



The Rancher and the Rock Star

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Fate was a nasty flirt.

Gray Covey dropped his forehead to the steering wheel of his rented Chevy Malibu and sighed, a plaintive release of breath, like a balloon with a pinhole leak. He had no idea what he'd done to her, but Fate had been after him for months. After this last wrong turn in her twisted maze, he knew she'd finally trapped him.

The long, pitted road ahead wasn't described in the useless directions scribbled on the slip of paper in his hand. Neither were the two branches fanning left and right fifty yards away. And being lost wasn't enough. Oh-ho, no. On top of everything, Fate had hung an angry, bruise-colored sky about to unleash enough water to terrify Noah.

He lifted his eyes, rubbing the creases above his brow. As he prepared to admit defeat, the edge of a small sign to the left caught his eye, and his first small hope sparked. Inching the Malibu over the washboard road, he pulled up to the hand-lettered sign he'd been told to look for. Hope flared into gratitude.

Hallelujah. *Jabberwicki Ranch.*

Still unable to believe someone would give a piece of property such a stupid-ass name, he stopped short of laughing. Half an hour ago, a dour attendant named Dewey at the only gas station in Kennison Falls, Minnesota, had made it clear nobody in the town of eight hundred

souls laughed at anything Abby Stadler–related. The woman Gray sought was no less than revered.

And yet . . .

The saintly Abby Stadler was harboring a missing child.

His.

He rolled past the Jibberjabber sign, stopping at side-by-side black mailboxes. *A. Stadler - Jabberwicki and E. Mertz*. Ethel Mertz. What?

Alice in Wonderland meets I Love Lucy?

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” He spoke out loud without meaning to. Out of habit he checked over his shoulder to make sure he hadn’t been followed and overheard.

This explained why Dawson had been so hard to find—he’d fallen down a friggin’ rabbit hole. The sophomoric humor helped him remember he was only half serious about throttling his runaway son to within an inch of his life. And it kept him distanced from emotions that had been scraped raw in the past weeks. His current jinxed concert tour aside, between his mother’s worsening illness, moving her to the care facility, and Dawson’s disappearance within days of that, life lately had been sorely lacking in humor.

Except, maybe, for Ariel. In his ex-wife’s case, all he could do was laugh. “They’ve found Dawson,” she’d announced on the phone the night before in her clipped British accent. “But unless you want the authorities to fetch him, you’ll have to pick him up, darling. I can’t leave Europe with the baby.”

Of course not. After all, only six weeks had passed since their son’s disappearance—nobody could make arrangements for a two-year-old on such short notice.

Gray had not been about to let the police “fetch” his son, nor had he wanted to alert

Dawson and send the boy running again. So here he was in Jabbitybobbits, Minnesota, despite the monumental nightmare he'd caused by leaving his manager, his baffled band members, and eighteen thousand fans in the lurch.

Well, what the hell? It was just Fate adding another hilarious disaster to the worst tour in rock history. Refocusing, he looked left toward a homey log house, then right into a thick stand of pine and oak. Which fork led to Ethel Mertz and which to The Jabberwock's ranch?

Eeny, meeny, miny . . . He couldn't get lost if he stayed right. Slowly he drove toward the trees and didn't see the diminutive, elderly woman staring at him until he'd drawn even with where she stood in an opulent flower garden near the road. For a moment he considered stopping, but her assessing glower and the stern set to her square-jowled face convinced him to settle for an impersonal wave and continue around the gentle curve through the woods. He hoped the dour watchwoman wasn't the much-adored Abby Stadtler.

The house he *hoped* belonged to Jabberwocket . . . *Ranch?* didn't appear until he was in its front yard—an old, two-story farmhouse painted non-traditional Guinness brown with windows and doors trimmed in blue and white. A disheveled patch of shaggy, colorful wildflowers, much less immaculate than the garden he'd just passed, stretched along one side.

The growl of thunder greeted Gray as he exited the car, and he looked with concern at smoke-bellied thunderheads piling high. The end-of-May breeze smelled wet and thick. In front of a small garage stood an older, red Explorer, and on his left a short stone path led to a porch wrapping two sides of the house.

After mounting two loose steps, he faced a pair of dusty saddles, the kind with big, sturdy horns in front, sitting on sawhorses, and several flowerpots in various stages of being planted. A small square of black electrical tape covered the doorbell. He knocked, got no answer, then

knocked again. Several minutes later he returned to the driveway, searching his surroundings. Down another gravel slope, a couple hundred yards away, stood a vintage barn, its white paint worn and the haymow window boarded-up from the inside. He sighed and climbed back into his car.

Heady scents of hay, sawdust, and animals hung in the heavy air when he left the Malibu once again. To his delight, a golden retriever loped toward him with lolling tongue and giant doggy smile. “Hey fella.” Gray scratched the dog’s ears. “Got a boss around here somewhere?”

A muffled thunk answered. Ahead, backed up against the open door of the barn, stood a flatbed trailer loaded high with spring-green hay. The golden led him to the wagon front, and a pair of small, gloved hands emerged from inside the barn, grabbed the twine on one bale, and yanked it out of sight. Intrigued, he watched until the owner of the hands popped from the dim barn interior. She placed her palms on the flatbed and, in one graceful movement, hoisted her long-legged body to a stand. Reaching for a top-tier bale, she dragged on it, toppling the entire stack. Gray’s brows lifted in appreciation.

“Afternoon,” he called.

Her startled cry rang more like a bell than a screech of fear, but she stared at him with her mouth in a pretty *oh* and her chest heaving. “Jeez Louise!” she said at last. “You scared me half to death!”

Flawless skin was flushed with exertion, and her round, bright eyes flashed uncertainty. A thick, soft pile of chestnut made a haphazard bun atop her head, but long wisps of hair had escaped and swung to her shoulders. Her face stopped Gray’s thoughts dead. It was not the toughened visage he’d have expected of a woman who chucked hay bales like a longshoreman. The elegant, doe-eyed face belonged in a magazine, not a barn.

“I’m really sorry,” he said.

A rumpled, hay-flecked, flannel shirt hung loose over body-hugging, faded jeans that had suffered one nicely-placed rip across her left thigh. He braced for the inevitable squeal of recognition.

“Can I help you with something?” She squinted at him for a few seconds, but rather than squeal, she shook her head and pulled down another stack of hay.

“Are you Abby Stadtler?”

“Yes.” She continued dragging bales, and he sighed in relief.

“I’m looking for my son.”

That stopped her. “Son?” Her eyes took on a glint of protectiveness. “Who are you?”

That stopped him. For an instant his vanity stung, but the freedom of unaccustomed anonymity hit, and he allowed a private grin. “David Graham.” He used his official alias.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said. “Excuse my rudeness, but this hay has to get in that barn before the storm hits. I can’t help you with your son. I don’t know anybody named Graham.”

Abby Stadtler hopped to the ground. The plaid shirt swung open to reveal a bright blue tank top hugging a curvy hip. “My boy isn’t Graham,” he said, meeting her eyes, which were unlike anything he’d ever seen. Green-ish? Blue-ish? “He’s Dawson. Dawson Covey.”

“I know a Dawson. His last name is Cooper.”

He tamped down a flicker of irritation, as she grabbed twine, swung a bale, and took two steps to dump it in the barn. There was not a single sound of exertion—or any hint she was taking him seriously.

“Yes, that would be my devious son.” He held onto a pleasant tone. “Cooper is his

grandmother's name.”

“And why would he use a different name?”

As she turned the interrogation on him, a rope of tension twisting down his neck knotted between his shoulder blades and threatened to stiffen him top to toe. He willed his fingers to uncurl, one-by-one.

“Because he's sixteen years old, he's pissed off at his mother and is hiding from me. He's also sharp as a knife blade, so it's taken us a while to find him. You've obviously never had teenagers.”

An immediate illusion of height accompanied the steeling of her spine, and the soft, nameless color of her eyes turned to stormy aquamarine. “You shouldn't make assumptions.” She tossed another hay bale, and Gray took a step backward.

“I apologize. I only meant you don't look old enough to have teenagers.” That was true.

“If that was an attempt at getting yourself off the hook, it was smooth but ineffective.”

The sharpest prickles left her voice.

Finally, she stopped tossing and crossed her arms. The rolled-up sleeves on her overshirt exposed slender forearms with sexy lines of definition curved along the muscle.

Gray produced his best version of a devilish grin. “Dang. I usually have better luck with a silver tongue.”

“I'll just bet. Look, Mr. Graham.” She hesitated. “Wait a minute. Did you say sixteen?”

“Yup. My Dawson is sixteen. How old is yours?”

She didn't respond to the humor. “Eighteen. We definitely have some confusion here. I hired a young man six weeks ago to help around the farm. He'll be leaving for home in another month. Colorado.”

Gray snorted. “He’ll be leaving for Colorado over my dead body.”

“Mr. Graham.” Her voice flashed with annoyance to match her eyes. “I think you have the wrong Dawson. People must have mixed up the information they gave you.”

“I do not have the wrong Dawson.” Slamming his palm on the wooden bed of the hay wagon hard enough to cause flakes of alfalfa, and Abby Stadtler, to jump, the humor Gray had been using so desperately as a shield disintegrated. His make-nice smiles hardened into anger lines he could feel. “Look, Madam Jabberingwickets, or whatever the hell this place is called. You’ve got my son.” He jabbed his fingers into a back pocket, yanked out his wallet, and flipped through the three pictures that were part of its meager contents. “Tell me this isn’t the little con artist you call Dawson Cooper.”

The photo was two years old, but it did the trick. Abby leaned over it with skepticism, and then her shoulders sagged. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes.”

“I, I’m sorry.”

He gave her points for the apology, although she looked for all the world as if she didn’t want to give it. “It’s all right.” He calmed his voice. “All I want is to find my son.”

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