. Dee designed the interior of the bus herself. Both sides are lined with long leather couches—cushy and deep like the one in her parents’ living room. One couch sidles up to a retro dining nook while

the other ends near the compact kitchen area, which is complete with a sink and a well-stocked refrigerator.

I plop down on the right-side couch, cozying against the throw pillows. Dee had them made with a floral fabric to look like the wildflowers on her album cover. There's a full-size bed in the back, where Peach is already lying down, and two bunks tucked into the bus's side wall.

Dee nestles into the couch across from mine, turning so she can look out the tall windows at her family. They can't see her, but she presses her palm against the glass. Her other hand rests on the couch, lingering near her two ever-present cell phones: one for personal contacts and one for work calls. The personal phone holds only a few numbers.

Everyone in the crowd waves as the bus lurches forward. Dee waves back even though no one can see her but me. The bus driver honks the horn a few times, and just like that, we're on our way to everywhere. Dee keeps looking out the window, watching as the scenes of downtown slide into images of our small town on the east side of Nashville. The snapshots of home pass us by—the wide trees and fields of crops and little houses, each with its own American flag. Outside, the sky is darkening, and so is Dee's mood. She's wringing her hands absentmindedly, smoothing a fingertip over her polished nails.

Real-life Dee doesn't have shiny pink nails. She has dirt under her fingernails from playing with her little brothers. She's still in full makeup from the press conference earlier, and, with false eyelashes too dark for her fair complexion,

Dee looks like a higher-contrast version of herself. Her blond hair is in loose waves that end exactly at her shoulders, the same cut and style as my own. The only difference is that Dee's natural coloring looks like an American landscape—country-sky-blue eyes and hair the color of Tennessee wheat fields, golden strands with darker undertones. My hair is nearly black, and I have jealous green eyes. In a fairy tale, she'd play the good fairy. I'd be the evil witch's screwup second cousin.

Dee's working through something in her mind, hugging herself as one hand toys with her necklace. The necklace is her trademark talisman—a thin chain with a tiny horseshoe that rests right on the hollow of her throat. Jimmy gave it to her for her fourteenth birthday, and she's never played a show without it. The necklace suits Dee so perfectly—the gold color and the simple, delicate charm—that it seems intrinsic, as much a part of her as the tiny scar on her chin or the freckles across her shoulders.

"Hey," I say, finally figuring out why she's so preoccupied. "That reporter from earlier . . . she doesn't know anything. I think her hair was proof of that."

Dee tries not to smile, but she can't help it. I like to think of myself as the devil on her shoulder, happy to say the things that she's too polite to think. "I don't want it to be like this, you know. Missing him makes me feel weak and pathetic."

"I know." When she talks about Jimmy, she almost never says his name. She doesn't have to. He's the "him" in every sentence that really matters; he's the "he" in every song.

She shakes her head. “I brought this on myself by writing the songs that I wrote. Of course they were going to ask. I just have to take it.”

Thinking back to this afternoon’s press conference, I bite down on the insides of my cheeks—a habit I’ve developed since I quit smoking last month. The media session, held in the event room of the record label’s building, was mostly uneventful, but one reporter got pushy.

“Your first album was all about falling in love,” the reporter said. “This album seems to be mostly about heart-break. Can you speak to that?”

Dee’s smile stayed glued on, but I know sadness swelled in her lungs. In interview prep, Dee’s publicist quizzes her with painful questions like they’re multiplication flash cards. I knew she could handle this question, but she looked so diminutive up on the platform, sandwiched between her bulky manager and her towering publicist at a long table.

“Eh,” Dee answered smilingly, trying to sound casual. “I didn’t want to be seen as a one-trick-pony songwriter, so I focused on something other than falling in love—falling *out* of love.”

That’s another thing the fans have wrong about her. They think she’s a celebrity, and she is. But she’s also a real girl, one who fake-smiles until she can close her bedroom door and sob.

“Did you recently end a relationship that caused you heart-break?” It was the same reporter, butting in without being called on. My noncasted hand gripped into a fist. “Perhaps a

long-term relationship with a high-school boyfriend, as it's been rumored in the tabloids?"

Behind the microphone, Dee caught her smile right before it dropped to the floor. "The only relationship I'm in is with my guitar. We're still very happy together; thank you for asking."

Laughter spread through the crowd of reporters. Even Dee's sour-faced publicist, Lissa, almost smiled. Dee moved on with press-conference pleasantries, but my edges are harder than hers and always have been. She forgives, forgets, moves on; I smolder quietly like embers, waiting for just enough fresh air to rage into a wildfire. Needless to say, that reporter better hope she never comes up against me. I grew up in a minefield of mean girls, and their snarky shrapnel made me bionic. Now I've got a stockpile of verbal ammunition and a grudge against anyone who crosses Dee.

Dee sighs and slides over to my couch, still with the same solemn look on her face.

"Reagan, I can't tell you how much it helps to have you here." She's the only person I know who can say sentimental things and still sound completely real. She glances toward the back of the bus and says in a quieter voice, "Peach is great, but it's not the same."

Peach is Mrs. Montgomery's youngest sister. When Dee was little, she couldn't say her aunt's real name, Clementine. She called her Peach instead, and now everyone else does, too. Dee takes after Peach, with her fair skin and naturally

blond hair. But Peach is taller, with straightened hair and feathery bangs.

I smile at her. "I wouldn't have missed it."

Actually, I almost did miss it. My dad was reluctant to let me spend my summer traveling the country on a tour bus with only Dee's twenty-six-year-old aunt as the chaperone. He isn't much for parental mandates, so I assume that my stepmother was pulling his puppet strings. Fortunately, they both hated Blake, the guy I was dating at the time, and would have done anything to put distance between us. They finally agreed to the tour when I mentioned college applications. I plan to use the tour as a way to add to my photojournalism portfolio. By summer's end, I should have shots from all over the country.

For me, this summer is more than a pleasant detour; it's a necessary diversion. For the past year, I've been stuck in the life of a normal junior in high school, passing the time with people I don't especially like at parties that aren't especially fun. So I made my own fun, and it did not go very well. Meanwhile, Dee has been performing at award shows, shooting magazine covers, and completing the *Middle of Nowhere* album.

Peach emerges from the bedroom area in the back of the bus. When Dee opened for the band Blue Sky Day last year, she needed a guardian to accompany her on tour. Dee's parents couldn't come because of her brothers, so Peach volunteered. She wound up dating Dee's banjo player, Greg, which

explains her eagerness to join up on this tour as well. Dee requires very little supervision, so Peach spends her time hanging out with her boyfriend and fielding phone calls from Dee's management team.

True to form, Peach is holding a magazine. She keeps up with all the gossip websites, too, checking for articles about Dee. I'm always tempted to read what people say about Dee, but my temper can't handle it.

"Thought you might want one." Peach smiles as she hands me the open magazine. "It's not out till next month, but we got a few first-run prints for approval."

"Thanks," I reply before she retreats to the bedroom. I examine the front of the magazine, which happens to be a favorite of mine. I never would have thought Dee could land the cover of *Idiosync*; she's the first country artist ever deemed cool enough for it. The magazine's aesthetic is edgy and urban, which is how I'd describe my own sense of style—but never Dee's. In the picture, she's wearing red ballet flats and a tight navy blazer over a white collared shirt and jeans . . . while riding a mechanical bull at a Nashville saloon. Instead of some trying-to-be-sexy rodeo-girl pose, Dee's holding on with both hands, head tilted back and laughing. She looks taller than her petite stature—only one inch taller than me—and it makes me wonder if other people in magazines are smaller in real life. *BUCK THE MAN*, the title screams. *Dixie darling Lilah Montgomery talks prep-school style, small-town roots, and bucking off pop music.*

Dee grins at me, pointing at the bold-font headline. "Lissa

is *not* happy, so, naturally, I'm thrilled. She's making them change the title of the article."

Most of Dee's "look" has been a bickering match with her publicist at some point or another. The wardrobe battle raged on for months. Dee has a very specific sense of style, which is inspired mostly by the old movies she watched with her mom when she was little—shrunk blazers; girly skirts or modest, colorful dresses; and delicate ballet flats. When Dee was starting out, Lissa fussed that her style was "too collegiate for our target demographic." The record label wanted her in cowgirl boots, but Dee refused. After her first album, Dee was offered a promotional deal for J.Crew's new teen line. Lissa's eyes spun like a slot machine landing on dollar signs, and she never mentioned Dee's clothing choices again.

I skim the article, hoping the interviewer played nice. *Idiosync* mocks clichés, which is why I like it, but if they made fun of Dee, I'll have to cancel my subscription and send anonymous hate mail.

Country chanteuse Lilah Montgomery is everything you expect and a whole lot more that you don't expect. She is a giggly blond gamine, she is affably coy about her personal life, and she is unpretentious to the point of eating a messy cheeseburger in my presence. In the two hours I spent with Lilah Montgomery at Smokin' Pistols Saloon in Nashville, she proved sweet as pecan pie. But this rising star will raise her voice, all right. Just ask her if she plans to veer her upbeat country-gone-folksy songbook toward the pop music scene.

"Never," she insists. Her voice carries vehemence, a resounding finality that defies the usual public-relations doublespeak. "No, let me rephrase that. I won't change the way I write music; I won't change my subject matter or add bass beats or refrain from using a banjo and harmonica in my backup band. But if people who enjoy pop music also enjoy my music, wonderful. I'm thrilled. But I won't compromise who I am as an artist or songwriter."

Industry critic Jon Wallace calls her a "musician's musician"—an artist focused on instrumentation, on perfecting complicated harmonies and pioneering her own sound. Lilah cites Patty Griffin, Joni Mitchell, and Dolly Parton as her biggest musical inspirations, though her music is pointedly more cheerful than her inspirations suggest. Where does that extra spark come from? Her mother—songwriter Laura Montgomery.

While I read, Dee's spinning her work phone in the palm of her hand without looking at it. Instead, her gaze shifts around the tour bus as if she's tracking the flight pattern of an aimless gnat. When Dee's mind darts around, her eyes do, too.

"Hey," I say. "Relax."

"Yeah, yeah." She waves her hand at me. "I'm relaxed."

This would be a lie no matter when she said it, even in her sleep. The first time I saw a diagram of nerve endings in my biology book, I thought they looked like tiny, splayed-out hands or the bird's-eye view of a leafless tree. I'm pretty sure Dee's nerve endings look like coiled springs.

"Terry texted me again. He won't give it up." Terry, her manager, is relentless.

“Which ‘it’?”

“Performing ‘My Own.’ Not gonna happen.” She taps her fingers on her phone, standing her ground.

The song is an upbeat powerhouse, complete with hand claps in the chorus.

*On my own, you'll see,
This ain't no Les Miserables.
I'm wild and free and I'm seventeen,
And I'll make it my job
To show you how good my life can be;
Ain't no pain in my alone.
I'm happy to be just little ol' me,
And I'll make this world my own.*

She thought if she could write a song about being happy without Jimmy, maybe it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That plan didn't work, but her label loved the song enough to put it on the record. Dee cares deeply about honest performances, and she can't make herself prance around stage while singing a lie to her fans. When Dee refused to include “My Own” in the tour set list, Terry's face looked like an oven-baked ham—pink and almost steaming.

The sky is nearly dark now, smudges of clouds across an inky sky, and the bus window reflects my image back to me—the sharp collarbones that have long been my least favorite feature, the wavy hair that's hard to manage without the use of my left hand. But, worst of all, behind thick black eyeliner,

my eyes look tired. And I *am* tired—weary, even—but at least I'm here, hiding in Dee's life until I can handle my own.

As we barrel toward North Carolina, I take in the last glimpses of Tennessee that I'll have till late August. I don't think I'll miss Nashville, except maybe the country sky at night, the way every centimeter is flecked with stars. It's something I could never capture in a photograph, the hugeness of the universe and the smallness of everything else. When Dee and I were little, the world seemed so vast—so impossibly, frighteningly vast that we could never make it our own.

Does the sky go on forever? Dee asked me the summer we met. We were lying on our backs in the cool grass, facing up. She'd gotten a book of constellations for her eighth birthday, and we were using it to search the sky.

Yep, I told her. It's called infinity.

Infinity, she repeated. There was a pause as I traced Ursa Minor with my finger, and I could feel her looking over at me. *Do you think we could be friends for infinity?* she asked.

After a moment, I said, *Yeah. I'm pretty sure we could be.* She linked her pinkie with mine, our secret signal, and the planet spun on beneath the starlight. These days, the world doesn't seem nearly big enough to outrun our problems.

My eyes follow a blinking airplane light, and its steady path leaves me thinking about how far we've come. It's no secret that Dee has come a long way from the middle of nowhere, Tennessee, but, as the cast on my arm reminds me, I have, too. The difference is: I still have a lot farther to go.