

ON THE FENCE - Excerpt

By

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Chapter One

There was no way around it. Catching Mr. Right was damn hard work. Shellie had worn all different styles of clothes, fluttered her eyes, sipped sophisticated looking drinks, and still, nada.

No, that wasn't entirely true. Not nada-nada, there had been plenty of Mr. Wrongs. Lord have mercy, but there had been *plenty* of Mr. Wrongs. She shuddered. Sorry to the boyfriends and one night stands of her past, but dull and arrogant dropped her pulse to dang near dead levels.

Her mother and her ridiculous ideas about flirting to catch the right kind of man—AKA, wealthy—was putting Shellie on a fast track to becoming the next weird cat lady on her block. That was a serious problem for Shellie. She didn't like cats. Honestly, she wasn't a fan of anything that pissed and shit on her carpet. There'd been only one thing she could do. Get out of town to catch a breather. She turned to the one person she knew in all the world who could revive her. Riley Hamilton.

Riley handed her a glass of iced tea and sank into the rocking chair next to her. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

She smiled. "My carpet."

"Your what?"

"Never mind."

Ah, Riley Hamilton. In elementary school he'd put grasshoppers in her Hello Kitty backpack. In Jr. High he'd constantly untied her hair ribbons. In Sr. High, he'd kissed her. Just once. She sighed as memories washed over. She'd been shocked at the moment and froze. He'd pulled away immediately, muttering an apology. Later she glowed, then she was weirded out by

it. They did what any good friends would do—they ignored the moment and fell back into their routine. Looking back, she still found that kiss a bit...weird.

It'd been Riley. They had no business kissing, but still, of the handful of men who had ever kissed her, Riley's was the only one who could make her toes curl by the memory. And it had just barely been a kiss. Not even a kiss, really. A peck. A whisper of lips over one another.

She swirled the ice around in her glass and sighed. "I was thinking about my mom."

He pulled in a slow breath, unsure likely, on how to comment. It was a common side-effect when speaking of her mom. He rocked in his chair and tapped his glass against the wooden arm rest. "Dangerous territory."

She smiled, appreciative of his honesty. "No kidding."

"Are you getting homesick?"

She shook her head. "No. I was thinking about dating and how I follow her advice." A laugh, hollow to her own ears, slipped over her tongue. "I guess I don't know what to do with myself now."

Riley shrugged. "Do what you want. You're better than what your mom lets you believe."

"Thank you." She warmed over at that. When the idea of a breather struck her, she knew Riley was the man to find. He'd been the one who'd showed her how to sneak out at night and how to spend the day on the river bank instead of the mall where her mom believed she was. Taught her how to "borrow" the car and top it back off with gas after she was finished.

Shellie was in desperate need of some of that bad-Riley-behavior. She couldn't push her mom off forever, not if Shellie wanted to keep her sanity. And honestly, married to some stuff shirt banging his secretary would be a hell of a lot easier than sticking it out with Mom and her never-ending list of Shellie Faults.

Sit up, dear.

What are you wearing? Comfortable? No, wear the dark wash jeans and low cut red silk shirt I bought last week.

Why in God's name did you tell him there was sauce on his cheek? You're not his mother! You should have situated yourself closer and nonchalantly removed it yourself.

Knots wound through her stomach. If she didn't stop, she'd have to get her antacids.

Shellie rested her head against the worn wooden back of her rocker, soaked in the cool autumn breeze, and stared off across Riley's property. The weathered chair squeaked against the old, paint-peeling porch, lulling her into a dazed zone.

It was so different from Dallas here. Seemed to be miles of open fields and swaying grasses enclosed within a circle of pines. Brown cows speckled the grounds and a small pond rippled next to a grouping of trees with leaves varying in fall colors from brilliant yellow to fiery red. It was nice and peaceful, but so unlike where she'd pictured Riley, the boy with the quickest hands to ever graduate Jones High School, to have settled down.

God, she'd missed him over the years. They'd graduated high school and been tugged in different directions with only the internet keeping them tied together. This was the first time seeing him in some six years.

He reached across the tree trunk serving as a small table and covered her hand with his for a moment. "I'm not just saying that. You *are* better than what your momma tells you. Go to college or do whatever you wanted."

If only *I don't know what to do with myself* resembled a career path. No, she knew what she wanted. Something with flowers. Growing them, arranging them, she wasn't sure. It was risky business since she tended to kill any plant she dared to breathe on. Still, the idea of being surrounded by that quiet beauty appealed. She'd never voiced that thought, as her mother would likely croak at the idea of her doing anything with her hands which didn't involve flirting. Anytime she'd mentioned doing something other than following in her mother's footsteps of marrying a rich man, the woman broke out into hives and cold sweats.

But no, what Shellie had meant was her love life. She frowned. No, not a love life. She wasn't there. Just figuring out a dating life. Since her mom was about to fling her in front of every eligible, wealthy man across the U.S. as part of some supposed vacation, she had better start puzzling out some dating dos and don'ts. Nothing was worse than being flung in front of a man—boring or not—and being painfully aware she had no idea how to flirt and be herself. Her mother's words were always in her head, making her analyze every little line before she spoke, throwing off the whole conversation.

Smile. For God's sake, at least make your smile look real.

Relax your shoulders. Straighten your back. Shellie, can't you even stand normal without me correcting you?

Would it be too hard to look like you're having fun?

Is that your second piece of cake?

Shellie inhaled a deep breath, one not tainted with her mother's advice. That right there was what she was talking about. Her mother had directed her on behavior for as long as she could remember. She didn't even know what was natural and what had been rubbed in. She glanced around, wishing an easy answer was written somewhere. Instead she caught sight of Riley.

His breath slipped out in slow, but heavy exhales. A white knuckle grip held his tea. The flannel sleeves of his shirt were rolled up a bit, showing the flexing tendons of his arms. A thick swallow moved down his corded throat. With her heart beating unexplainably fast, she lifted her gaze to his dark eyes and found him staring at her.

Their stare lasted for only seconds before he looked away. Something was a bit different about him than the man Shellie had known. Where he used to be light and fun, she now often caught an intense look etched on his squared jawed face. A look capable of tossing her breath for a loop. Dashing and charismatic features had become honed into dark and careful.

Dark and careful was far more intriguing. Exciting.

She tugged the skirt of her gray sweater dress down, not recalling him ever looking at her quite like that before. "Thanks for letting me crash here for a while."

He took an intense interest in knocking dried mud off the side of his boot. "If you keep feeding me like you have been, I may never let you leave."

She chuckled, thankful for his attempt at a light-hearted remark, even if it came out strained. "If that's all it takes, you're the one being dangerous now, Riley Hamilton."

He saluted her with his Mason jar of tea. "You do get my underwear soft when you wash them, too."

"Mmm...I'll keep my laundry secret and you'll have to keep me around then." She'd arrived that morning, saw his laundry room while he'd been out and tossed a few things in the wash. He'd been shocked and then pleased.

"Or I could just quit wearing underwear." He winked.

She laughed and then stopped as the idea of Riley stripping out of his jeans, his lean hard body, that would no doubt be sweating, filled her head. She cleared her throat and tugged at the thick turtleneck suddenly choking her. Where did that thought even come from? Riley was Riley.

He used to put peanut butter in her hair and prickly things in her shoes. The kind of guy her momma would say to stay away from.

Oh, Shellie, no, her mother had said. He'll never make something of himself. Just look at him. Look at his parents. White trash. No, stay away from him before you find yourself knocked up and then nobody will want you. Not even him.

A little brown and white speckled cow trotted around the side of Riley's house. Shellie blinked. Holy shit, there was a cow in Riley's front yard. Riley still stared at his boots and didn't seem to notice. She flicked her hand out, trying for his attention, but failing for words. Mother never schooled her on this situation. "Cow."

Riley looked up and set his tea aside with a heavy sigh. "Now where did he get out?"

The animal moved around and munched on grass by the porch steps, like it wasn't a problem. Like this was just a regular routine for the animal.

Dear God, there was a *cow* in Riley's front yard, steps away from the porch. Should she be scared? Was the thing going to climb the porch and stampede? Stampede? Eep! She turned back to the animal to keep her eye on it just in case she needed to make a run for it. But instead of one, there were now two.

"Riley! There's another cow."

"Where there's one, there's usually another." Riley stomped down the steps and walked right past the pair of cows chewing on grass along the side of the house. He even patted one on the ass on his way by. Lord, but it was a wonder the thing didn't kick him.

Growing up, Riley hadn't hunted, fished, or any of those other things. He was into sports, girls, and fast cars. When she'd arrived, the last thing she'd ever expected to find was him surrounded by open fields with cows in a little town called Apple Trail, Arkansas.

"What are you going to do?"

Riley glanced over his shoulder, his brows rose. "Put them back up. They'll get hurt and ruin stuff if they run free." He stared at the horizon and she followed his gaze to dark clouds hunkering and sweeping over the tree tops. "Looks like the rain will be here faster than they called for. It's rained every afternoon this week. My hay fields are mush."

She swallowed as he walked on, completely sure of his actions and his plans. Confidence. He may have changed in some ways, but he still had that. And she was still jealous how he just always seemed to know what to do and how things would work out in the end.

He marched onward and her gaze dropped to his jeans fitting around his ass. No longer was she concerned about the cows because, Lordy, how had she never noticed the way his jeans cupped his very nice ass? She blinked and stared again. She'd never noticed because he'd worn baggier jeans in high school. Except for those football pants...she cleared her throat, suddenly hot on the cool day.

Cows. On the loose. Right. "How?"

He spun, taking a few steps backward. "You could come with me and find out."

She glanced down at her black suede boots and frowned.

"What's the matter?" He laughed and spun again so that he was walking forward and around the corner he went.

She grabbed the handles of her chair, fully intending to shoot from her seat and march after, but she stopped. The cows didn't follow, but seemed content with lazily munching on the weeds around the house. She had to admit, that would be a handy animal to have around to help with the lawn. Which also made her admit something else, it wasn't fear of the wild cows standing right there stopping her from following.

She walked the long porch to the edge and peered around the corner, but didn't see Riley. The side door of the wooden barn was open. It was too dark and far away to tell what he might have inside there.

Would the cows go to him like dogs? Though if they did, he probably would have called them already, wouldn't he? This was all so rustic and fascinating. Her only encounter with cows before this week included a table and a side dish.

The breeze moved a bit cooler and stronger off this side of the house. It lifted hair from her ears and seeped through the thick, turtleneck sweater dress to prick goose bumps on her skin. No sign of Riley. Was he getting rope things like horses used? Not that she knew anything about horses, but she had watched a western movie or two in her day. She could follow and see as he suggested, but what if she got mud on her wool dress or boots?

A groaned vibrated up her throat and she marched toward the steps. She was so tired of living with her mother's words constantly nagging. Here she was, in the middle of freaking nowhere and she wasn't following her curiosity because she might ruin her boots. Didn't she come out here to get away from all that? To find the fun Riley had shown her in high school. Why was she hiding on this porch?

She stepped out on the narrow walk in front of the house and just like that, lightning streaked overhead. Thunder rumbled through her body all the way down to her toes in her four hundred dollar boots. She hurried toward the barn, wanting to beat the rain.

Why are you drenched, Shellie? My God, you look like a drowned rat. I don't want you touching me looking like that, why would you think anybody else would?

Shellie froze and fought against her mother's words. She stood still in the middle of the yard and waited for the drops to pour down. And then those damn cows ran past, bumped her side, and sent her flying into an icy cold puddle.

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