



ONE

ELYSE

On a Wednesday morning in July of the year 2125, in Jackson County, Georgia, in the pearly gray dawn light, Elyse Hutchinson was riding her golden-colored horse, Honey.

A tall, solidly built, twenty-one-year-old woman with long red hair in a single messy braid, Elyse was wearing a well-used tan cowboy hat, a green long-sleeved button-up shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. She had inherited the horse ranch from her parents. Her great-great-grandmother had started the family horse breeding business over one hundred years ago, before even COVID-19 had happened. Petting Honey's neck, Elyse took a deep breath. A few weeks ago, the most important thing to her had been discovering more about her family. Part of her regretted the decision to dig into the past. She should have just accepted what she knew and left everything alone. *Except then I would have never met Josh Everly or discovered I have a magical talent*, she thought.

Honey nickered, drawing Elyse back to the task at hand: checking the fence line that bordered the old Highway 124, one of the few paved roads that was still safe for a car to drive on. Elyse had been hoping to get an early start before the sun and the humidity made it almost impossible to be productive. And yet here she

was, daydreaming instead of taking advantage of the cool morning temperature.

Elyse clucked to Honey, urging the mare to continue forward at her steady walk. The sun began to peek over the top of the tallest grass-covered rolling hills when a sudden feeling of foreboding hit Elyse, causing her to sway precariously in the saddle. Honey reached back with her nose and nuzzled Elyse's boot, as though checking to make sure she was okay.

Elyse shook herself to get rid of the bad feeling. *Magic*, she reminded herself. *What I am feeling is my magical talent doing... something*. Even after everything that had happened, she still had these feelings—premonitions, or whatever Catrina had called them. Supposedly, she would eventually be able to fully control them so they would only come when bidden, but Elyse was skeptical.

Giving Honey a quick hug, Elyse returned to the task of checking the fence line, eyes expertly going over each post, looking for weakness or loose barbed wire. Honey tossed her head slightly, causing Elyse to look up just in time to see something shiny coming toward them on the worn-out highway. With the scarcity of cars since long before her birth, she never paid much attention to the highway other than ensuring that her fence was secure. The fence bordering the far side of the highway was the property line for the thousand acres that belonged to her good friend Jessica's family. This section of the pasture she was currently assessing was a fairly flat field, bringing the fence a mere ten feet from the edge of the highway.

Raising her hand over her eyes to block out the bright sunlight, she squinted, trying to see the winding highway better. "Look, Honey, it's an actual vintage car!" she said, disgust tinging her voice as the roar of the combustion engine got louder. It was one of the old models that were around long before COVID-50, before the automobile industry and the US government forced everyone to have exclusively electric vehicles. *And yet look where that got*

us. Now over half of the population in the US can no longer afford enough electricity to power even the most basic things—a lightbulb or hot water heater.

Honey snorted and flicked her ears, bringing Elyse out of her thoughts as another wave of foreboding hit her. This time the feeling was accompanied by an image of the car in flames. Rubbing her eyes with the palm of her hand, Elyse shuddered. *The car is clearly not on fire. Honey can run fast, but not as fast as a car, so I can't do anything about the flames. Catrina might be able to teleport, but I can't.* She giggled at the thought of teleporting herself on Honey somewhere, wondering what the horse would think of that.

The driver of the bright red sports car sped up, blasting past Elyse before the highway disappeared around a curve and the rising hill in the pasture. Honey pawed the ground.

“I know, girl. I’m not impressed either. C’mon, we’ve got work to do.” Elyse clucked, and they continued their trek along the fence. When they got to the top of the hill, she’d be able to survey almost all of this pasture’s fence for any major defects. Elyse kept her eyes on the fence with Honey dutifully following the well-worn path. Twice a year they checked the perimeter fence, unless there was a bad storm or other disturbance. Over the years, the trees had been cleared away from the fencing so that when they did fall, they would land in the middle of one of the fields instead of damaging the fence.

Boom!

Honey jumped sideways at the unexpected sound.

“Easy, girl.”

Boom!

Honey danced around. Terror rushed through Elyse as she realized that a sound like that could mean just one thing. Her feeling of foreboding and the vision had just come true. “C’mon, girl, let’s go!”

Elyse dropped her hand and gave the mare her head. Honey leaped into a full-speed gallop up the hill. Elyse shifted her weight, and Honey slid to a halt at the top.

On the highway below was the red sports car they had seen minutes before, crumpled and smoking.

“Shit,” Elyse whispered before urging Honey down the other side of the hill as quickly as they could manage. The horse eagerly found her way down the rocky southern side of the hill, their speed sending the occasional cascade of rocks tumbling ahead of them.

Safely at the bottom of the hill, Elyse maneuvered Honey as close as they could get to the car before throwing herself off her horse, concerned about whoever was driving the car. She rushed forward and immediately regretted doing so. She started coughing as the dark black smoke billowed toward her in waves. Rolling her eyes at her stupidity, she reached into her back pocket for a bandana and tied it over her nose and mouth before continuing closer. She easily jumped over the fence and headed across the road to the car. Dark smoke poured out of the back half. Crossing her fingers, she hoped that someone would come along and find them. She wasn't sure how much help she could be with only a few fence repair tools at her disposal.

When Elyse was close enough, she could see what the car hit. A black steer. She rolled her eyes at the thought of a stupid city person who had gone out for a joyride without considering that there could be loose livestock wandering around. The smoke cleared for a moment around the steer, and she was surprised to see that it looked more like a hunk of metal than a dead black Angus. The steer was the least of her worries though. The vintage car had a driver. Of that she was certain.

“Hello?” Elyse called. She walked around to the driver-side door. She grabbed the handle and tugged. It wouldn't budge. She tapped on the window but was having trouble seeing the driver as the smoke was rapidly filling the inside of the car.

Elyse scanned the ground and found a big rock; she quickly grabbed it.

“If you’re awake, shield your eyes!” she warned before throwing the rock as hard as she could against the window. The rock bounced off and clattered to the ground.

Flames licked around the edge of the car. Cursing to herself, she knew her window of time was rapidly disappearing. *The other door, dub!* Elyse rushed to the other side. The passenger door handle was almost too hot to touch. After a moment’s hesitation, worried about getting badly burned, she gripped the door handle firmly and tugged. Much to her surprise, the door opened.

Coughing, Elyse waved her hands, trying to clear the smoke to see who was inside.

“Are you okay?” she called. No answer. Elyse climbed into the car, smoke stinging her eyes, trying to see the driver.

Realizing trying to see was futile with the smoke, Elyse gently searched with her hands for the driver. Her fingers finally met firm, well-muscled human flesh. Running her hands over what she assumed was an arm, she slid her hand down to the person’s wrist to check for a pulse. Whoever it was was currently alive, and she intended to keep them that way.

Gently reaching around the person, she successfully found the seatbelt and was able to follow it to the buckle.

“Please work,” she whispered before pushing down on the seat buckle’s latching mechanism. *Click.* With a gasp, she let go of the seatbelt as it released. Wrapping her hands around the arm, feeling certain the person was shaped wrong to be a woman, she gave a big tug. He didn’t budge. Growling to herself, Elyse wrapped her hands more firmly around his arm and tugged again. This time it worked, and she fell backward out of the door and onto the pavement with the stranger half on top of her.

Elyse struggled, trying to get out from underneath him. She finally freed her legs and stood, then grabbed the man by the arms and dragged him to the other side of the road. She felt as though this stranger was somehow familiar, almost like Josh. But Josh didn’t have a car like that, did he? *I’ll figure out who I just rescued as*

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soon as we're far enough away from the car, she thought, but before she had a chance to get a good look at the stranger's face, the car exploded. The blast threw Elyse backward into the fence, and she blacked out.