

CHAPTER ONE

My eyes burned like a bonfire. I'd spent the last couple of hours alone in my car with only a radio shouter named George for company, who terrified me with tales of aliens paralyzing my body while I slept, so they could poke and prod me at will. I'd cranked open my window to breathe in the cool night air, hoping it would unfog my brain, until a howl pierced the stillness and I immediately closed the window tight. Now the center line of the highway began undulating before my eyes like a milky ribbon, and I prayed the shimmer of light I spotted in the distance offered salvation.

I hadn't intended to quit the band and take to the road; it just happened; gradually, then all at once. And now, at 1:26 in the morning, I had absolutely no idea where I was. Worse, I didn't know what I was doing here, in this desolate spot with no one around for company, and I didn't dare take my eyes off that tiny light, lest it puff out, like a blown lightbulb.

"It's not too late, Leah!" Mom had pleaded as I tucked the edges of my fourth cardboard box closed and cinched a strip of packing tape across the top. I'd just sold my last possession of any value on eBay the week before, my creamy blue Justin boots with orange and green stitched flowers, the boots I'd worn to every gig for the past seven years; my precious \$459.00 boots; my lucky boots. And I still owed two months' back rent to Great Uncle Ed, above whose garage my tiny apartment squatted.

"But, see, it *is* too late, Mom. In the blink of an eye I'll be forty. What label is going to sign a middle-age female singer with a dated repertoire? I missed it, Mom; missed my chance. I tried, I really did. I thought if I kept plodding along, paying my dues, eventually I'd make it—because I earned it. But it doesn't work that way. Nobody cares. I bet there are a thousand singers like me out there, and they won't make it, either."

I tried to wipe the memory of the last words I'd spoken to Caleb, my cousin and best friend in the world, who'd been by my side with his guitar ever since I was eleven and I stood on the county fair stage for the first time, my legs trembling, my hand gripping the microphone stand as if it was permanently welded to my fingers. What did Caleb expect, I rationalized. Our final gig had turned into a horror show. I'd had drunks reach out and rub their hand up my leg as I perched on the edge of the stage. Once a woman projectile-vomited all over my boots. An inebriated oldster at an Eagles club hollered out, "Too Fat Polka!" in the middle of the second

verse of “Blessed” and I smiled down at him through clenched teeth. But the band had never before broken into an all-out brawl while I stood strumming my guitar in front of them, barefoot, bootless. And a fight with slabs of fried steak, no less.

It wasn’t his fault, but when he rang me up somewhere in the early morning hours and asked if this time the band was truly done, I told him, “You bet your ass the band is done.”

I pulled up under the truck stop’s canopy, its blazing light shocking me awake. I grabbed a bottle of Visine out of the glove box and aimed the drops at my irises, then wobbled inside.

“Help ya?” the fleshy woman behind the counter asked, eying me suspiciously.

“Yes, please.” I squinched my eyes closed to exorcise the driving devils, which I was sure made me look like a raving psychopath. “What town is this?”

“Ain’t no town. Kidder Township. Chance is two point three miles that way.” She pointed her index finger to the right and held it there, as if to warn me to get on down the road.

I blinked furiously, realizing the Visine had run down my cheeks instead of inside my eyeballs. “Chance? That’s a town?”

The woman sighed. “Yea. It’s a town. Did’ja wanna buy somethin’?”

“Cup of coffee?”

“This is the courtesy counter. Café’s down the corridor.”

This woman was the perfect choice to ply the “courtesy counter”. She’d get folks moving along courteously...or else.

I slid into a booth in the café and scanned the menu apathetically. Only one other person inhabited the place, a stocky man wearing bib overalls and a red neck kerchief. He slumped in a booth on the far side of the room and poked his finger at images of playing cards on a tabletop console, cussing intermittently.

“You’re new,” the waitress said, not unkindly.

I glanced up. It must have been opposite day at the Fill ‘Er Up. This young woman was rail skinny and had the prettiest cobalt eyes I’d ever seen and a gentle smile.

“Yes.”

She stifled a giggle. “Don’t let Irma scare you. She’s in a permanent bad mood. “So, just passing through?”

“I—think so. I mean, I don’t actually have a destination in mind. Just a road trip,” I added, embarrassed.

“Well, there’re worse places to stop. Chance is a nice town. They got a hotel if you need one. Looks like you do.”

“I sort of got hypnotized by the road and just kept driving,” I admitted.

She poured coffee into a white mug and slid it in front of me. “Here,” she said as she scribbled her name on a napkin. “Tell Burt at the hotel Randi referred you. He’ll give you a deal.”

As I sipped my coffee, the strong brew unclenched my muscles and a good night’s sleep under crisp sheets sounded exquisite.

Randi sauntered over from the line of brewing coffee makers. “Lemon meringue pie?” she asked.

“No, but thanks. I think I’ll check out the hotel in Chance.”

I slipped a dollar bill under the saucer, then asked Randi, “You don’t have to share your tips with *her*, do you?” I gestured down the hall.

“Ha! No! As if! I don’t care if she is my aunt...”

“You’re kidding!”

“You’re the only customer I’ve ever admitted that to,” Randi whispered.

I fished inside my purse, found another dollar bill and added it to my paltry offering.

I should have known the end was near when I took to drinking myself to sleep, only awakening when the afternoon's searing heat glued the bed sheet to my body like I was an overcooked mummy. For eleven years Laredo Sky had toiled in local clubs, until one by one they closed, leaving the band only two-night-a-week gigs at the VFW and New River's AMVETS chapter. My town was dying and there was no place anymore for a band, no matter how talented, to properly ply its trade. At one time Caleb and I snuck our co-written songs onto our last set of the night, where the properly lubricated audience applauded appreciatively, but eventually we abandoned our writing altogether. We slid into a tired routine of cover songs, and the crowds turned indifferent. He, at least, was savvy enough to find a day job; I, on the other hand, didn't know how to do anything but sing.

The town of Chance was thankfully tiny enough that The Luck Hotel was the only establishment with a portico light. In the blackness of the early morning hours, the town appeared to have only one street, and it was deserted. Not even a single vehicle was parked along its curb, and the town fathers apparently felt it would be a waste of tax dollars to assign more than one street light to the entire expanse. Thus the little portico bulb was a beacon—a hard to notice beacon unless one was searching for it, but it emitted a friendly, welcoming glow. Either that or I was giddy from exhaustion.

Growing up in an old town, I'd become accustomed to turn of the century edifices, former factories now re-imagined as "hip" apartments that remained two-thirds unoccupied. A cold storage warehouse converted into an indoor artisan mall, with sullen girls peddling home-beaded necklaces and guys hawking their album collections and silk-screened t-shirts. But The Luck was fascinating, even in the dead of night. Its softly-lit lobby sported cherry-red leather settees and honest-to-God spittoons. Behind the desk was a tic-tac-toe row of wooden cubbies, just one with an envelope shoved inside. The room smelled of old cigars and cedar.

A bald bowtie-clad man popped out of nowhere. "May I help you?"

"I'd like a room," I said. I sheepishly pulled the napkin out of my pocket and placed it on the counter. "Randi referred me."

"Oh, Randi! Great girl! My second cousin! Well, I can give you a rate of \$29.99," he beamed. "That's ten dollars off our regular rate."

I readily agreed and scribbled my name across the registration card. "I'll just go get my—"

"No, no! Harold will do that for you! Just pop your trunk and head on up to Room 203. Harold will bring up your bags."

I felt like I'd stepped back into the nineteenth century and I rather liked it. The lobby was so quiet! So tranquil. Nary a TV screen blared the latest erectile dysfunction commercial, nobody was exploding imaginary projectiles from a game console; no one had the latest bro-country group on blast on their iPhone. The dull hum I heard was only the remnants of road refuse rattling inside my head. I smiled at the shiny-headed man and he smiled back serenely.

That night I luxuriated beneath cotton sheets that smelled of baby's breath and I cherished the silence. I pushed my window open and let the night breeze waft through the curtains. I wanted to stay here forever—no nightclub managers jabbering in my ear, no cussing matches between my bass player and my rhythm guitarist. I even forgot for a night just how poor I was and at last *breathed*. And I slept like a newborn; no booze, no stimulants. If this was but one moment in time I decided to enjoy the moment.

[RUNNING FROM HERSELF](#)

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REVIEWS:

"Running From Herself" by April Tompkins follows a singer's emotional journey as she navigates the ups and downs of the music industry while discovering what truly matters to her. The novel follows Leah Branch, a jaded country musician who abandons her struggling band and ends up in the tiny town of Chance, Wyoming, where she reluctantly takes a job as a bartender at the local honky-tonk.

Like 'Daisy Jones & The Six', this behind-the-scenes glimpse into the music industry reveals the raw, human stories that shape the songs we love. Tompkins excels at creating rich characters who feel lived-in and real. From Burt, the quietly wise hotel manager, to Paula Barnes, the straight-talking country music star who becomes Leah's mentor, each character serves a purpose while maintaining their own personality. The author particularly shines in her portrayal of the complex relationship between Leah and her cousin Caleb, capturing the unique dynamic of family members who are also creative partners.

One of the novel's greatest strengths lies in its intimate understanding of the music industry's inner workings. Tompkins demonstrates deep research of both the local bar circuit and the Nashville machine, depicting everything from technical recording sessions to the politics of record labels with convincing detail. The author doesn't shy away from

showing the darker aspects of the business, including predatory managers and the toll that constant touring takes on performers.

In addition, the small-town setting of Chance is vividly rendered. Tompkins has a keen ear for dialogue, capturing the distinct voices of characters from different backgrounds without resorting to caricature. The author's description of live music performances is particularly strong, conveying both the technical aspects and the emotional experience of being on stage.

One of the novel's most interesting aspects is its exploration of authenticity in art. Through Leah's journey, Tompkins examines what it means to stay true to oneself in an industry that often demands conformity. The contrast between Leah's genuine songwriting and the manufactured pop-country promoted by her label provides thoughtful commentary on commercialism in music. Not to mention, readers hoping for a romance will not be disappointed. The love story between Leah and guitarist Mick develops naturally and feels earned, avoiding the typical whirlwind romance tropes.

While the plot occasionally meanders, particularly during Leah's time in Nashville, in some ways this actually serves to reinforce the protagonist's sense of displacement and uncertainty. The pacing picks up considerably in the final third of the book as all the subplots come together for a satisfying conclusion. The book's few other weaknesses include some underdeveloped secondary characters and occasional repetition in the internal monologue sections. However, these are minor issues that don't significantly detract from the overall story.

"Running From Herself" is ultimately a story about finding home - both literally and figuratively. It's about learning that sometimes you have to lose yourself to find yourself, and that success doesn't always look the way you expect it to. Tompkins has penned a very readable exploration of identity, creativity in the music industry, and belonging that will resonate with readers whether or not they're interested in music.

This novel announces Tompkins as a promising voice in contemporary fiction, one who brings authenticity and emotional depth to her storytelling. While it will particularly appeal to readers interested in music industry romances and the creative process, the universal themes and strong character work make it a satisfying read for anyone who enjoys well-crafted fiction.

- Maria Ashford, Book-Shelfie

Another fantastic read from April Tompkins following Leah 'Layah' Branch, singer, on her journey of discovery.

After quitting her band in her home town she takes herself off to 'find herself'. She stops in Chance for an overnight layover where she discovers an easier, slower pace of life and decides to stop a little longer than anticipated. Here, she discovers love, friendship and music. Her journey continues to Nashville with lots of heartbreak, friendship, strength and much more.

This story had me laughing and crying in equal measures. The author manages to make you feel like you are beside Leah in her self discovery. With likeable characters and a story that flows beautifully and has a surprise ending, I couldn't put this book down.

- Sharianne Creber, GoodReads

OTHER BOOKS BY APRIL TOMPKINS

[Shadow Song](#) (novella)

[Inn Dreams](#) (novella)

[Lies and Love](#) (novella)

[New Kaitlyn](#) (novella)

[The Diner Girl](#) (novella)

[Bad Blood](#) (novella)

[Find My Way Home](#) (novella)