



TRUE BLUE

Sigmund
Brouwer

& Cindy
Morgan



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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: Elle has everything she's ever dreamed of,
but can she hold on to it?

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*To Olivia and Savannah.
You fill our lives with beautiful colors.*

One

All the muscles in Elle's throat started to constrict as she tried not to panic. Everything had been going so well until now.

The crowd was on fire, clapping to the beat of her song. The lights were moving in time with the music. She felt beautiful in her glittery blue dress and brown vintage cowboy boots. Her headset allowed her to move around the stage. Her jewel-studded guitar strap held her guitar close enough to her to make it easy for her to play, sing and move freely.

She was flying high.

Until her voice cracked at the climax of the high note. Blaine, the bass player, caught her eye and raised his eyebrows. She struggled through

the last three songs in her set, trying not to think too much about her voice. But hearing her voice crack over a gigantic sound system in a huge arena was one of the most embarrassing and terrifying things she had ever experienced.

The band gave her high fives at the end. She held her hand up to her throat, and Blaine said, “Don’t worry, Elle. It happens to everyone. Even Johnny’s voice cracks once in a while. It’s part of singing live.”

“Yeah, but he’s Johnny James,” Elle said. “With twenty thousand screaming fans every night, I don’t know if they even hear him singing.”

Blaine tilted his head. “I know what you mean, but still...don’t worry about it. Get a little extra rest. There’s some Throat Coat tea in the green room. Just go straight to bed on the bus tonight. I bet you wake up good as new.”

She appreciated him being straight with her. Elle had never been on any tour before, much less the biggest sold-out tour in country music. It was all part of a life she was just beginning to understand.

Johnny’s twin backup singers ignored her as she passed them backstage. They were probably

thrilled her voice had cracked. Many backup singers, Elle knew, were waiting for their big break. Wondering why they weren't the ones out in front.

* * *

Elle understood how you could end up with a bad attitude in this business. When she'd first come to Nashville, she'd been overconfident. All her friends and family had told her how talented she was. How she was going make it big fast.

It hadn't happened.

She remembered the first time she'd gone to the Bluebird Cafe. It was a world-famous hole-in-the-wall-dive where the world's most esteemed songwriters came to play the big hits they'd written for other artists. There was so much talent. That's when she had discovered that the bar was set very high in Nashville. You didn't get close to reaching that bar without some tough life lessons, which often turned into songs.

She had been knocked down and gotten back up more times than she cared to remember. But those hard knocks had taught her a little

something about humility. About learning from others and not acting like a know-it-all brat. She had songwriter friends to thank for teaching her that. But she wasn't a pushover. Humility doesn't mean you can't have confidence. Elle was learning to trust her instincts.

Elle made her way to the green room. The Throat Coat tea was on the catering table along with hot water, lemon and honey. A huge fruit platter sat in the center of the table with fancy granola bars, hummus and pita chips on either side. There was even a little espresso machine for those who needed a serious boost before going onstage. The crew guys went for the monster drinks and Gatorade. The singers pampered themselves with designer water. Only the best for Johnny James and his band and crew.

Elle filled her travel mug with hot water, a tea bag and some honey. When she took a sip, it felt good sliding down her raspy throat.

Yes, life in the big leagues was everything she'd imagined. But the day in, day out grind of touring wasn't as easy as she had thought it would be.

A lot had happened since she had posted a YouTube video that revealed how she had been transformed by her record company from Charlene into Elle. The dieting, the skanky clothes, the makeover. How it had made her feel a lot less than authentic. How she was taking that back.

And then her big break had arrived.

She still remembered the phone call from her father, telling her the amazing news.

Guess what artist wants you to open for him? he'd asked.

Not in a million years would she have guessed that Johnny James wanted her on his tour.

At first, it had seemed like a dream. All those years writing and singing songs in her bedroom had brought her to Nashville. Her first days there had been rough. Her first producer had turned out to be a complete crook. Thankfully, one wonderful thing had come out of that awful time. She had met Webb, who had been swindled by the same producer.

His full name was Jim Webb, but most people just called him Webb. When Elle's (and Webb's) label had gone under, Webb had been a rock

for Elle. When her father bought the label, Webb had reminded her that she didn't have to be anything but true to herself.

Since then, Webb had chosen the indie route and was building quite a following through social media. His YouTube channel was actually earning him money every day.

Elle also had a YouTube channel that was doing well, but there was no doubt that being on a major label created many more opportunities for an artist. Now, living life out on the road, Elle was just beginning to understand the not-so-glamorous part about being a touring artist.

The tour had started off better than anything she had dreamed of. Big tours tended to start off in cities on the smaller, midwestern circuit. Places where people weren't music critics in the same way they were in entertainment towns like Nashville, LA, Atlanta and New York.

She remembered how nervous she had been when she first stepped in front of a sold-out crowd in Minneapolis, in her home state. Twenty thousand screaming fans in an arena bigger than anything she'd ever seen in her small town.

The scariest part wasn't the singing. For her it was the talking. She had gone through months of public-relations coaching with a woman named Karen in Nashville. Karen was legendary in the music business for getting young, not-so-well-spoken newbies ready to do interviews.

Elle remembered her first session with Karen, who had videotaped Elle answering a series of questions. When they were done, Karen had played the video back for Elle.

Elle, what do you hope your music accomplishes in the world? Karen had asked.

Um, well, like, I hope that, um, like, my music will connect.

Elle had wanted to crawl under her chair. She had no idea she spoke that way.

Look, Elle, Karen said, the way you speak is very typical for teens. But you are not just a typical "teen" anymore. You are a national recording artist for Starstruck Records. The expectation is that you will be well spoken.

Like Taylor Swift? Elle asked. She had been impressed when she saw Taylor Swift on *Good*

Morning America. She had been so poised and confident.

Yes, Taylor is a very bright and poised young woman. Now. When she first came to me, she sounded just like you, Karen said.

You worked with Taylor? For some reason, Elle was totally amazed.

Yes. But again, she wasn't a pro when she first sat in that chair. But with enough time and practice, you will be just as poised as Taylor.

Elle nodded. After all, if Taylor could do it, why couldn't she?

After that first show in Minneapolis, Elle had given her first series of interviews for tour press. She had taken deep breaths, remembering what Karen had taught her. *Think of the first word you are going to say before you form the first sentence.* Don't stall with an *um* or *like*. It was very effective, and though Elle wasn't Taylor yet, she was getting there.

Two

Elle made her way back to her dressing room to change into her sweats and pack up for the bus. Most nights she went to the product table to meet new fans and sign what she sold. Her new EP was her big seller. A close second was a huge poster from her last photo shoot. She also carried a vintage-style T-shirt that was big with her female fans. Younger fans liked autographed head shots.

Tonight, she had told their tour manager, Todd, that she was going to skip the product table. She hated to let her fans down, but she didn't want to risk straining her voice further by talking a lot right after a show.

She stuffed her cowboy boots into the boot drawer of the stage wardrobe that was brought

into her dressing room every night. Her clothes would appear in the wardrobe before the next show, clean, steamed and ready to wear. She'd been pretty excited about it the first day of rehearsal. Now it was just part of her routine.

That first day, her head had spun when a rack of beautiful designer clothing was presented to her. Her stylist, Kara Kat, pulled out a lot of skimpy options.

Do you have anything with a bit more, um, fabric? Elle asked. *You know how I feel about this kind of stuff.*

Kara rolled her eyes. *We've been over this before, Elle! It's all about your image. And these are the images approved by your label's marketing department.* Her sidekick, Brian, stood behind her, nodding his head in agreement.

That all changed when Elle called her dad that night.

He sent an email to the stylist, requesting that Elle's clothing choices be respected.

He was the boss, so Kara begrudgingly obliged. Mel and Shel, the twin background singers, were more than happy to wear the skimpy outfits Elle had rejected.

There had been many discussions about Elle's "look," but in the end, she decided she liked the idea of wearing dresses—a little on the short side but not too short—and boots. Something feminine and a little glam, with the boots to keep it earthy.

Kara and Brian faked enthusiasm for her wardrobe choices, obviously sucking back their resentment at having their creativity questioned by a newbie.

Elle felt it all, but she tried to remember what her mother had taught her and what had become her core belief in life—be true to yourself. Even if other people don't like it.

Elle tried not to take advantage of her relationship with the label owner too often, but he was her dad. And he probably didn't really want her prancing around onstage in next to nothing anyway.

About halfway through the first rehearsal, Elle had been brought to the side of the stage to meet Johnny James. He was even better-looking in person than he was in his videos. Elle had thought she would faint when he said, *I love that song of yours "True Blue." Sounds awesome.*

Your voice is killer, not to mention you're pretty easy on the eyes.

He had topped this off with a smile so charming that, as they said in the south, it could have melted butter. *Looking forward to having you out on the tour, sweetheart*, he said.

He gave her a hug, and she was swept back to the stage for rehearsal.

The band sounded like a recording. Johnny James could afford to hire the very best and hottest players in Nashville. But it wasn't only about skill. It was also about having stage presence and fitting a certain persona. Elle wasn't too thrilled to see Jack Miles, an arrogant guitar player she'd met when her friend Marsha used him on a session. It hadn't gone well.

Blaine, the bass player, seemed nice. Will, on drums, was the funny guy. Scott on keys was a brilliant computer geek who kept to himself. But when they came together to make music, it was mind-blowing.

She'd left the rehearsal feeling giddy and euphoric, hardly able to believe that she was going to be singing on a huge stage in front of thousands of people.

Back then, she couldn't wait for the tour to begin.

Now, she was worried that it would be over for her all too soon.

Three

Go ahead, tell me how awesome you were!
The text was from Webb. She smiled. He always knew what to say to make her feel better.

She texted back. **Hmm...not so awesome tonight, but it will be ok. You ok? How's life on the houseboat?**

Elle visited Webb on his houseboat whenever she was home in Nashville. She liked to gaze through the skylight at the stars as they listened to the water lapping against the dock.

Webb said it was the best piece of real estate in Nashville. He was housesitting for the friend of a friend. His family was in Canada. The music was in Nashville.

He sent an emoji with stars in its eyes.
Nashville isn't the same without you.

It was Elle's turn to blink. Her first label had folded early in the year, and in the weeks since then, she'd been in Nashville, looking for a new deal. And she was beginning to learn that talent alone wasn't enough. Also, if she walked, she'd have to explain that to her father, and that wouldn't be pretty.

On the other hand, if she did it Bernie's way, she'd essentially become his puppet. Elle wasn't about to let that happen. Not a chance.

"Go ahead, Bernie," Elle said. "I'll do this meeting myself and tell them that you stopped along the way to drink more whiskey. While you're enjoying my daddy's money, think about how much more you could have made by hanging around."

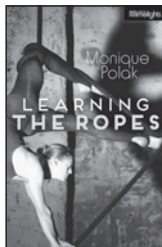
Elle headed down the hallway, holding her breath. She hated that she needed Bernie, but it felt good, leaving him there.



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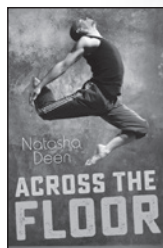
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