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An Excerpt from

# Survivor

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*Time is a miraculous healer. With time, the pieces of a broken heart can be picked up and coaxed back together again, making it whole once more. And the pain that shattered it in the first place becomes a distant memory as though it never even happened.*

*But time isn't always enough.*

*Sometimes tragedy can shred a heart beyond recognition until the damage bleeds deep into the soul. In those rare and terrible circumstances, something far greater is needed to patch the shards back together. And when that happens, the heart will never be the same again...*

## Prologue

Avery Gibson gasped and bolted upright. Her chest heaved with her breaths, and her pulse pounded in her ears. Her hair was matted to her face, obscuring her vision. She brushed it back hastily and wiped the moisture from her cheeks, but still couldn't see anything past the darkness that surrounded her.

She swallowed against the tightness in her throat and blinked against the familiar burn of new tears. Her chest constricted like a vice, squeezing her heart as it thudded in her chest.

The panic threatened to overwhelm her, and she forced her attention to her breaths. In, out, one. In, out, two. Counting each one.

Breathing became easier, but the pressure in her chest wouldn't ease. *It was only a dream.* But it was more than that. It was a memory—a horrible recollection of the worst day of her life. The day she lost everything.

Moisture pooled in her eyes as the loss consumed her all over again. Would it ever not hurt?

She pulled the duvet around her, but it brought little comfort. The pain clawed at her insides, along with a far more vicious emotion that shredded her, tearing her apart.

Everything about the dream had seemed so real, as if *it* was happening all over again. Even awake, the darkness rose up like a tidal wave about to drown her. The panic. The helplessness. The insurmountable agony as she realized what had happened. Though the room was warm, her teeth chattered noisily, and her muscles quivered as if she was standing barefoot in the snow.

The paper-thin patches she used to hold herself together disintegrated into nothing. Pain shot through her chest as the pieces of her heart shattered once again, widening the hole that no patch was able to fill.

## Chapter 1

Hoot and Hollers was Mason's very own dive bar, or as close to one as this quaint southern Alabama town could offer. Beyond being renowned for its locally crafted brews and blackout-inducing Aunt Robertas, Hoot and Hollers was also famous for its live music.

Tonight, Blues and Moonshine—a local favorite—had drawn a crowd with their rocking blues. But Reid Hudson wasn't here for the band. He was there for a stiff drink to ease his troubles and—if he was lucky—the opportunity to forget. Even if it was only for one night.

Ever since his cousin and best friend, Wade Hudson, had become engaged to the woman of his dreams, Reid found it particularly difficult to get out of bed in the morning. He was glad Wade had found the love of his life, but being around the happy couple was a constant reminder of what he'd never have. That didn't mean he couldn't have a little fun tonight.

Reid scanned the room as he stepped through the entrance. Besides a few empty seats at the bar, it was standing room only. People squished together as they stomped their feet and swayed their bodies to the music, not seeming to care if they spilled their drinks. The band's set was in full swing, and the guests were happy and well on their way to hammered.

Thursdays were singles' night at Hoot and Hollers, and because of it, there were a number of attractive, available women tonight. The problem was finding one who didn't know him or his reputation. Since Mason was a small town, and he'd been working the meaningless flings and one-night stands for some time now, out-of-towners were his best shot.

He pushed through the crowd and found an empty stool at the bar. Once seated, he leaned his back against the counter and watched four substantially drunk women dancing in a group. They were young and boldly pretty, though perhaps a bit bubbleheaded, and he didn't recognize any of them, which meant there was a good chance they weren't from around here.

His gaze lingered on a redhead wearing a halter top and skinny jeans so tight it was a wonder she could breathe. She ground her hips provocatively against one of her girlfriends as she seemed to search the room for anyone to notice her. When her warm brown eyes found his, she held his gaze and smiled. Making sure he was looking, she blew him a kiss and ran her hands down her body and over her swaying hips.

She seemed fun and open to suggestion. Hell, she was practically begging for him to go over there and dance with her. *By the looks of it, probably even more.* Spending the evening with an attractive and willing woman would be far better than wallowing in self-

pity all night. So why wasn't he on his feet and moving toward her to do exactly that? That's why he was here, wasn't it?

The face that haunted his memory suddenly pushed its way front and center, leaving that familiar punched-in-the-gut feeling. Betrayal, bitterness, and regret swirled within him, threatening to hijack his night.

He drew in a breath and unclenched his hands, forcing his mind off the subject. If he didn't want to be swallowed by the memories—and he didn't—he had to maintain control.

He swiveled on his stool and rested his elbows on the oak-top bar. Grady Ryles, the owner—a man nearing middle age with dark, grey-dusted hair and baby blue eyes—was standing a few feet away, pouring out a round of shots. Reid caught his gaze and lifted a finger. Grady responded with a nod before finishing with his current customers.

A minute later, Grady was standing in front of him, pouring Reid's favorite whiskey into a glass. "How's it going tonight, Reid?"

He shrugged. "Can't complain." He took a sip of his whiskey, enjoying the heat on his tongue. "Well, I could, but I won't."

"Wade's not with you tonight?"

"He's having a family night with Ashley and Emmett." *Just like every other night.*

Ever since Ashley and Wade had moved in together and started planning their fast-approaching wedding, the little family unit had been inseparable. Reid understood, and despite his own hopeless situation, he was happy for them. Mostly.

He brought the glass to his lips and drained it in one swallow. The whiskey left a welcome burn in his throat and warmth in his belly. Already a bit more relaxed, he set the empty tumbler on the bar top.

"Wade and Ashley came in on Monday for square dancing night. They seem really happy," Grady said.

"They are. You kind of have to hate them for that."

He chuckled and slapped Reid on the shoulder. "Come on, now. Wade's been going through a lot lately, after what happened to his brother last year and then his dad's diagnosis. He deserves to be happy, don't you think?"

"I never said he didn't." Reid toyed with his empty glass.

"You just want some of that happiness for yourself."

Reid shot him a dirty look. He didn't want to go there. Not tonight. Not ever.

"Don't get sour on me. We all want a little of what he has. A love like that is hard to come by. But I guess I don't need to tell you that."

Frowning, Reid pushed his empty glass across the bar. "Pour me another drink."

"It sounds like someone needs to loosen up a little, but I guess that's why you're here, isn't it?"

Grady always knew exactly which buttons to push. He meant well, but that didn't make Reid any more in the mood to hear it. He sent Grady a death glare and tapped the bar again, harder this time, only to be ignored.

“Look, I get that you needed time to heal, or whatever the hell it is you’ve been doing all this time, but don’t you think it’s gone on long enough?”

He rubbed his temples. “For God’s sake. What kind of bartender are you if you can’t even pour me a damn drink?”

Grady gave him a stern look and held up the whiskey bottle. “I’ll pour when you listen.”

“And here I thought we were friends.”

His expression didn’t change.

Reid sighed and pushed his glass toward the stubborn bartender.

“Now, I’ve watched you follow the same pattern night after night, and you don’t seem any happier.” He filled the glass and slid it back to him. “I can’t see how any of this is fulfilling for you. And after what you had... Look, I get it. You needed to find yourself again. But don’t lose yourself in the process. You can’t keep going on like this forever, and when you finally realize that, it may be too late.” He rested his forearms on the bar to bring himself down to Reid’s level. “So here’s what you need to ask yourself: is this the kind of life you want?”

Reid stared at the amber liquid in his glass. Of course it wasn’t what he wanted. He was tired of it, all of it, but he didn’t have many options.

Two guys in their early twenties staggered up to the bar a few stools over. One of them hollered at Grady and held up two fingers. He lifted his head in reply before turning to Reid again. “Think about what I said.” With that last piece of unwelcome advice, he went to deal with the newcomers.

Reid exhaled. *Saved by drunk and drunker*. He was already painfully aware that becoming the creepy old guy at the bar was a real possibility. He didn’t need Grady reminding him of the fact. Finding something “real” wasn’t an option for him.

He swirled his glass, watching the whiskey go round and round. Without a doubt, he couldn’t go on like this forever. A person could only tolerate so much self-loathing. Plus at some point, what was once charming would become downright pathetic.

When he got too old, he’d become the recluse who locked himself in his trailer in the woods and ate dinner alone at the Fried Pickle once a month so people wouldn’t think he was dead. *At least I have that to look forward to*.

Reid drained his glass, slapped down a twenty for his tab, and pushed away from the bar. At any rate, he could have tonight. As he was turning toward the dance floor to search for the seductive redhead he’d seen earlier, his eye caught a new face behind the bar.

She had porcelain skin and copper-red hair that draped down her back. Her hair was darker than the other woman’s, the one he’d seen on the dance floor—a deeper, richer color of red that shined under the bar’s lights. Long, lean legs, generous hips, and a narrow waist seemed understated beneath baggy jeans and a shapeless T-shirt. Her face was serious as she poured a beer from the tap. She handed a foaming pint to a

handsome stranger and didn't even blush when the man gave her what Reid assumed was his most dazzling smile.

Though he didn't think he'd seen her before, there was something oddly familiar about her. Had he slept with her and simply didn't remember? He cringed at the thought. That would be a new low even for him. But no, that wasn't it. As he watched her, he realized *she* wasn't necessarily familiar, but the air about her was... like the way she held herself. She reminded him of someone he used to know. But who?

When Grady had finished pouring several rounds of shots for the twenty-something guys, Reid waved him over.

"Did you think of an answer to my question?"

"Who's the redhead?" Reid asked, ignoring him.

Grady looked over his shoulder at the woman in question. "That's my new bartender."

"What can you tell me about her?"

"Nothing."

"You hired her. How can you not know anything about her?"

"I didn't say I didn't, but I'm not going to tell you."

"Come on. I'm not dangerous."

"I think that's a matter of opinion."

He shot Grady an expression that made his lack of amusement abundantly clear, but Grady wasn't moved. "All I'll tell you is she's quick on her feet and she can hold her own with the customers. She sells a whole hell-of-a-lot more drinks than I do."

His gaze dropped to Grady's rounded belly and the matching love handles. "Have you tried jogging?"

"Very funny." But his tone and the turn of his lips suggested he didn't find it funny at all.

Reid returned his attention to the far more attractive bartender. "She is much prettier to look at than you are. Even with her thrift-store clothes."

Grady followed Reid's gaze and shot him a warning look. "Don't you go getting any ideas. It's hard enough to find good employees without you scaring them off. Besides I can about guarantee that girl is not looking for what you're offering." He smirked as an idea seemed to come to him. "On second thought, you should go for it. I haven't seen you get your ass handed to you in a while."

He scoffed "And if I decided to go for it, I'm sure it wouldn't happen this time either."

"If you're so confident, why don't you go over there and prove me wrong."

"She's not my type. Besides, I think I'm already spoken for tonight." He searched the crowd for the woman he'd seen eyeing him earlier. She was still on the dance floor, only now her drink was dangerously low. She'd be needing a refill.

Grady followed his gaze to the spicy redhead and frowned. She was gyrating her hips against one of her girlfriends as she took a final sip of the drink in her hand. "Don't you think you're getting too old to go after girls like her?"

The woman spotted Reid looking at her and her lips curved up in a slow smile. Biting her bottom lip, she slowed the movement of her hips to a seductive swagger. “She doesn’t seem to think so.” He rose to his feet. “Two shots of tequila, my good man.”

Grady sighed and reluctantly poured the drinks. He slid them over and shot Reid a look of pity. “Use a condom.”

He snatched the drinks and turned his back on the bar. Grady could be a real ass sometimes and he wasn’t the only one. Reid’s family, his friends, hell, even his mail carrier had all offered their opinions about his situation at one point or another. When was everyone going to stop telling him how to live his life? It was always: “Stop messing around” or “It’s been nearly two years—get over it already.” They all knew his past, but that didn’t mean they knew what it was like for him. They had no idea and he was sick of everyone acting like they did.

Shaking off his irritation, he focused his efforts on tonight’s therapy. She watched him with interest as his eyes found her again. With a toss of her light auburn hair, she gave him a welcoming smile and a “come hither” look. If that wasn’t an invitation, he didn’t know what was.

He held up the shots and gave her his smile that had been known to turn a woman into jelly a time or two. Even from across the room, he could see the pink blush on her creamy skin as she nodded her approval. His eyes never leaving hers, he made his way over to the woman who seemed to be offering exactly what he needed tonight.



## Chapter 2

It turned out the seductive redhead's name was Scarlett—go figure—and she was passing through town on her way home from a dance audition in the city. Reid guessed she was either here to celebrate her success or ease the sting of rejection. If her eagerness and inebriation were any indication, he'd say it was the latter.

Scarlett ground her hips against Reid's to the rhythm of the music as her hands roved over his chest. His head was swimming from the booze, and his muscles were loose and relaxed. His limbs were as light as a cloud and they floated with the rest of him. The tension from earlier was lost in the fog caused by good drinks and even better company.

Scarlett leaned toward him and brushed her lips against his ear, making his skin tingle and his blood rush south. They may not have a future, but at least they could have tonight.

As her lips trailed down his neck, he grabbed her backside and pulled her against him. They were nearly strangers—talking hadn't been at the top of either of their agendas—but she still knew how to get his blood pumping.

With one hand, he grabbed her auburn hair at the nape and angled her head. His lips found hers and he thrust his tongue inside her mouth, tasting tequila. She moaned and ground her hips against his, filling his nose with her enticing perfume. She broke the kiss first and trailed her fingers down his chest while her eyes told him what she wanted to do to him. *Yeah, talking's overrated.*

"If you're not careful, you might get me to give it up right here on the dance floor," she purred.

"Is that a promise?" Reid's hands rested on her backside once more and his lips traveled along her throat.

She groaned and melted into him as she wrapped her arms around his neck. When she spoke again, her voice was husky with need. "How about one more drink and then we go back to my hotel room?"

He couldn't argue with that. "What are you drinking?" he said against her neck.

"Mmm. How about a Slammer?" She giggled as he nibbled her ear.

"Coming right up. Don't you go anywhere." As he kissed her, she reached her hand between them and brushed him below the belt. His sharp intake of breath had her smiling against his mouth.

"Don't be long."

She didn't have to tell him twice.

Scarlett was his type of woman, the only type of woman he was compatible with these days. She was adventurous, sexy, and perfectly willing to take what he offered and leave happy in the morning. She was looking to use him as much as he was looking to

lose himself in her tonight. As long as he didn't think too much, they were going to get along fine.

Reid worked his way through the crowd, his lips still tingling from Scarlett's last kiss. He smiled to himself, enjoying the familiar rush of adrenaline and the swirl of anticipation. Tonight was about forgetting his troubles and having a good time. He'd deal with the consequences later.

When he reached the bar, he looked up to find himself standing in front of Grady's new bartender. The first thing he noticed was her eyes. They were a striking bottle green and seemed luminescent against her pale face. Her skin was as smooth and flawless as a porcelain doll, made more charming by a cluster of light red freckles that dusted the bridge of her nose. An enticing flush colored her lush cheeks and made him want to trail his thumb across their silky surface.

The sense of familiarity was back and with it a strange inclination he couldn't explain. Despite her plain clothes and absence of makeup, she was stunning. With little effort, she could be a complete knockout. But she wasn't the type of girl who'd be interested in what he had to offer.

At his arrival, her naturally pink lips lifted in a small smile. Her voice was like honey, her drawl revealing her deep Southern roots. "What'll you have?"

For a while, he merely stared at her, trying to place the strange sensations that had come over him in her presence. It was like glimpsing a part of himself he'd thought was gone.

As he watched, her dainty brows lifted in a quizzical look as if she thought he might be a bit slower than most.

Painfully sober all of a sudden, he cleared his throat and smiled at her, thrown off by his unusual lack of charm. "I'll take an Alabama Slammer and a glass of El Gordo."

Nodding, she set two clean glasses on the bar. She scooped ice into one and poured amaretto liquor over it.

"Have we met before?"

She arched a brow but didn't look up. "Is this the beginning of some crude pickup line?"

"Is that something you're into?"

"Can't say that I am."

"Then it's just a question."

She looked up from her work to study him, as if trying to gauge his motives. "I haven't been in town long, so no, I don't think we've met."

"So you're new in town."

She poured in peach liqueur, gin, and orange juice and finished with a splash of sweet and sour. "I only said I haven't been here long, not that I'm new in town." She stuck a red straw in Scarlett's drink and gave it a stir before setting it down in front of him.

His brow creased as he realized she wasn't going to elaborate. "Is this some kind of riddle?"

With a chuckle, she grabbed the other empty glass and started filling it from the tap. "I left town a few years ago and recently moved back."

His eyes flicked to hers. "You're from here?"

"Born and raised. I left shortly after high school." She put the glass of El Gordo on the bar beside the Alabama Slammer and wiped her hands on a bar towel.

"Why did you leave?"

She shot him an "are you dense?" kind of look. "Have you seen Mason? There's not exactly a lot of opportunity here."

He studied the woman in front of him. She had looks—though understated—but it was more than that. There was something about her that held his attention and kept him from wanting to walk away. "I have to disagree."

"Can I get you anything else?" she continued, ignoring him.

He shook his head.

"That'll be fifteen dollars."

Reid reached for his wallet as he searched for a way to keep the conversation going. "If Mason's so bad, why did you come back?"

She paused, suddenly a thousand miles away. "Sometimes you need to come home."

"Well, aren't you cryptic."

She shrugged and took the twenty he offered her. "Enjoy your drinks."

He couldn't let her go. Not yet. "I'm sure you already have plenty of old friends to catch up with, but if you'd like a new one, I'm always available." He offered her his hand. "I'm Reid Hudson."

When she shook his hand, her skin was cool to the touch, and her grip was surprisingly strong considering the size of her hand. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm not interested." She broke the contact first and flung the bar towel over her shoulder. "Besides, I think your date is waiting for you." She gestured behind him and he turned to look.

Scarlett was watching him, her eyes glazed with alcohol and something much more indecent. She swayed her hips and curled one finger at him, suggestion written all over her face. "She looks like fun. You wouldn't want to keep her waiting."

After Reid turned back, the mystery bartender gave him a knowing smile. "It was nice to meet you, Reid Hudson." With those final words, she breezily moved down the bar to help her next customer. She seemed relaxed, wearing a friendly bartender smile, as if their conversation hadn't affected her at all.

Even though she'd rejected him so casually, he had to admit she intrigued him. It looked like Grady had been right again. At least he hadn't been there to see it. It was probably a good thing she'd turned him down, anyways. She was bound to cause him trouble.

He grabbed his drinks and turned to find Scarlett in the crowd. As their eyes locked, he smiled at her and began to make his way over. She reciprocated with a look that should've had him aching to chug his beer as fast as he could and take her back to her hotel room, but for some reason, he wasn't as excited about the idea as he'd been before.

When he reached her side, she took her drink from his hand and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, sugar. How about we move this along and head out." She took a sip from her glass and brushed her lips against his neck. Her mouth was cool from her drink and made him shiver uncomfortably. "I'm getting impatient."

So was he. But he didn't think it was for the same reason. "Great minds think alike." He clinked his glass with hers and brought it to his lips until every last drop was gone.

## Chapter 3

Streetlamps passed overhead, momentarily lighting up the cabin of Avery's old Civic as she drove through downtown Mason. She'd finished her shift at Hoot and Hollers, and she had the wad of cash to prove it.

She could get used to working singles' night at the bar. The men were mostly harmless, and the tips were comparable to what she'd made on her busier nights in the city. Maybe being back in Mason wasn't so bad.

The streets were dead quiet, and all the traffic lights on the main road were green this time of night. Before she could blink, downtown Mason was behind her—a testament to how little this town had to offer.

Her whole life, she'd dreamed of becoming a successful country singer-songwriter, and she wasn't going to get there in a town like Mason. So she'd left and forged her own path, hoping to achieve her dreams, unwilling to let anything or anyone stand in her way. It was that attitude that had cost her everything.

Her chest tightened and the familiar knot lodged itself in her throat. The worst part was, her life wasn't the only one that had been at risk. And that was something she'd have to live with forever.

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