

TENDER MERCIES

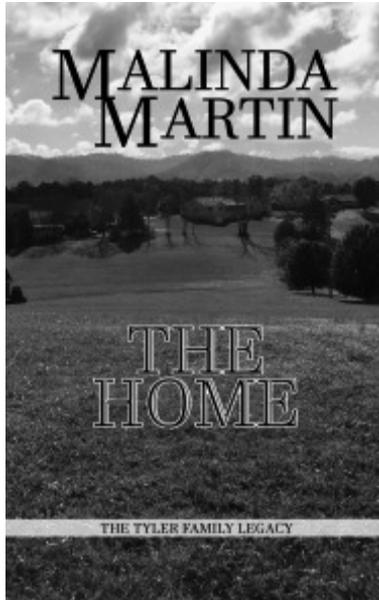
Malinda Martin

For more “Love From Above” Christian and inspirational fiction, visit Malinda Martin’s website at www.malindamartin.com¹. Make sure to check out the free stories and books available.

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THE CITY

Chapter One

September, 1981

The city gently woke from a night of serious play, the sunshine peeking through the skyscrapers like a teasing child. The idea amused him as he took another sip of hot, fortifying coffee. He only wished he'd been one of those players instead of cleaning the common areas of his school late into the night. Although he had a full scholarship for the Julliard School, he needed funds to establish himself in New York, for additional music lessons, to be completely on his own.

But for David Tyler, if it took scrubbing toilets at two in the morning in order to give him the chance to succeed in this town, he'd take it.

The little coffee shop on the corner of Broadway and 56th Street had become his home away from school, allowing him to sit for hours if he so chose, working on lyrics, homework, anything he needed to do. The owner, a burly man by the name of "Howie," had welcomed him not long after he'd moved to New York. Other than the other students at school, Howie had been his first friend, always with a grin, encouragement, and a hot pot of coffee in hand.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Howie approached with his ever-present pot. "How's it going today, Beethoven?"

"Not bad, Mr. Coffee." Howie laughed, a high-pitched belly laugh. It never failed to cheer David.

Making himself comfortable, he sat across from David, setting his pot on the Formica-topped table, ready to dish out his daily serving of advice. "Did you take my suggestion and add that little part there about the good-looking man catching the pretty girl's eye on the beach at Coney Island?" He turned to glance at his wife, a short, curvaceous dish with a husky voice. The man practically drooled.

David grinned. “Just can’t find anything to rhyme with Coney Island.”

Howie sat back, his eyes going to the ceiling. “Let’s see. Biland, ciland, diland, filand . . .”

Before he went through the entire alphabet, David patted his hand. “That’s okay, big guy. I’ll keep working on it.”

The door to the diner opened and a beautiful redhead with sharp green eyes strolled in, pushing her long tresses behind her. David couldn’t help grinning widely as she walked down the aisle like it was a catwalk for models. “Hey, sugar.”

“Hi, ya honey. Hey Howie, think I could sit with my boyfriend?” Her sharp New Jersey accent she was trying to lose was actually cute to David’s Southern ears.

“Huh? Oh sure, sure.” He stood, allowing the woman to gracefully sit and slide across the booth. “You want breakfast?”

She patted her flat stomach, considering. “Cup of fruit. Black coffee.” When Howie was gone, she folded her manicured fingers and leaned forward. “You hear from that agent?”

“No. I take that to mean he’s not interested.” He sighed and took a sip.

“Oh honey, don’t be down. You’ll get an agent soon and he or she will have you raking in the dough.”

“It might be nice if I didn’t have to get my calls through the college. Who knows, he could have tried and not been able to get through.” He shoved his hands through his thick chestnut hair. “I wish I could get my own phone. In my own room.” Shrugging, he added, “My own place.”

“I’d ask you to move in with me but I don’t know if my roommates would like that.”

He sat back. “No, that’s okay. It just seems my fate in life to share a space—two brothers now three dorm mates.” That gut level determination that was never far away grew inside and he narrowed his eyes. “One day, Lana. I’m going to have everything I want.”

She took his hand, beaming at him. “Of course you are.” Her thumb moved over the back of his hand lazily. “You coming to the club to watch me dance tonight?”

In the six months he’d been in New York, he’d seen a lot of new things, had a lot of new experiences. He’d rationalized to himself that it was normal in the big city, eons away from his family in East Tennessee. It was his first time away from home and shouldn’t he try new things? Learn how other people live?

He also knew that his mother and father were praying for him. The years of being raised in a Christian home stayed with him and although he’d watched and listened to things they wouldn’t have approved of with only a bit of guilt, he hadn’t been able to talk himself into going to the nightclub where Lana was an exotic dancer.

Smiling, he squeezed her hand. “I’ve gotta work tonight, sorry. But sometime. I’ll make it there sometime.”

The lovely woman with sharp cheekbones he’d met in orientation class slowly grinned. “I’ll hold you to that. Maybe we could meet up after I get off of work.”

“What time?” His eyes stayed on hers.

“Three.”

It would give him time to finish his job and put in another couple of hours in one of the practice rooms. He kissed her hand. “Perfect.”

Since he hadn’t heard from the talent agency he was in contact with, he decided to pay them a visit before his eleven o’clock class on opera studies, something he was enjoying and was helping him become a stronger singer.

Times Square was busy this morning, not surprising as it was tourist season, and despite the bars, gentleman clubs, and explicit x-rated shows, visitors still flocked to the iconic area. He ignored the street vendors, not wanting a photo of John Lennon wearing a NYC shirt or a brightly colored scarf that was one of a kind. He shook his head, chuckling.

“Hey friend, I’ve got some great news for you.” A heavy built, blonde Viking approached him, offering him a pamphlet. “Sure hope you read this through and think it over.”

Normally he’d ignore the “pushers” at Times Square but the man’s voice had him stopping and taking the booklet.

Not glancing at it, he said, “I detect a Southern drawl. Where you from?”

His perfect teeth gleamed. He leaned back on his heels and replied, “Charleston, South Carolina. What about you?”

“Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Just south of Knoxville.”

“Well now, brother, it’s good to meet you.” Before David could breathe, the man had him in a bear hug. “Hearing you makes me a little less homesick for the folks.”

“Yeah, don’t it just. Hey, what are you doing in NYC? I’ve heard Charleston is a great place.”

He stifled a moan at the reminder. “That it is, son, that it is. Southern charm, friendly people, and the best grits and shrimp you ever tasted. Think I’m tearing up.” He rubbed a finger under his eyes in mock sorrow.

“But I had an opportunity to relocate here for work and thought it’d be a good opportunity. What about you?”

“Same. I’m finishing up school over at Julliard. Looking for my big break in music.”

“I wish you all the best.” He motioned to the brochure in David’s hand. “Hope you take a look and join us one Sunday morning.”

“What’s this?” He opened it for the first time and saw that it was information on a new church in the Times Square section of town. Great. Waving the brochure, he said, “Well, I wish you all the best with this,” echoing the man.

“Come out some Sunday and let me know what you think. May not be what you’re used to in Tennessee but the pastor knows the Word.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

The man stuck out his hand. “I’m Todd Lindstrom, by the way.”

“David Tyler. Look, I gotta run. Thanks for the invite.”

“Anytime. See ya around, David.”

He nodded and left quickly. Well, if he was going to see a slice of every culture there was in the city, it stood to reason he’d encounter Christians also. A look at the brochure showed that they were meeting in a nearby building, on the corner of Broadway and 45th. Good location. He sincerely wished them well.

And tossed the brochure in a trashcan.

Chapter Two

The talent agency reception area was crowded, of course. He had to wait in line just to ask for whom he needed to ask for. At the front, he flashed his best smile for the pretty young receptionist. “Hey. I’m David Tyler. I’ve been speaking with Oliver Backus about representation and haven’t heard back. I’m living at The Julliard School and was concerned the message had gotten lost.”

“I see.” Her returning smile was almost sympathetic. “If you haven’t heard back within one month after initial contact it is assumed that Mr. Backus has decided to decline on an offer at this time.” Now her expression was sympathetic. “Sorry,” she whispered.

Feeling like a big loser, he tried to capture a little dignity by giving a slight smile. “Okay. Is there another agent I can contact?”

She pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to him. “Here’s a list. But the company policy is that after a submission, you must wait six months before submitting to another agent. With another demo.”

Great. He’d have to figure out a way to pay for a new demo. Another expense he couldn’t afford.

He nodded and left the office, the paper clutched in his hands. A glance at his watch told him he’d have to rush to make his class on time. He’d hike back to school since he didn’t want to pay for the Subway unless he had to.

At the meeting of Seventh Avenue and Broadway he folded the paper still fisted in his hand and jammed it in his pocket. Then slowed his pace as he noticed street musicians performing. One in particular played the guitar with much less skill than he had, in his opinion. A glance showed that the tourists were generous, pitching coins even bills in his open guitar case.

Maybe that’s what he needed to do. The thought had crossed his mind, vaguely. He’d never really considered it before, but the need for

cash, the disappointment over being rejected by an agent, again, it was a viable option for the time being.

He watched the performer grin and work the crowd, something he admired and was learning to do better. Street performing he knew nothing about. When he stopped playing, David went over. "Hey, buddy, you got a minute?" Mentally cringing, he pulled out a bill, folded it so the man couldn't see the dollar denomination, and tossed it in the case, hoping the man would answer all his questions on being a street performer.

"My time's yours." His grin was big and toothy.

So he would take the subway after all.

It was a little after eight at night. He had a good forty-five minutes before he had to go to work. And he'd been putting off calling home.

David didn't exactly know why he didn't call home more. His folks insisted he call them collect whenever he could. After a call he always felt the love they had for him. Then the guilt that he wasn't living a more Godly life.

He tried to put a good, even "holy," spin on what he was doing. Tonight would be no different, he thought as he picked up the pay phone in the lobby of the dormitory.

When the operator informed his mother that a David Tyler was calling, she said, "Yes! Yes, we'll accept the charges! Davy, how are you, sweetheart?"

The comfort of Dora Tyler's voice oozed through him, filling all the cold places the harsh day had brought. "Hey, Mama. It's good to hear your voice."

"You too, honey. Ed," she called. "It's Davy. Go get on the extension."

"Davy! How's New York?"

The sound of his little sister's excited voice made him chuckle. "It's fine, shortcake. Everything all right there?"

"Becca, let Pop get on."

"I'm here, darlin,' we can both listen. Hey there, Davy. You all right?"

"Good, Pop. How are you?"

"As happy as ol' Boomer layin' on the porch chewin' on a big ol' catfish head." David laughed out loud. "Especially hearing from you."

"I know I should call more."

"Hey, Davy. How's it going?"

"BJ, Stop pushing me."

"Sorry, Mama."

His family. He missed them more than he thought possible. "Hey, BJ. It's good here. School's good, learning a lot. How's the subdivision going, Pop?"

Ed Tyler, a carpenter by trade was heading up a new subdivision not far from the family's property, east of the little town of Pigeon Forge.

"It's coming along. You won't know the place when you come home." David cringed knowing his father was hoping he'd get his education, get his fill of the big city, and come back to Tennessee.

"Hank still working out okay?" he asked, referring to his brother-in-law, his sister Mary's husband.

"Oh, yeah. Doing well. They're thinking of hiring him on fulltime at the church but I said they can't have him until I'm finished with him."

"And Mary. She feeling well?"

"Yes, she is," his mother supplied. "Just glowing and her round belly is precious. I think she's having a girl."

"You're hoping she's having a girl," Ed said. "Since Tommy and Mindy's got Petey, your mama's hoping for a granddaughter." David smiled thinking of his oldest brother Tommy, his wife Mindy, and their year and a half old son.

"How's the little guy?"

"He is the spitting image of Tommy at that age—dark hair, brown eyes. He's walking everywhere now. Mindy has her hands full."

“That’s good to hear. Next time you get some extra pictures of him, send ‘em up to me.”

“I will. Oh, Becca took the cutest pictures of him the other day, playing with Boomer,” his mother said, referring to their large dog.

“I’ve got some extra, Davy. I’ll send them to you.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“Any news on the agent?” BJ asked.

David had to resist exhaling in frustration. “Not yet. Still working on it.”

“Well, what’s wrong with those people up there? Don’t they know how much talent you’ve got?”

“You ought to tell them you were packing ‘em in over at Silver Dollar City,” Pop added. It made David grin.

“Unfortunately, there are hundreds of people with just as much talent up here, folks. But thanks.”

“I just can’t believe that. God gave you a special talent and I’m sure He means for you to use it.” He didn’t comment on that.

“How’s the church hunt going?” Ed asked.

Pleased that he could tell them . . . well, something, he said, “Actually, I met a very nice man today. He was handing out brochures about a church in Mid-town. Looks good.”

“That’s wonderful, son. You’ll have to let us know how you like it.”

His mother’s comment had him grimacing. “Sure. Well, I don’t want to keep y’all. Give my love to everybody. And to Grandpa and Aunt Bonnie.”

“They’re at a church meeting. They’ll be so sorry they missed you.”

“Next time. I love y’all.”

After shared affection and admonitions to take care of himself, they hung up. He replaced the receiver and turned hoping he didn’t have to explain anything about his call to nosy bystanders. He should have known better. This was New York. The lobby was crowded with people,

each one going in his or her own way. No one cared that he'd spoken to his family. Or that he missed them so much his insides ached.

He still had another thirty minutes before clocking on for work so he walked back to his room. It was quiet since the other three guys were out and he didn't waste a moment of the solitude. He pulled out his guitar, his prized possession and ran a hand over the old wood frame. His parents had gotten it for him for Christmas at his request when he was ten. It had been his constant companion since, helping him through the trauma of junior school, through the despair of losing a grandfather, through the frustration of wanting to succeed at his music and failing time and time again.

"Come on, Ol' Sue. Cheer me up tonight." The sounds of his fingers plucking the strings instantly brought back a peace to his soul. Thoughts of missing his family, or his financial needs, of being rejected by an agent, of church faded in the joy of creating music.

He stopped and pulled out a file with sheets of his written music. With a pencil he changed a chord, a note, and went back to playing. Yeah, this song would work well in Times Square. He smiled with the new venture he'd work on. Maybe something good would come from it.

Chapter Three

With a deep breath, David stopped in the Strawberry Fields section of Central Park, ready to go to work since he didn't have any classes for the day. He opened his guitar case and after pulling out Ol' Sue, set it on the ground to hopefully receive an abundance of tips. His foot on a bench, he tuned up the instrument like he had hundreds of times through the years, his heart pounding with anticipation of playing publicly in New York City.

Knowing he was on what was thought to be sacred ground, near the Imagine mosaic, he softly played a slow Beatles' tune. After receiving his permit to play in the park yesterday, he'd been up late into the night working on his routine for today. He had another one planned for Times Square, and another one planned for the subway stations. The crowd was quiet, taking pictures near the iconic mosaic, stopping to remember the famous musician. David couldn't help the little bit of envy over the love for the man. Although in the end he had been killed by a crazed fan. Something to think about.

As he continued, a few tourists would meander over. He'd give them his best smile, wink at the women, and sing with all his heart. The tips slowly trickled in, for which he was glad. After an hour, he stopped to take a sip of water from his thermos. Turning back, he caught a couple of young boys, reaching down into his guitar case. "Hey!"

They quickly took off, thankfully before they could take any of his hard earned cash. A glance inside told him they must be desperate to take his measly stash. He reasoned that this might not be the best place to make a buck. The mass of people in Times Square and in the subways might prove a better opportunity. Of course, more people meant more thieves. He'd have to be extremely diligent in watching over his money.

After two more hours, he took the money from the case, a pitiful seven dollars and eight-five cents, and packing up his guitar, walked the 1.7 miles to Times Square to perform again.

The sun beat down on the asphalt around him, sweat quickly forming on his neck. Still, he smiled and charmed, sang and joked with the throng of people passing by. Having learned from the boys at Strawberry Fields, he took a second every ten minutes or so to scoop out his tips and put them in his pocket.

The tips were a little better, though not incredibly so. After two hours he'd pocketed ten dollars and fifteen cents. He was packing up when he heard his name called.

Smiling, he waved. "Hey, Lana. What are you doing here?"

"Lookin' for you. One of your roommates told me you were working on the street today." She stood in front of him, hands on hips, grinning. "Just look at you, performing in Times Square. I knew you had it in you." She winked and he chuckled.

"It's a start, anyhow."

She grabbed his arm and started up Broadway. "I have good news. How about I share it over lunch?"

He wiped a hand over the back of his sweaty neck, visions of his earnings for the day diminishing before his eyes. Before he could suggest a hot dog from a cart, she said, "My treat." Thank goodness.

They settled into a small fast food pizza joint with their slice and soda, his feet letting him know how happy they were to be resting.

"I was just at the office at Julliard and heard them finalizing the details."

"Of what?" He took a big bite of his hot pizza with green peppers and ground beef, just now realizing how famished he was.

"Next month they're invitin' a bunch of agencies to come to the school and let students audition. Sign-up sheets go up next week."

His pizza fell back to the plate. "Wait. You mean they're coming to the college to let us speak with them there?"

"That's right, sweetie. No husslin' for an appointment, then waitin' for hours to show your portfolio and demo." She reached over and excitedly pounded his shoulder. "Isn't that the most?"

“Yeah. Wow.” He sat back in his chair. “A whole mess of ‘em in one place.”

“Didn’t I tell you it was big news? Now, aren’t you going to thank me for the info?”

He grinned, leaning over to kiss her. “Thank you, sugar.”

“You’re welcome.” She took a nibble of her veggie pizza without cheese. “I’ll let you know exactly when to sign up.”

“That would be greatly appreciated.” He winked at her.

They settled into eating, David feeling refreshed, as if his luck was starting to shift, when a man in a business suit, smiling, walked by the table. “Well hello, Cinnamon Buns. How are you?”

Lana delicately dabbed her lips and grinned at the man. “Hi, good to see you.” Her voice was as smooth as butter.

“You going to be performing tonight?”

“Sorry, I’m off tonight but I’ll be back next weekend.”

His smile widened. “I’ll look forward to that,” he said softly.

David’s eyes followed him as he left the restaurant and walked down the street. Turning to Lana, he narrowed his eyes. “What was that about?”

She’d gone back to her pizza, pushing an olive to the side. “Huh?”

“Why’d he call you Cinnamon Buns.”

“That’s my stage name. I’m gonna get more water. You want I should get you more?”

“Cinnamon Buns? People call you Cinnamon Buns? You let men watching you dance call you that?”

“Honey, every exotic dancer has a stage name, that’s part of the job. When I dance, I’m entertaining the audience. I’m fulfilling fantasies, making dreams come true.”

His stomach tightened. “I’ve never asked you this but . . . are you wearing clothes when you’re dancing?”

Her light laughter made the knots in his stomach tighter. “Not much but yes. Why?”

He considered his answer, not looking at her. “If you were asked to dance naked at a club, would you do it?”

“Of course.” Her instant answer had his eyes finding her sparkling ones. “I’m a dancer, my body is my instrument. Like your guitar. If a song called for the release of clothes, how could I say no?”

The uncomfortable feeling in his gut intensified. It bothered him that the girl he was seeing had no trouble with nudity in her performance. He wasn’t going to analyze why it bothered him. It simply did.

She reached over and held his hand. “Sweet David, you don’t have to worry about me, I know how to take care of myself.” He didn’t explain that he wasn’t concerned for her safety, only how this affected him. He knew it was shallow but there it was.

With considerable effort, he lifted the edges of his lips, determined to let it go for now. “So. Cinnamon Buns?”

“I wanted a name that was . . . tempting.” Her finger stroked down the back of his hand, making him chuckle.

“Okay, Cinnamon Buns, let’s finish lunch. Then I’ve got to get going.”

“Sure. But you can call me by my nickname, Cinn.”

He frowned. It sounded too much like the word sin for his comfort.

They met up again later that day when she cooked dinner for him in her apartment. “I thought we were having sloppy Joes.”

“We are. The New Jersey version.”

He watched as she arranged slices of pastrami on slices of rye bread, covered with coleslaw, Russian dressing, and Swiss cheese. “Interesting. Why are you only making one sandwich?” He’d been on his feet all day and sincerely hoped she didn’t want him to share.

“I’m trying out for Swan Lake next week so I need to watch my evening diet.” She grabbed two sodas, one sugar-free and one regular, and set them on the table.

“I’ll be late tonight, Cinn. Don’t wait up.” One of her roommates walked to the door, wiggling her brows at them.

“Got it. Have fun.”

He put her nickname out of his mind and waited for her to sit. At her nod, he took a bite. Well, it wasn’t his mother’s fried chicken. Or meatloaf, or steak, but it was better than the food in the school cafeteria. “It’s good,” he said between bites.

“I’m glad.” She blew out a breath, as if she’d been nervous.

“This sandwich common in New Jersey?”

“Yeah, sure. My mother made it for us all the time.”

He wiped his mouth hoping he didn’t get a stomachache since he wasn’t used to the combination of flavors. “How was it growing up in New Jersey?”

“Great. My parents are amazing. We used to go to the shore on most weekends. I love the beach.”

Before he took another bite he said, “You didn’t go to church on weekends?” Where did that come from?

She giggled, studying him, clearly amused. “No. Did you?”

“Yeah.” Better stop talking now. He filled his mouth with a large bit of sandwich.

“That must have been a drag. I can’t imagine going every Sunday to listen to a man wearing a white collar drone on and on about something I don’t have the slightest interest in.”

He thought back to the church he had gone to in Sevierville, Mountain Community Church. Pastor Roy didn’t wear a white collar, and to be honest, he did occasionally have interesting sermons. He especially liked when he spoke on King David, since they had the same name, or when he spoke about the underdog winning—David and Goliath, Gideon, Moses, Jesus. It made him think there was a chance for him to make it big.

“How’d you stand it?”

He looked back at her and shrugged. "It wasn't so bad." Her confused expression had him speaking again. "The music could be good. The food at the potlucks was amazing. It kinda gave you a sense of community, you know? Getting to know your neighbors."

She huffed out a laugh. "Who wants to? My old man used to say, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' Privacy was very important to us."

"I guess it's a cultural thing," he said, backtracking. "In the South, it's common to be friends with everyone around you."

"Remind me never to go south." She took a sip of her drink.

"A lot of times it was nice. Really."

"Just the same . . ." She set her drink down and wrapped a hand around his neck. "I'm glad you're here. And I'm here. And we're . . . friendly."

She leaned in to kiss him but was interrupted when another roommate called out. "Cinn, can I borrow your green scarf?"

"Yeah, sure. It's in my left dresser drawer," she yelled. Her voice softening, she said, "Now, where were we?"

They kissed but the pleasure escaped him.

He held up his sandwich and said, "Great meal. Let me just take a few more bites." That seemed to appease her and she sat back grinning.

Once he was done, he helped her straighten up the kitchen before retiring to the couch in the living area. Her arms immediately went around his neck, her lips dropping small kisses on his cheek.

"How about a little television?"

She leaned back, clearly surprised by his request. "All right." She switched on the set and found *The Love Boat* starting. He'd never seen the show before since his parents had been extremely strict about what came on in their home. "This okay?"

"Fine."

She settled back on the couch, cuddling up close to him. He put his arm around her, telling himself to enjoy being with her and to relax.

The show proceeded, people coming onto a cruise ship, each with their own problems or issues. He chuckled with her at the jokes, joining the canned laughter of the show.

When the love scenes started, he was again uncomfortable. She began playing with the buttons on his shirt, her soft sighs communicating her intention. When she reached up and kissed his neck, she whispered, "You know, you can stay tonight if you want."

He cleared his throat. "Won't your roommates mind?"

With a giggle, she said, "They have guys over all the time." She kissed his lips slowly. "We have an agreement not to bother each other." Her kisses continued as she got in his lap.

His self-control was starting to snap, his mind going blank until the door flew open and a woman, apparently another roommate, ran into the room crying. "Oh, Cinn. Cinn, Justin dumped me." She plopped down on the couch, not concerned that she was interrupting an intimate moment and continued to bawl.

"I put two years into that man. We've been talking about moving in together and now . . . now . . . he wants to date others!"

Lana looked apologetically at him and slid off his lap. "It's okay, honey." She put an arm around the woman. "Better to find out now than later, right?"

As the woman continued to wail, he stood and rubbed his hands on his jeans. Had he just been spared making a big mistake?

He gave Lana a small smile. "I'd better get going." He motioned to the woman blubbering on her blouse. "You're needed here."

"Oh no, don't go. You can wait in my bedroom." Her voice lowered. "This won't take long."

He glanced at the distraught young woman, desperately in need of a friend. Shaking his head, he said, "She needs your help tonight. I'll catch up with you later."

Before she could talk him into staying, he left quietly, hearing the woman wail, "Oh, Cinn, Cinn, Cinn. It hurts so much."

It could have been a sermon from Pastor Roy.

Chapter Four

Dana let him know when the “Agency Fair” announcement was posted and he was third in line to sign-up for the maximum five slots allotted per student. In the time he’d been in New York, he’d done as much research as he could about the various agencies and knew the most prestigious. Pleased with the offerings, he quickly filled in his name.

The next few weeks he polished his performance until he was doing it in his sleep. He knew he was talented and this was his golden opportunity to start on the road to stardom. Nothing was going to stop him.

Excitement was rampant at the school the week before the fair. The administration recommended to all students to take the weekend off from rehearsing and relax before the stress of the week. Although it was hard, David determined that he’d do just that.

Early Saturday morning he went to the stables of Central Park. Back home he had a horse, Prince, and a ride on him always calmed him, helped him to think things through. This wasn’t the hills of Tennessee but how could it hurt?

He mounted a gentle bay and led her to the bridle path that encircled the Reservoir and North Meadow. As the park slowly filled with people and other riders, he was careful to go slow as he thought about the coming week. This could be it, the moment he’d been waiting for when someone in the industry actually acknowledged his talent and contracted to help him. Wouldn’t that be something if he could call his parents and tell them he had a New York agent.

The other issues in his life paled in comparison to this great need to succeed. His relationship with Lana, his classes, the church he’d told his mother he’d check out, nothing was as important as making it big.

That reminded him. It couldn’t hurt to go to church tomorrow, the day before the fair started. Maybe it might earn a few points with God. He could use all the help he could get.

When he was turning between the Reservoir and North Meadow, he saw lights set up and a group of people behind a barricade watching. He was getting used to this in Manhattan. There was always a television show, movie, commercial, ad being filmed somewhere in the city.

He stopped his horse to watch the proceedings but couldn't see anything other than the bright lights and the accompanying umbrellas. He didn't see a large crew so that probably meant ad of some kind.

When a few people walked back from that area passing him, he said, "Excuse me. Do you know what's going on over there?"

"Print ad for Macy's. For their spring catalog," a woman said.

"And they've got a really hot babe modeling the clothes," a man said and got a stare from the woman. "I think she's somebody famous."

"She was a Miss America. Elizabeth somebody or other."

David's body was suddenly on alert. *His* Miss America, Elizabeth Paige, was in the North Meadow, within sight of him? His mouth was dry and he was weak with the pounding of his heart. "Ah, thank you," he was able to say to the couple before they walked off.

He'd fallen in love with the woman when she was crowned Miss America and had actually met her at a benefit in Knoxville. Well, they hadn't officially met. She probably still thought his name was Bubba, if she even remembered him, which she probably didn't. The embarrassment of that day returned, blocking out the excitement of seeing her again.

For a brief second he deliberated galloping over to the shoot, letting her see him riding confidently on the back of a horse. That might counter the image of the speechless, shy singer she knew by the wrong name.

Then again, the horse could be frightened by the bright lights or decide to attack the shiny umbrellas. Knowing his luck.

He angled his head, straining to at least get a glimpse of the woman. And smiled. He couldn't see her face, but got a good view of her back. Her golden hair was shining in the sun, flowing down her back. The yel-

low dress she wore flapped around her as the photographer worked in front of her. He could just imagine the mesmerizing smile she was giving the man. Lucky him. His mind drifted with thoughts of the woman he considered perfect. He'd tried to get her out of his mind over the years but found that at different times, he'd go back to the moment in her dressing room when their eyes had connected and she'd given him a smile. Just for him.

"Hey, buddy, you want to get your horse moving?"

He glanced over to see a policeman watching him. How long had he been sitting on his horse watching? Creepy even to him. "Yeah, sorry." He pulled the reins around and started back on the path by the Reservoir.

"One day, Elizabeth Paige," he muttered. "One day I'm going to meet you on equal ground. Then we'll see what's what."

The streets were empty the next morning. Of course, everyone was sleeping in after a fun Saturday night. What had he done last night? Worked a double shift getting the school ready for the Agency Fair. And this morning he'd been sore from both the work and his long horseback ride. He had a slight cough. His nose was cold. Were those enough reasons not to go to church? His mother wouldn't think so.

So, he got dressed and walked down to 45th and Broadway to the New York Christian Chapel. Taking a deep breath, he walked in and found a seat in the back. The music had already started, a little more upbeat than what he was used to. They had a full band—guitars, keyboard, and drums—playing catchy tunes he'd never heard.

A quick glance around made him think of the church back home. Happy people singing, or perhaps simply making a joyful noise. He remembered one time he'd asked his mother how he was supposed to concentrate on the music when the woman behind them couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. She'd smiled and said it didn't matter to God. Well, it mattered in New York. Maybe not to this group, but to the group he'd be meeting this week, it was of extreme importance.

Not wanting to strain his voice in any way, he sang lightly, getting a feel for the songs. A strong hand clamped down on his shoulder and he turned to see the guy he'd met on the street. Now what was his name?

"David. So good to see you here today."

Thank goodness for nametags. "Yeah, hi Todd. Thought I'd check it out."

"I'm glad you did. I'll be around later if you have any questions about the service." He gave him another pat. "See you then."

He quickly forgot about the man and focused on the musicians. Good technique, good sound. The singers were adequate, although they weren't connecting with their audience, which is what a performer should do. Except for glancing down at their instruments, their eyes were closed or on the ceiling as they sang. What the heck were they thinking?

After singing, a few announcements, and the offering (of course), a relatively young man, probably mid-thirties, with reddish brown hair took the pulpit.

"Good morning." The congregation responded. "I greet you in the precious name of our Savior Jesus Christ. And He has a word for you today. Let's open our Bibles to Revelations three and learn about the church of Laodicea and see exactly where they missed it."

For the next half hour, David listened to the message about the church that had left its first love. Interesting, and he admitted the pastor did have style and authority in his voice. But the sermon had absolutely nothing to do with him.

Well, he'd tell his mother he'd attended. It would make her day.

At the final "Amen," he tried to slip away but Todd was waiting for him. "David, tell me what you thought of the service."

"Nice. Real nice." He shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to come up with enough to satisfy the man without coming out and saying he wasn't really interested in attending his church. "The music was a little different from where I come from. We stick to the traditional

hymns, but I got to tell you I enjoyed the performers here. They're very talented."

"You mean the Praise team."

"Huh?"

"They aren't performers. They lead the congregation in praise."

"Oh. Okay. Your pastor has a nice way about him. He's a pleasure to listen to."

"Yes, he is. What did you think of the sermon?"

Now what could he say? "A lot to mull over. Thanks for inviting me, I enjoyed it, but I've got to head back to the college. We've got a lot going on this week."

"Is there something I could pray for you about?"

The question, from a relative stranger, caught him off guard. "Ah . . . what?"

"I'd be glad to pray for anything going on in your life that you're concerned about. You said a lot was going on at your school. Anything in particular?"

"Well . . . yes." He knew how this prayer thing worked and there was no reason not to get all the help he could. "We've got what's called an Agent Fair this week. We'll be speaking with and performing for a bunch of agents and hopefully being signed for representation. It's a big deal."

"Sounds like it. Yeah, I'll be sure to pray that you get the right offer."

He was stunned by the man's sincere offer. "That's really nice of you, Todd. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure." He shook hands with him. "One piece of advice. Make sure you get a lawyer to take a look at anything before you sign. In fact, I've got a good friend here in our congregation that's a lawyer. I'm sure he'd be glad to look over a contract for you, pro bono. Just let me know. Here." He reached into his pocket and handed him a business card. "You can reach me at this number."

"Again, thanks, man. I hope I'm in need of one."

Chapter Five

The Agents Fair started off early the next morning. Classes were cancelled through Wednesday so the agents would have all the time they needed with prospective clients.

David was his charming self. He played with the skill of years of practice and his voice was solid, pleasing to his own ears. His first two appointments went moderately well. Both agents kept their heads down most of the time, making notes. The few times they glanced at him, it was with bland faces. It was tempting to veer from his practiced routine and try a little ad-lib to get them involved, but he didn't. This was too important to try something new.

The appointment Tuesday morning was the pits, the man glancing at his watch the entire time. David mentally checked that agency off his list.

Wednesday morning he waited for his fourth appointment of the week, tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair, his foot joining in the internal beat in his head. Where was she? Was his time of so little value to her?

When he started pulling out his guitar to practice, a tall, stunning woman, probably upper thirties or early forties, with the brightest red hair he'd ever seen walked in. Her brown suit with black trim fit her toned body perfectly. Her briefcase was made of expensive leather, as was her high-heeled shoes.

She walked with confidence, irritation, and purpose, glancing around at the people in the waiting room. Seeing David, she walked over, her sharp green eyes accessing the entire time. "David Tyler?"

The deep, lyrical cadence of her voice took him by surprise. "Ah, yes. That's me." He stood, surprised to find that they were at the same height. Her eyes continued to survey, study, dissect, investigate. And was that a hint of appreciation?

“Theresa Bolton of American Talent Agency. Let’s get started, shall we?” After giving him a brisk handshake, she turned on those mile high heels and strode to one of the small practice rooms, set up for the interviews.

She took off her jacket and carefully folded it on the arm of her chair. “Please sit.” When she did as well, she crossed long legs and opened the file she had on him in front of her. “David Tyler, from Tennessee.”

“Yes, that’s me.”

Her eyes briefly touched his before continued reading his bio. “You’ve performed at . . . Silver Dollar City in . . . Pigeon Forge.” She looked up, frowning. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Apparently this woman had no knowledge of the South. Probably had never stepped one dainty toe below the Mason Dixon Line. “No. No joke. I’ve listed other performances there,” he said pointing to the file. “I’ve been at The Julliard School for six months. Studying vocal arts, instruments, and composition. I play acoustic guitar, bass guitar, electric guitar, piano, organ, keyboard, drums, harmonica—” He snapped his lips closed before he mentioned he also played the washboard, jug, and spoons. He didn’t think she’d appreciate that additional information.

She took another moment to finish her reading and closed the file, sitting back. “All right, David Tyler from Tennessee. Impress me.”

Just the invitation he was waiting for. Quickly he pulled out his guitar and started with an upbeat, original composition. The song “It’s Just Me” expressed a man’s delight and amazement at the wonderful things that had happened to him—especially the girl by his side. When he finished singing, hitting the last chord, he waited, his heart pounding in his chest.

Those hard eyes were again measuring him and after what seemed like an hour, she spoke. “I’ve never heard that song before.”

“I wrote it.”

Her perfectly penciled eyebrows rose. "You wrote that song?"

"Yes ma'am. I mean, yes. I did." *Remember, Northern women don't like the ma'am label.*

Again leaning back, her hands folded in her lap, she said, "Let's hear something else. Something fast this time."

He relaxed slightly, thankful she hadn't laughed him out of the room, and sang "You May be Right," a Billy Joel standard, letting his fingers fly over Ol' Sue's strings. The joy from the music took over and he lost himself in the fun of the song, forgetting everything around him, performing for the woman.

After the last note, he still couldn't figure out her level of interest.

"One more. Something slow."

He strummed softly, playing one of his favorite country classics, "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." His eyes were closed, enjoying the feel of the guitar, the meaning of the words, simply enjoying himself.

The last note drifted away and the room was silent. He opened his eyes to see her studying him once more.

"How would you feel if I offered you a contract, David Tyler?"

The question surprised him. "Ah, I'd go around runnin' like a possum eatin' a sweet tater." The comment came out before he could stop it and winced.

But the sharp, professional woman in front of him did something he never would have imagined. She laughed.

What should he do? Was this a good thing or a bad thing. "Ah, I'm sorry. That just sorta slipped out."

She stood and put her jacket back on, shaking her head. "Don't you dare apologize. It's part of your charm and an angle I might be able to use. You know of a nice place to get a cup of coffee and talk?"

His head was spinning trying to keep up. "There's a good coffee shop on Broadway and fifty-sixth."

"Fine, let's go." When he didn't immediately follow, she stopped and stared at him. "You have some place else to be?"

He shook his head. “No. Can’t say that I do.”

The breakfast crowd had moved on meaning they had their choice of booths. David’s head was still reeling from riding in a limo. He was able to give Howie a wave and lead Ms. Bolton to the back for a quiet booth. “I don’t think I’ve been here.” She glanced around observing the place.

“It’s good. And their coffee is the best in the city.” He took a breath, trying to calm his racing pulse.

“If it isn’t my favorite songwriter. How’s it going, Beethoven?” Howie slapped him on the back.

“Great, Howie. Could you bring us two coffees please?”

Howie turned to Theresa and asked, “Would you like cream with that?”

“Skim milk and sweet ‘n low.” She barely gave him notice, focusing on David. Behind her back, Howie raised his brows, as if to say, “Who’s she?”

David cleared his throat. “I’m still new at this, Ms. Bolton, so help me out here. Do you need more information from me?”

Her lips quirked, her amusement not touching her eyes. They were intent, staring at him. “What I’m thinking is that you have potential. Potential to be big.”

He wanted to record those words. Frame them, paint them, burn them into wood. It was the first encouragement from someone in the business that he’d gotten. This woman wasn’t his family or friends, not even his professors or classmates.

“Thank you, Ms. Bolton.”

“Let’s stop that right now.” She smiled. “I’m Theresa.”

Howie set the coffees in front of them along with the milk and fake sugar. His wide eyes met David’s, making him smile. “Thanks, Howie. We’re good here.” He hoped he conveyed he didn’t need any help from the man.

She took a small sip, nodded, and dapped her mouth with her napkin. “You have talent, a little raw yet but definitely workable. Your voice is strong, interesting. You handle the guitar well. The fact that you play a variety of instruments is a bonus.

“Your songwriting skills are exceptional. I want you to keep at it. Have you got any other songs ready?”

“Not polished.”

“Well, polish. Your performance skills are definitely above average. That last song you did, it was lovely. I’ve always been partial to a good love song.” Her eyes softened. “You sang it well, although I want you to keep your eyes open so you can sing to the multitude of women who will be madly in love with you.”

It was a surreal experience having this professional predict things he’d only dreamed about.

She reached over and stroked his hand holding his mug. So deep in his thoughts was he that it took another minute to clue in to what was happening.

“You have a real way with a love song. Your voice is soft, comforting yet enticing. It’s a special gift. And . . . if you play your cards right, will take you far.”

Was she coming on to him? Ridiculous, she was a professional. He was just imagining things.

She pulled out a sheaf of papers and slid them over to him. “I’d like to get our contract in the works. If you have no problem with that.”

“Huh? No, of course not.” He glanced down and felt his heart squeezing, his throat clogging. It was happening, really happening. He swallowed hard, hoping to stop himself from crying like a baby.

“Wonderful. How about you come to my place tonight and we’ll . . . seal the deal.”

Chapter Six

He glanced up and her eyes were communicating something different. No business in those eyes. They were sultry, bright, intense . . . interested in more than a business partnership. “Ah, Theresa? I could be wrong but I’m sensing you have something else in mind beside just signing a contract.”

A smug smile on her face, she leaned forward. “David. You’re a handsome man. No reason we can’t mix business with pleasure.” He felt her foot rub up next to his and he jumped back in the booth.

“I’m afraid you’re getting the wrong idea here. I’m not . . . well, not that you’re not attractive, but I’m . . . I have a girlfriend and I don’t—”

“David, I know you’re a naïve boy from Tennessee, but let me tell you how things are done in the big city. You can have all the talent in the world, be as gorgeous as Adonis. But you need me to get your name and face out there. Without me you’ll still be playing for donations on the street.” Her face pinched. “Or Million Dollar City.”

“Silver Dollar City.”

“The point is, you need me, darling.” Her finger stroked his cheek. “We could be very good together, each meeting the other’s needs. It’s a win for both of us.”

He was flummoxed. Speechless, he stared at her, his breathing shallow, wondering how to handle this situation.

Finally, she sat back and reached for her purse. “Fine. You’re not ready to make a decision. You’re not ready to be famous.”

“It’s not that. I’m . . . not sure.”

The smug smile returned. “Why don’t we do this. It’s Wednesday. You have one week to give me an answer. We’ll meet back here, same time.” She pulled out a business card and put it in his hand, closing hers over his. “If you’re not interested, well, there are other handsome, talented singers in the city.” She slid out of the booth and turned. “Don’t disappoint me, David.”

He continued to stare at her as she walked out of the diner and to the next block where her driver picked her up.

“That is one scary lady.”

He turned to see Howie standing next to him. “Yeah, she is.” He looked down at her card in his hand, her contract on the table and sighed.

“What did she want?”

“She wants to give me a contract with her agency.”

“She . . . Hey David, that’s great! Looks like you’re on your way.”

“There might be a few . . . complications.”

“I saw the predatory look she was giving you. That’s always the way when you’re dealing with her type. Sometimes all they see when they look at us is a piece of meat.” Howie shook his head. “It ain’t right.”

The comment lightened his heavy soul and made him laugh, something he needed since he had a difficult decision to make.

His final appointment Wednesday afternoon didn’t show and the first three agencies left notes at his dormitory that they weren’t interested. Try again next year with new material.

His only option at the moment was Theresa Bolton. Great.

He’d researched her in the library and found her to be successful in the entertainment industry. A few of her clients had gone on to big things. None had stayed with her too long. Shocker.

The agency itself was solid, with a full slate of agents representing some of the biggest names in the business. Maybe if he could get his foot in the door with Theresa he could transfer to another agent. But that would mean agreeing to her terms. How could he do that? He’d admit she was an attractive woman, older by more than a decade. What would Lana think? They weren’t serious by any means but still he didn’t want to cheat on her.

She’d been insisting he come to the club to watch her dance. After the week he’d had with its emotional highs and lows, he decided to go to her nightclub on Saturday night. Hopefully, during Lana’s break they

could talk. They hadn't been able to get together all week and he wanted to get her impressions of what had happened with Theresa.

The bright, flashing lights beckoned passersby to come in for a good time. He sighed, thinking maybe that was what he needed. Looking at the eight by ten glossies of a few of the dancers outside had him cringing. His mother would be embarrassed that he was contemplating going in. He could almost hear her quote the verse about being careful of what you put before your eyes.

Mentally shaking his head, he gave himself a pep talk about living his own life and walked inside. The smoke immediately greeted him, choking a cough out. He got a seat near the back and ordered a drink.

"Wonder what Randy Camden would think about this place," he muttered to himself. The little bar back on the outskirts of Sevierville had been a favorite hangout. He drank, played darts, talked with friends there. He thought of all the guys, mainly Romeo Harper and Hank Donahue.

A chuckle escaped his lips. Hank Donahue wasn't going to Camden's these days. No, he had a wife and a baby on the way. And he was training to be a preacher. David had never seen that one coming.

The lights lowered and the music, loud and brash, filled the club. He tried to concentrate on the sounds, the different instruments playing, but with the heavy curtain of smoke, the garish laughter from the table next to him, and the latecomers pushing past his table bumping him, it was hard to listen.

The dancers came out, filling the stage, gyrating and bouncing to the slightly off-tune music. Usually he could appreciate a good dance and at Julliard he'd gone to student performances of ballet, modern, and tap, had enjoyed them. But that hadn't prepared him for the show in front of him.

The women were beautiful, with smiles bigger than their costumes. His eyes bugged out as he tried to figure out how the tiny bra top stayed

in place with their movements. The small skirt was more like a napkin and swung with every turn and beat of the music.

He saw Lana, or Cinnamon Buns, in the group, smiling and shaking with the others. Glancing around, he saw the audience was in two groups—ignoring the show or leering at the barely clothed women on the stage. One of which he was dating. It all seemed . . . wrong.

Taking a big sip of his drink, he wondered what was wrong with him. This was the city. Everyone did what he or she wanted, with no rules breathing down their necks. Maybe what he needed was more beer.

After the show, Lana hurried over to him, thankfully wearing a dress over her costume. Beaming, she grabbed him, kissing him hard. “Well? What’d ya think of the show?”

They sat and he considered his words carefully. “It’s obvious you have a lot of talent, Lana.”

“Shh.” She glanced around. “Cinnamon Buns, remember?”

“Oh, right. Well, good job.”

“Thanks, honey.” She took his hand. “I’m so glad you came.”

He wasn’t so sure he was. “Yeah. Hey, I need to ask you about something that happened this week. I want to get your take.”

“Yeah, sure. How did the agents appointments go?”

He shrugged. “Not great. At least with four of them. There was one that . . . well, she offered me a contract.”

“A contract? David, that’s fantastic!” She leaned over and gave him another kiss. “Why didn’t you tell me before? I’m so happy for you.” She kept her hand in his.

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure it’s such a good deal.”

“What do you mean?”

“She wants to take me on as a client, but not only as a client.” His neck heated up. “She wants to have an affair with me.”

He expected shock and surprise in her eyes. He was disappointed.

“And . . .”

“Did you hear what I said? She wants me to sleep with her so she’ll promote me.”

“You make it sound like it’s something unusual. Honey, it’s a tough business. You gotta get the breaks anyway you can.”

He opened his mouth several times trying to speak. “I don’t even know that woman. I’m not going to sell myself to get work.”

Her eyes narrowed, her hands fisting on her waist. “When did you become so self-righteous? Of course you want to sell yourself, that’s why you’re here in New York. And if it takes a little extra . . . attention, what does it matter? You both get what you want.”

“You’d have no problem with my having an affair with my agent?”

“Of course not. It’s going to further your career. That’s what it’s all about, right?” A satisfied smile curved her lips. “How do you think I got this job?”

A myriad of emotions filled him—shock, disappointment, disgust. All he could say was, “I see.”

She patted his hand and he struggled not to yank it away. “Hey, it’s just the price of doing business in the industry. Nothing out of the ordinary.” She scooted her chair closer to him and arms around his neck whispered in his ear. “I get off at two. How about coming back to my apartment with me?”

Even with her nibbling at his ear, he wasn’t tempted. At all. “Ah, listen, I’m going to get back, go to sleep. I want to get an early start at the park tomorrow.”

“You sure?” He nodded. “Well, okay.” She kissed his lips. “I’ll see you at school.”

She stood but bent to whisper in his ear. “Remember what I said, David. This could be your big chance and they don’t come along every day.”

He walked back to the college, his hands shoved into his pockets thinking. The noise of the cars, clubs, angry pedestrians didn’t bother him, didn’t even penetrate his consciousness. Moving to New York

had been a jolt to his system and he'd gotten through learning about the subway, ordering in a busy deli, navigating the tough streets. But tonight he'd faced a reality of life he wasn't comfortable with at all.

It wasn't that he was a greenhorn in the ways of romance but what Theresa Bolton was suggesting wasn't romance. It was a contract with physical attachments. And made him sick to his stomach.

But was Lana right? *Oh, excuse me, Cinnamon Buns.* He shook his head. All he wanted to do was to sing for lots of people, play his instruments, write songs, and make a living from it all. Was that too much to ask? Okay, sure, he had visions of playing for sold out venues, having an abundance of adoring fans, who didn't? But at what price?

The long walk back didn't do enough to clear his brain. When he stepped into the lobby, he was motioned over to the front desk. "You got a message tonight." The square-faced, short R.A. smiled smugly and waved a memo in front of him. "Your mommy called."

David grabbed the memo and uttered a crude suggestion.

He got to his room in time to hear a roommate arguing with his girlfriend while another roommate sat on his bed watching. Irritated with them, and with life in general, he ignored everyone and fell on his bed, bunching his pillow around his ears. He had a few more days to think about the situation, which he would do. And make his own decision.

Sometimes New York was brutal. He'd played and sang all morning in the park making less than ten dollars. Then switched to Times Square. The traffic was heavier and he made an even eighteen dollars after five hours of singing. There had to be a better way of making a living.

After a hot dog and soda to recharge him, he took his guitar case down into the 42nd Street subway station. He'd give it a couple of hours and then take the subway back to school.

It was going well for a while. A group of high school kids even stopped and joined in singing. It was fun, although they didn't leave a tip.

Heading toward ten at night, his section of the station grew quiet. Traffic lessened, fewer trains came by. He supposed it was normal for Sunday night with everyone settling in for the coming workweek. Maybe he should just pack it in for the night.

The take from the subway station was miniscule, worse than the park and square. Why was he beating his head against a wall? Theresa had offered him a contract, exactly what he wanted. Yeah, there was that little extra condition but maybe she was just kidding. Or maybe it would just be a kiss or two.

Sighing deeply, he looked around at his dark, dank surroundings. Maybe Lana was right. It was all just part of getting ahead here. He certainly wasn't a prude. Anything would be better than working your butt off all day for less than the price of a meal at a restaurant in town. Yeah, he was leaning closer and closer to signing on the dotted line.

He set his guitar on the ground and knelt to count his meager tips. "Hey, nice tunes."

"Thanks, man." He stuck the change and few bills in his pocket.

"How long you been playing?"

He chuckled and stood to answer. "A long time. Since I was—"

He didn't see the fist coming.

Chapter Seven

Before he knew what happened pain erupted from his eye and his body was pushed back against the wall. He opened his mouth but was silenced by another punch to his stomach, causing him to double over in pain, the breath knocked out of him.

“The money’s in his pockets.”

David was held down to the ground as hands went into his pockets pulling out his hard earned cash. He tried desperately to catch his breath to scream, threaten, curse, anything. It was difficult to speak over the pain in his gut. And eye.

“Hey, have a look at this old guitar. Might bring us a few bucks.”

He jerked up despite the pain and opened his good eye. It was hard focusing but cursed both men under his breath when they handled his precious instrument. “Leave it alone!” With his last bit of strength, he got up and, like a fullback on a football field, charged the men.

They merely moved out of the way and he crashed into the other wall. Amidst their laughter, they approached him. “Think you’re tough, huh?” One of the men kicked him in the side. “Think you can take us? Maybe you’d like to see us get really angry.”

He dragged David up and again punched his middle. Again and again.

“Not so hard, Cal,” the other man said.

“Why not?” He dropped David and started kicking his sides.

Curling up into a tight, painful ball, David was sure he was going to black out. *Not my guitar, God. Please.*

“Hey! Leave him alone!”

He heard running. The kicking stopped and although he wanted to thank whoever had called out, he couldn’t move.

“You all right, fella?” All David could do was moan. “They’re gone now. They really did a number on you, didn’t they. I’m going to help you turn over and see how bad the damage is.”

His mind was screaming please don't. If he could just lay there for several hours maybe the hurt would ease. Apparently the man couldn't read his mind and gently started to turn him.

He now knew exactly what the term "felt like being run over by a bus" meant. His body throbbed, his head pounded and the hot dog he'd eaten earlier was close to coming back up on him.

"Whoa, buddy. They got you good. I'm thankful that—David? Is that you?"

His good eye blinked and tried to focus. He swallowed what little saliva he had in his mouth and tried to concentrate. He'd seen this man before but where? "You're . . . the church guy. Ah, Todd?"

"That's right."

"Thank God you came."

"I'll amen to that. What happened?"

"Oh, nothing really. They punched my eye in, punched my gut, kicked my sides. My head hurts from a run-in with the wall but I did that on my own."

Todd moaned in sympathy. "Look, there's a walk-in clinic not too far from here. I know the doctor there. How about we get you in to see him."

David shook his head slightly and even that small action had him seeing stars. "No money. They took it all."

"Don't worry about that." He put his arm around David and slowly helped him to his feet.

It was embarrassing to be panting and weak on his legs, but more he was grateful. "Did they get Ol' Sue?"

Todd glanced around. "Sue? There was a girl with you?"

The comment almost made him smile. "My guitar. Please tell me they didn't take her."

Chuckling, he said, "No. Ol' Sue is right here." Todd leaned him to rest against the wall and put the guitar in the case, closing it. With one

arm around David, he carried the case in the other. “I’ve got it. Now we’ll take it slow and easy.”

After a few steps, David said, “Thanks. I mean it.”

“Thank God, David. I was on my way home and made a wrong turn in the station. I never come this way. Our good God was looking out for you.”

He didn’t comment. Couldn’t, but swallowed past the knot forming in his throat.

Todd indeed knew the doctor and made sure they were taken straight back. The diagnosis wasn’t good but could have been a lot worse—slight concussion, bruises all over his sides and abdomen, blackened eye. David tried to tell himself he’d had worse but he knew that wasn’t true.

“Can I come in now, doc?”

“Yes, Todd. Just finishing with the patient.”

Todd walked into the cubicle holding a large cup of water. “Thought you might be thirsty.”

The water was like ambrosia to him. It was hard to follow the doctor’s instructions to sip instead of gulp.

“He going to make it?”

The doctor smiled. “I expect a full recovery. He’d just better not get into the ring again any time soon.”

“I’ll do my best,” David said weakly.

“Should I take him home with me?” David cringed. He wanted his own bed tonight, even if it was in a dorm with three other guys.

“No, he should be fine. I’ve given him a list of instructions along with a couple of doses of pain medication. That should do.”

“I owe you, doc.”

“What I’m here for. See you at Bible study on Thursday night.” It hit David that the doctor must go to the same church as Todd.

“All right, let’s get your shirt back on and get you home.”

Gingerly, he took the shirt Todd offered and eased his arms into it. "I can't thank you enough. I can get home from here."

"I'm sure you can but I won't feel my job done until you're back at your place. I'll even spring for a cab."

If he'd had the energy, he would have argued. But he didn't.

David slept through the night and most of the next day. When he finally got up he groaned, feeling as if he'd suddenly aged sixty years. On his desk he saw that a message from the front desk had been left. His mother had called twice yesterday. It wasn't like her to call so often and little licks of fear heated his sore stomach. Had something happened?

He hobbled down to the pay phone in the lobby and called home. After several stressful minutes, a cheerful voice answered. His stomach eased somewhat.

After agreeing to the reverse charges, he heard, "Davy, sweetheart! How are you? You're mama's been trying to get you for a couple of days now."

"Hey, Aunt Bonnie." He rubbed his middle. "I've been real busy."

"I'm sure. Listen, honey. A couple of days ago Mary went into labor."

The fear was instantly back. "She wasn't due for another month. What happened?"

"Now calm down. The doctor said it wasn't that out of the ordinary. First babies especially have a habit of coming when they want to. Seems your little niece was ready to make an appearance.

Joy swept through his soul. "My . . . niece?"

"Mm-hm. Abigail Virginia. Born Sunday morning about ten o'clock. I guess she wanted to make the eleven o'clock service. That's what Hank said."

His eyes watered as he chuckled, ignoring the pain in his sides. "Yeah. Then she's okay? Mary and . . . Abigail?"

“Both are beautiful and healthy. Both grandmas are at the kids’ apartment, getting things set up for them. My, that little apartment has gotten used by your family—your parents, Tommy and Mindy, Mary and Hank.” With fun in her voice, she said, “You going to be next, Davy?”

If she only knew how far he was from settling down with a nice girl she wouldn’t ask even in jest. “I don’t think so.”

“Is something wrong? You sound so tired.”

“I’ve been putting in a lot of hours.” He blew out a breath, already tired from standing so long.

“Davy.” She hesitated for a long moment. “You’ve always been so special to me. You know you were Judson’s favorite,” she said, referring to her late husband. “Because of that I feel close to you.”

“I feel the same way, Aunt Bonnie.”

“I’m glad, honey. So I won’t be prying when I say that you sound . . . reflective, quiet.”

He sighed. “I’ve got a lot on my mind. I have to make an important decision this week and I’m having trouble with it. Don’t ask for details.”

“Well then, I’ll just be praying for you. As soon as we hang up I’m going to pray that the Lord will give you wisdom and understanding about what you should do. How’s that?”

“You are a peach, sugar.” She giggled, as she always did when David called her “sugar.”

“Okay honey, I know you need to get back. I’ll tell the family you called and I gave you the news.”

“Thanks. And give everyone my love. And give Mary and Abigail kisses for me. Tell the new daddy I said, ‘Nice going.’”

“I’ll do that. And Davy, remember I’ll be praying. I’m sure you’ll make the right decision when the time comes.”

Back in his room he eased onto his bed, pulling his guitar with him. Thankfully, his fingers hadn’t been injured. He started running through finger exercises and then onto a few old standards he liked. As always

his guitar, his friend, helped to relax him. He closed his eyes and let his fingers play.

His mind began working through all the happenings of the past week—meeting with Theresa, visiting Lana at the nightclub, the mugging, Todd taking him to the clinic. The call he'd just made home—Mary and his new little niece. Aunt Bonnie praying for him. If he was keeping score, Christianity would be way out in front of New York.

The faith of his family wasn't something he thought about often. He knew they worried about the condition of his soul. He knew they wanted him to make a decision for Jesus.

Without realizing it, his fingers began to play, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," one of his mother's favorite hymns. The sweet melody poured through his soul as he thought about the many Sundays he'd spend singing that hymn and many others. Hearing his mother humming the hymn while cooking or his father playing it on his violin. It gave him comfort now to play it on his guitar. Ol' Sue, which had almost been taken from him. He shuddered to think if Todd hadn't chanced to come that way. But Todd didn't think it was a coincidence. That God had sent him.

He frowned. If God was looking out for him, why'd he let those guys beat him up in the first place. No, that was being ungrateful. He still had Ol' Sue, that was the important thing.

He stopped playing. He'd thanked Todd, he'd thanked the doctor. But he hadn't thanked the one that probably was responsible for seeing that he wasn't killed and his prized guitar taken. Bowing his head, he squeezed his eyes shut. "Um, God. I haven't done this since I was a kid and I'm not sure if I remember how. Listen, thanks." His throat clogged with emotion. "Just thanks. I know . . . ah . . . I probably should . . ."

A knock sounded before his "favorite" R.A. stuck his head in the room. "Hey Tyler. You got a call downstairs. Whoa, what happened to

your eye? I don't think I've ever seen that shade of purple around an eye before."

He set his guitar aside. "Just a little misunderstanding. Who's on the phone?"

"I'm not your secretary. I didn't ask. She does have a nice voice, though. When you're finished with her how about giving her my phone number?"

He was just too exhausted to think of a good comeback.

Taking a breath, he shuffled to the phone and answered, feeling a tinge of nausea when he heard Theresa Bolton's silky voice.

"David, I wanted to confirm our meeting Wednesday at the delightful little diner for coffee and the signing of our contract. We are still on." It wasn't really a question but a command."

He rubbed his stomach not really wanting to deal with her at the moment. Maybe that should be an indication of how working with her would be. Still, he couldn't help thinking of the possibilities of having a contract with an actual agent.

Whether he went with her or not, she deserved to get the answer in person, on Wednesday as planned.

"Yes. Wednesday. At the diner."

"Very good. I'm looking forward to us celebrating your decision."

He choked back the bile rising in his throat. "I'll talk to you then, Theresa." He couldn't get off the phone fast enough. He just wanted to get back to bed.

Suddenly he stopped, remembering something Todd had said when he'd first visited his church. He pulled out the card with Todd's phone number. Curious that he was wearing the same jeans he'd had on when Todd had given it to him, he thought as he dialed the man.

"Todd? It's David. David Tyler. I wonder if you have a few minutes to talk."

Chapter Eight

“You sure you want to meet that one again?” Howie asked as he poured a mug of hot coffee for David.

He smiled. “Yeah. Don’t worry, I think I’ve got a handle on the situation.”

“You just be careful, there David. Women like that . . .” He shook his head. “They have nice guys like you for breakfast.” His eyes softened as he glanced to the front of the diner where his wife was hostess and cashier. “Take my word for it, find you a woman who’s beautiful and kind.”

David took a sip behind his grin. “Sure.”

The front door opened and Theresa whirled in, dressed perfectly in a low-cut blue dress and black suit jacket, black stiletto heels, smiling red lips and bright eyes pointed in his direction. Until she noticed his black eye, now a bluish-green.

As the Southern gentleman that he’d been trained to be, he stood up, holding his breath to stifle a bit of lingering pain. “Theresa. Good to see you.”

“Darling, what happened to you?” She took his hand and air kissed his cheek as she sat.

“Just a little altercation in the subway station.”

“Altercation?”

“They wanted my money. I didn’t want to give it to them.”

“You poor darling.” She sat and muttered a quiet “thank you” when Howie set her coffee with skim milk and artificial sugar in front of her.

Her concerns for his health already in the past, she folded her hands on the table and said, “Have you got something for me?”

David took the folder from the bench seat next to him and handed it over. “Before I sign, there are a few things we need to go over.”

She opened the file and saw that under her contract was another one. “What’s this?”

Mirroring her image, he folded his hands on the table. “Theresa, I’m very interested in your agency. It has an excellent reputation. Lots of contacts, very successful. Just the kind of agency I want to be with.”

“Yes?” Her eyes reviewed the new contract.

He felt a peace in his heart as he continued. “More than anything I want to play my music, to be successful, make a name for myself. I believe I can do that. I have the talent, the ambition, and the work ethic needed.” His voice became like steel. “I will make it, with or without you. But it’s going to have to be the result of my musical ability and your marketing talent. Nothing else.

“Now, if that doesn’t meet with your approval, I’ll be sorry but I’ll just have to look for another agency.”

Her eyes lifted to meet his. “You had an attorney draft your own contract?”

“I felt it was imperative.”

“Our contract wasn’t good enough for you, David Tyler?” Her tone was biting but he was not deterred.

“No. I didn’t feel it would result in the most successful union.” He was proud his voice stayed strong.

Her eyes flared and he was sure she was getting to the part about there being no physical relationship between the two parties. He’d loved how Todd’s lawyer friend, also from his church, knew exactly how to word the document to sound completely professional and reasonable. He also knew that the upper echelon of the agency would have no trouble with the revised contract. In fact, he’d upped the percentage he’d give the agent. It was only fair, to his mind.

She finished her reading and sighed, her hands going back to the folded position. “Well, I don’t know whether to be insulted or impressed.”

“I hope you’ll choose impressed.” He grinned and was glad when she chuckled.

“Okay, David Tyler. Let me run this by our legal department.” She closed the folder and studied him, her head cocked. “I like you. You’ve got style. And talent.” Her eyes narrowed a bit in scrutiny. “All you need is polish. And the right agent behind you and that’s me.”

“All right, Theresa Bolton. We’ll give it a chance.” He lifted his coffee and they clinked mugs in agreement.

He was feeling pretty good as he walked slowly back to The Julliard School. The bruises were fading, the eye healing.

And he had an agent! He’d have to call his family and tell them. And thank Aunt Bonnie for praying for him.

But before his phone call, there was one more thing he had to do to clear his conscious.

Lana came out of the classroom, smiling when she saw him. Then gasped at his eye.

He sighed. “Yeah, I know, I know. It was a mugging, I got a black eye, I’m okay now.”

She put her arms around him. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Yikes, this wasn’t going to be easy. “Hey, you got a minute?”

“Sure, honey.” She leaned back and played with the lapels of his shirt. “What’s up?”

He looked around him to see all the men and women passing them in the hall. This was not the place to breakup with her. “Let’s go to the cafeteria and get a soda. My treat.”

“I’d love to.” She wrapped her arm around his and led him down the hall. “We can’t have your amazing voice getting dry, now can we.”

David winced. He wondered if she would think his voice was so beautiful once it announced that they should stop seeing each other.

They passed a table in the lounge and a headline on a trade paper grabbed his attention. “Wait a minute.” He picked up the paper and read.

“What is it?”

A smile started at the edges of his lips and spread across his face. “Elizabeth Paige has been cast as Sally in the revival of *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Starting in January.”

“Elizabeth Paige. Who’s that?”

His heart warmed and he couldn’t help the excitement in his soul. Remembering Howie’s words about the perfect woman, he said, “Just a woman who’s beautiful and kind.”

He suddenly had an incredible urge to buy a Broadway ticket. For January.

THE END

THE SHOW

Chapter One

March, 1982

It was like a show, watching the people rush past the windows of the coffee shop early in the morning. David stopped strumming his guitar, ‘Ol’ Sue,” for a moment and observed.

There was a little bit of everything in the world, he imagined, walking through the streets of New York. Some were obviously going to jobs, their suits pressed, their designer coats flapping in the cold breeze, expensive briefcases in their hands. Others clearly weren’t going to such lofty jobs but instead wore the uniform of their occupation—fast food staff, police, medical workers.

Another group dressed in colors and hairstyle reminiscent of the popular Princess of Wales or rugged jackets for Indiana Jones wannabes. David shook his head. He supposed it was all fine, this obsession with pop culture, but for him, he didn’t want to follow it.

He wanted to drive it.

A blast of wind had people pulling coats and jackets closer and he shivered at the sight. He’d endured his first New England winter and spring couldn’t get here fast enough, in his opinion. Which begged the question—when would spring get there? It was March and still cold, in the high thirties, with no sign of warming. Some forecasters were even predicting snow for the weekend. They’d probably be blaming “The Coming Ice Age” they’d been so adamant in predicting during the ‘70’s.

“Need a little more Joe there, Beethoven?”

David turned from the window and grinned at the owner of the Broadway and 56th Street coffee shop he frequented. Howie, a huge and hairy man, was a true New Yorker that had for some reason taken pity on him, a poor music student, allowing him to study and work in

one of the booths. David didn't take that privilege for granted and never took up space during peak times.

"Joe's always welcome," he said holding out his empty coffee cup. Howie gave his surprisingly high-pitched chuckle and poured. "Say, when does it start to warm up around here?"

Howie lowered his hefty body into the seat across from David. "Never know. Weather is like . . ." His eyes went to the ceiling as he thought. "It's like a fickle female, deciding on her own way. Doing things in her own time." His eyes went to David's as he leaned over the table. "We got a choice, buddy. We can fight against it or . . ." The edges of his lips lifted and he cast a glance over to the cash register, where his petite but supremely built wife Sadie sat smacking her gum and filing her nails. Howie sighed. "Or you can just sit back, relax, and enjoy the many facets of the exceptional reality."

"Hmm. Exceptional reality. Well spoken, big guy. Very inspiring." David strummed, wondering how he could fit the words into lyrics.

"Hey, anything I can do to inspire the arts. I've been trying to tell you for over a year, I'm your muse."

The idea tickled David. Yes, it was always a good idea coming to Howie's place, if not for a place to work then for the entertainment value alone.

"Me and Sadie are planning to come see you one night while you're playing at that club. Where is it again?"

"In the Village, Tenth Street. Dane's Jazz Club."

Howie moaned. "You mean I gotta go all the way down to the Village? You couldn't find a club closer?"

"Sorry, but I've got to go where the work is." His eyes surveyed the little diner. "Now if you'd let me bring in a mike here, maybe you wouldn't have to go so far to see my stellar performance." It was a familiar argument, one David knew he'd never win but enjoyed voicing, as Howie's eyes would light up. One thing Howie was passionate about,

it was his diner. Okay, two, he thought hearing Sadie speak with a customer.

Howie's reaction didn't disappoint. "I look like a patsy to you? People don't come here for entertainment. They come for good food, which I am known for." Seeing more people coming in the door, he stood with his coffee pot. "Drink your coffee, Beethoven, it's getting cold."

"Yes, sir." He took a sip, smiling as the man walked away.

He couldn't blame Howie, as the man was right. His little diner did serve amazing food and the layout didn't cater to a stage of any size.

The club he played in was small and smoky. Sometimes no one listened to him. But still, it was a job and since he'd moved into his own place a couple of months ago, he needed the cash.

The diner started to fill for lunch, which was his cue to leave. After paying for his coffee, and flirting with Sadie, he braved the cold to walk back to his apartment and get ready for his next class.

The cold cut through his denim jacket, making his teeth chatter. With his guitar on his back, he shoved his ungloved hands into his pockets. He'd thought East Tennessee, where he was from, could get cold but it had nothing on New York. There had been snow in the city off and on from January one through the end of February. Yeah, it had been fun playing in the freshly fallen snow in Central Park, the first couple of times. After two months of it, he was done.

He quickened his steps, wanting to get into the warmth of his place. Ah, just the thought made him feel better. Finally, he had a place to call his own, no brothers, no roommates. All for him. It was just a studio, which was a fancy word that meant it was just one big room, tiny bathroom, and kitchenette (a sink, two burners, mini-fridge). But it was his, along with his own phone. A smile filled his face. He had a phone and an answering service. How cool was that? So when that all-important call came through offering him the success he craved, he'd be ready.

Which reminded him. He needed to call his agent and see what the heck was going on. She'd raved about his new demo and said she even had a few record execs interested. He was waiting.

The old building that housed his apartment was just three blocks from The Julliard School, where he was attending, and beckoned him, encouraging him to jog the last block to enter its warmth.

The floors creaked, the smell was old and musty, and the windows were cracked. And he couldn't stop the spring in his step as he approached his apartment door. An envelope was wedged at the jamb and he removed it while slipping in his key.

Inside, he sat his guitar case against the flowered sofa he'd found a few blocks away on the curb and plopped down to open the envelope. It was a reminder of rent payment coming up in another week. So far, he hadn't been late. Well, maybe a few days, but well within the danger zone. His eyes went to the amount due and he swallowed hard. It never failed to amaze him that anyone could charge so much for a one-room apartment. Especially this one. He glanced around at the ugly red dresser that had been there when he moved in. The small kitchen sink that occasionally dripped. The old fridge that more than occasionally hummed. He'd been able to snag a twin mattress from the dorms before it was discarded so he had a bed. Of sorts. One day he'd get sheets for it. It would have been dismal without the quilt in blues and greens his mother had sent to him.

Oh, well. If this was part of the process he had to go through, living in NYC, making it big, he'd gladly participate. Although, looking at the rent reminder, he'd have to work a few extra shifts in the school cafeteria and at the club. His bank account was as miniscule as his kitchen.

The phone rang, bringing him out of his musings. He sprung off the hard cushion and trounced on it. "Hello?"

"Davy? Hey, I didn't know if I'd get you or not. I usually have to talk to one of those nice ladies that answers your phone for you."

Okay, not his agent, but someone even more important. He smiled and lay down on his mattress. “Hey, Mama.”

“I was just sitting here in the quiet, quilting and thinking about all my babies. How are you, honey?”

“I’m good. How’s everyone there?”

“Everyone’s fine. I had Petey with me all yesterday afternoon and my goodness but that little one has a lot of energy.”

He chuckled at the description of his two-year old nephew. “I’ll bet. And how’s my little niece?”

“Abby is just beautiful. Almost six months old now.”

“Mary and Hank getting any sleep yet?” he asked, referring to his sister and her husband.

“That sweet little dear is a good sleeper, thank the Lord. And you should see Mary. She’s the best little mother and Hank positively beams at the two of them.”

“I’d like to see that.”

David grimaced, knowing what was coming when his mother sighed.

“Yes, when are you coming for a visit, son? We missed having you here for Thanksgiving and then Christmas. And your birthday. You still enjoying the quilt I sent you?”

“Sure am, Mama. It’s still cold here so I can’t thank you enough for the quilt.”

“You’re welcome. So, when are we going to see you?”

David shook his head. There was no changing the subject. “I told you back in the fall how hard it is to get away.”

“I know, you’ve got your studies and your performances.” He was glad she didn’t know how dark and urban the bar he played in was. Or how strapped for cash. That was the real reason he didn’t go home for Christmas. He’d been saving up for the security deposit on his place and couldn’t afford a trip to Tennessee.

“Don’t you get some sort of break for the spring?”

He snorted out a laugh. *Spring. What was that?*

“The school does, but I still have to work.” And figure out how to make up the missed income from the cafeteria being closed.

His mother sighed deeply. And loudly. “We sure do miss you, Davy.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I know, Mama. I’ll try to figure out a time, really I will. Now tell me about the others. How’s Becca doing in high school?”

She went down the list—Becca enjoyed high school. BJ was excelling in his classes at University of Tennessee. His oldest brother Tommy and his wife Mindy were happily running Grandpa Lionel’s hardware store and raising Petey.

Grandpa Lionel’s dementia was better, as long as he took his medicine. He and David’s Aunt Bonnie lived in a cabin behind his parents’ house.

“How’s Pop doing? The subdivision going well?” David’s father was a carpenter and was heading up a massive project not far from their home in the hills behind Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

“He’s having the time of his life,” she said chuckling. “Hank is still working with him part-time, but he’s working more and more at the church. BJ spends Saturdays at the site working. I think it’s been good for him. I know your father enjoys it.”

A twinge of guilt filled his heart. He’d been working with his father before he’d gotten the scholarship to Julliard and had hated to leave him but knew he’d had to come to NYC. “Pop still okay that I didn’t stay and help him?”

“Of course he is. We both know you’re doing what God’s put in your heart. We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Nice to put the burden on God, he supposed. Seems he could rationalize lots of things with that thinking.

“You got everything you need, Davy? Anything you want me to pray for you about?”

He always hated that question. As if he couldn't take care of himself. "No, Mama. Everything's fine here. Classes are great. And Theresa—that's my agent—she's setting up a meeting with a record company. I'm a regular at the club—ah, venue that I'm playing at, so that's getting me attention. And I've almost got enough songs written to put together my first album. Theresa says it's a done deal that we'll get it sold." Maybe he was stretching things a bit, but he didn't want his mother to worry.

"Well that is wonderful. I can't wait to share the news with everyone. We're having a big dinner here Sunday after church."

David could just imagine. His mother and Aunt Bonnie always cooked up a feast for big family dinners. His mouth watered at the idea of chicken and dumplings, boiled lima beans, creamed corn, homemade bread and jam, strawberry shortcake. *Stop torturing yourself!*

"Sounds good. Wish I was going to be there."

"We'll miss you. Maybe we'll give you a call. What time do you get home from church?"

Yikes. He took a breath and said, "Not sure I'm going to make it this week, Mama. I'll be working late Saturday night. I probably won't get home until three in the morning."

"Good gracious! Why is anyone up that late in the night?" He grinned thinking of his sweet mother. "Now David John, you be extra careful getting back to your apartment that late. You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am." He was supremely glad she didn't know about the mugging that had occurred months ago.

"And don't forget Easter is coming next month. You want to be sure you go to church to praise the risen Savior?"

He really hated all the Christian jargon his family used. Of course with them it was as natural as breathing. It always made him feel uncomfortable. He'd learned a long time ago to just go with it. Agree and move on.

"Yes, ma'am."

Chapter Two

They said their goodbyes and David sighed, relaxing back on his mattress. The colorful quilt next to him reminded him that for all the little annoyances in dealing with his family, they really did love him. And he loved them. It was another reason he wanted to make it big—to do things for his family.

They'd never been what people would call poor. He'd seen plenty of destitute people from deep in the hills of Tennessee. His family's church was always sending help to them. But his own family lived a simple life, no frills, just pay your bills and save a little for a rainy day. Their idea of an entertaining evening was sitting on the porch and listening to the birds sing while the mountains to the south darkened with the coming night. It was peaceful and homey, but he wanted more.

Since he was a boy, he'd had the dream to sing his songs for masses of people. To hear their applause and feel their love. And to make the kind of money so that his family would never have to worry about a thing. He dreamed of taking them all on a long cruise, maybe through the Mediterranean Sea. He wanted to make sure his parents, Aunt Bonnie, and Grandpa Lionel were taken care of for the rest of their lives.

A smile curved his lips. There were a few things he wanted for himself. A big truck with all the bells and whistles. His own house filled with a collection of any and every kind of instrument available. Front row tickets and first class treatment to whatever event he wanted to attend. The smile widened. A gigantic bed with the softest sheets known to man.

His mind turned a new direction as he thought of something else he wanted. He could see her, an exquisite, long-legged blonde with a face that had to be fashioned by angels. Bright blue eyes that laughed with fun. Lips that smiled warmly and sometimes made him sigh in the night. The former Miss America that he'd fallen for with one look. The woman he could never seem to completely get out of his mind. One

day, one day he'd confidently shake Elizabeth Paige's hand, smile his own charming grin, and watch her fall as deeply in love with him as he was with her.

He shook his head. That woman was so out of his league. For the moment.

In the meantime there was no reason he couldn't enjoy some time with a pretty Southern belle he'd found at school. He turned back to the phone and dialed a familiar number.

Carrie Blanchard from Folkston, Georgia, had been a rare find in the throng of people in NYC. As soon as he'd heard her speak, he knew he had to get to know her. They were in the Vocal Performance class together and he'd been blown away by her amazing voice. The woman was going places.

"Hey, sugar. What's going on?"

"Nothing much, honey. In fact, I was just sittin' here thinkin' about you."

David's voice lowered. "Ditto. Thought you might like to grab an early dinner. Maybe come to the club tonight and watch me perform."

Her laugh was light, high, very feminine. "That just sounds perfect. Don't know of anything I'd rather do on a Thursday night."

"Great. I've got classes and then have some work over at the cafeteria but after that I'm yours."

She sighed long and deep. "Oh, David Tyler. If you only meant that." He grinned.

David didn't much like to go to Times Square, unless he was performing on the street. Besides the Broadway theatres the area had become a red-light district, with sex shops, peep shows, dives and bars galore. Still, you could find a decent diner or deli that wouldn't cost too much. And Carrie loved the giant billboards and flashing neon signs.

They settled with their dinners at a table near a front window and Carrie sighed with delight when they sat. "Don't you just love the city, David? It's so . . . everything."

Outside he could count two drug transactions going on, a prostitute cuddling up to two businessmen, and a mother covering the eyes of her young son. "It's different all right."

"Anything you could possibly want is right here. How fortunate are we that we live in the middle of it?"

After a bite of really good pastrami, he wiped his mouth. "I like Central Park the best."

"I like Central Park, too. It's so beautiful. I love to watch the seasons there. And now the spring flowers are just starting to sprout. Soon the concerts will start." Her lovely lavender eyes blinked up at him. "We should check them out."

"Sure. Although I think Central Park is best to . . . just think."

"What do you mean?"

"I love the city, don't get me wrong. It's fast and busy and full of life. But sometimes it's good to just go to the park and decompress."

"And do you write your songs there?"

Pleased that she put that together, he smiled. "Yeah, I do."

"So when are you going to write a song about me?" She stroked his arm with her finger. "You know I'd just love that. It would make me really happy." Her hand cupped his face and she leaned into him to give him a kiss.

Which he enjoyed, especially when a hum of excitement skittered down his spine. Just a hum. As nice as it was, he was careful in his response. "Yeah, maybe."

She clapped her hands together and went back to her salad. He was safe for the time being.

"David?"

They both glanced up to see a dark-haired man smiling down at him. It took David a few seconds to place him. "Uh, Doc?"

He chuckled and patted David's shoulder. "You remembered, I'm surprised. After all, you had a slight concussion the last time we met." Carrie gasped.

“Oh, Carrie, this is Doctor . . . Clark, right?”

“Russell Clark,” he said to Carrie. Turning to David, he said, “Nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, what are the odds? New York’s a big place.”

“You’d be surprised how often you run into someone you know. I thought maybe I’d see you in church. In fact, I’m grabbing a quick bite before heading over for Bible study tonight.”

“That’s good.” What else was he to say? “Carrie and I were just having dinner before I go to work.”

“Performing? Seems to me you’re a singer.” David nodded. “Where are you playing, I’d love to catch your act.”

Before he could give him a vague answer, Carrie responded. “He’s playing at Dane’s Jazz Club on Tenth Street. You should check it out.”

“I will. I’ve got to run now. It was nice to meet you, Carrie.” He patted David’s shoulder again. “Really good to see you. Hope I see you at church sometime.”

Once he left, Carrie said, “I didn’t know you went to church. That’s really sweet.”

He could feel his face heating up. “It’s nothing. I went a couple of times last fall. My parents are always asking me about it, so I put on the show, so to speak.”

She sat back, exhaling. “I should probably find a church. My folks are asking me, too. Where is it? Is it any good?”

“Forty-fifth and Broadway. New York . . . Christian something. It was all right, I guess. For a church.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “If you’re going to go to church it was fine. Nice people. Good music. I’m just not . . .” How should he phrase it. “I’m not ready for that stage of my life. I’m too busy with my music to be distracted by church.”

“Hmm.” Her eyes went out the window, her mind evidently far away.

“What’s that mean?”

Turning back, she patted his hand. “You shouldn’t forget about God, David. Especially in this time of your life. He’s important.”

“Really?”

“Sure. And if at any time in your life you need Him to be on your side, it’s right now.”

This stirred his interest. “How do you figure?”

She shook her head. “Honey, God controls it all. This is a tough business we’re trying to break into. There’s lots of competition for too few openings. Don’t you think it’d help to have God Almighty working for you?”

The way she phrased it didn’t exactly sit well with him. “You mean use God?”

Before speaking she pondered his words. “Not . . . exactly.” She huffed out a breath and leaned over the table. “Look, doesn’t it make sense that God would want the good people, His own people, to make it big? So you go to church, sing a few hymns, say a few prayers. Then ask him for his blessings. Makes sense to me.”

“Interesting. Using Christianity sorta like a rabbit’s foot, for good luck.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to you? I mean, other than to get you what you want in life?”

Her back became ramrod straight, as if offended. “Well, isn’t there something in the Bible about God giving abundant life? That’s all I’m asking, for my abundant life. Why shouldn’t I get what I want?”

He shrugged. “Maybe He has a different plan than what you think you want?” And where did that come from? He almost sounded like his parents.

She started to say something but stopped herself and took his hand to squeeze. “Hey, everyone has his or her own beliefs. You don’t have to

have mine nor do I have to have yours. Still, I think I might just check out that church for any advantage I can get.”

They went back to their food and not a minute later, her eyes widened. “Hey Sawyer, over here.” She motioned to a tall, slim man that had entered the restaurant. “Hey darlin,’ how are you?” She stood and kissed the man, who wore workout clothes and carried a duffel bag over his shoulder. That combined with his muscular build told David the guy was a dancer.

“Great, Care Bear.” David frowned. “I am famished. Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not,” she answered before David could say anything. She had a habit of doing that. “David, Sawyer. I met him in dance class. Sawyer, David, my current beau.”

The man’s gleaming white teeth shone through his smile. “Lucky dude.” He shook David’s hand and plopped in the seat next to Carrie and draped his arm around the back of her chair. “You guys just chilling or what?”

“We’re heading to a jazz club after this. David’s performing there.” She smiled brightly.

“No kidding? Great, man. What do you play?”

“What doesn’t he play, you mean. Go on, honey, tell him all the instruments you’re proficient on.”

“Acoustic guitar, bass guitar, electric guitar, piano, organ, keyboard, drums, harmonica, washboard, jug, and spoons.”

“Whoo, that’s some list. I’d love to hear the spoons sometime. Hey, you should audition for the play I’m working on. We’re set to open in a few weeks and they always need musicians. I heard today how they’re scrambling for more. Could be a lucky break.”

Carrie’s mouth dropped open and she turned to David. “And you see? Just the mention of going to church and He opens the door. I’m definitely going to check out the New York Christian something church. There’s power there!”

David didn't question his good fortune, but the next day he followed up with the information. After his audition the following Monday, they hired him on the spot and dazed, he signed the paperwork to play acoustic guitar for the new Broadway musical *A New Normal*. He could have shouted from the top of the Empire State Building, could have flown to the top on his own power, he was so happy. He couldn't wait to tell everyone he knew.

He stepped out of the theatre and breathed deeply of the air that was all New York—sausage, hot dogs, cigarettes, gasoline fumes. It was heavenly.

Mentally he started to make a list of all he'd have to do—put in notice at the jazz club. Meet with his professors to coordinate his classes and rehearsals. One thing about Julliard, they were flexible when one of their students got a break. Call his family. Absolutely, the moment he got back to his place. And Carrie. He'd have to give her a big kiss. She must have added a prayer for him when she went to church.

Down the street from the theatre, he passed the huge marquis of another show and stopped. *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* was playing and he went to the front posters, studying the names of the cast. Especially one—Elizabeth Paige. His dream girl was performing down the street from where he would be working. Awesome.

He studied the pictures of the cast until he found her. And sighed deeply. He gazed at her headshot. Ah, she was so lovely. Now that he had a gig paying more than he'd ever made, he could spring for a ticket. Well, after he paid his rent. Heck, he'd even take Carrie with him. Wouldn't she get a kick out of going to the play?

Walking away, he pushed his guitar to his back and began whistling one of his tunes. Yes sir, his life had just taken on a new shine and he'd enjoy every second of it.

Chapter Three

The rehearsals for the play were long and brutal. Never had David imagined how hard everyone involved with a Broadway play worked. But he was loving it, meeting other musicians, playing his guitar, watching the masters at work.

The play itself didn't really hold his interest. It was a bit risqué, the language was salty, but the music was solid and that was what mattered to him.

His agent Theresa hadn't been very happy with him signing on without even letting her look at the contract. He wasn't remorseful. He was tired of waiting for something from her. So far all he had from her was the assurance that a meeting with execs was in the works. Well, in the meantime, he was going to work and build his portfolio and deepen his talent. It was all good.

Since there were breaks in the final rehearsals, as the director would need time with different elements of the play, he'd taken to bringing in Ol' Sue to strum. Carrie might have said it was his lucky guitar but it was more sentimental than anything. His parents had given it to him for his tenth birthday and it had sparked his imagination, spurring him on to where he was today.

In the break room, he strummed, completely content, while the orchestra had an extended break. Occasionally one of the other musicians came over, slapping him on the back or sharing a joke with him. The camaraderie was wonderful.

Muffled conversations had him turning to the door to see a couple of men in suits standing in the hall. Must be backers of the play. He thought no more about it but continued strumming.

"That's a beautiful instrument you have there."

He glanced up to see one of the suited men standing in front of him. With a grin, he stroked the polished guitar he loved like a family member. "Yes, it is. My first guitar."

“Ah. Must be special.” The man sat on the sofa beside David. “My father had a guitar like that when I was growing up. Albert Nelson.” The man extended his hand to shake. “And you are?”

“David Tyler.” He shook hands, immediately liking the man.

“My father just played chords but he did love his guitar. Played it every night when I was growing up.”

“That’s a good memory. My father played the violin.”

He nodded. “We’re lucky, David. To have been raised with the gift of music. I take it you’re in the orchestra.”

“Yes, sir. Playing acoustic guitar and if need be, bass or electric guitar.”

“Multi-talented. Good for you.” He stood but paused, his eyes appreciating the old guitar David held. “I know you probably have an attachment to this guitar but if you ever want to sell it, give me a call.” He quoted a hefty amount that he’d pay and handed a business card to David. “My father’s instrument is long gone and . . .” He paused. “We lost my father last year. It would mean something to me to have a symbol of him.” He cleared his throat. “Like I said, if you’re ever interested, just let me know.”

“Sure.” He watched the man walk away, sympathy filling him. He knew he’d be a basket case if he lost Pop. Looking down at the card, his eyes widened. Not a backer as he’d thought, but the producer of the play. He stuffed the card in his pocket, wondering. Maybe he’d just made another important connection in the entertainment world.

The crowd continued to mill around the lobby until the theatre doors were opened. David led an excited Carrie to a seat high up in the balcony, the only two tickets he’d been able to get.

“Oh, David, this is wonderful! It’s my first Broadway show and it was so sweet of you, honey, to bring me. Just look at me, Carrie Blanchard from Folkston, Georgia, going to school at the prestigious Julliard School, attending a Broadway musical, and in the company of the soon-to-be-famous David Tyler. It’s just soooo excitin’!”

“You know, Carrie, you should try to drum up a little enthusiasm. Oomph!” Carrie’s good-natured jab into his ribs brought a wry smile to David’s face. “Besides, I just got a gig in the orchestra pit, I’m a long way from being famous.”

“You will be.” She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. “I don’t doubt that for a minute.” Her encouragement made him smile.

He opened his playbill and began thumbing through the pages. As much as it was exciting that in another week he’d be performing with a Broadway orchestra, he was equally thrilled to be sitting in the theatre to see Elizabeth Paige, former Miss America. *His* Miss America.

He remembered their chance meeting in Knoxville. Even though he had come off as a complete buffoon, he’d repeat the incident again to see her lovely face, to look into her shimmering eyes, to feel the effect of her smile—

“Did you hear me, David?”

With a start, he turned to look at Carrie. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said did you take a look at the cast? I love that guy they got to play Charlie Brown. He was on television a few years back. And the guy playing Snoopy is so talented. He used to be on a soap opera. I’m not sure that I recognize any other names, do you?”

“I’ll have to look.” He found the actors’ bios and began reading. There was Elizabeth. She had quite an impressive list of stage credits, of course all from her childhood in Florida. This was her first Broadway appearance. In a moment she’d be on that stage. Gee, he wished he’d had binoculars to bring. Then he could have—

“David. You’re not paying any attention to me tonight.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “What?”

“I said . . . oh, oh! The lights are going down! This is it!” She grabbed his hand and held it hard.

After a beautiful overture, the orchestra played a fanfare as the curtain went up. The stage was dark except for the outline of the six major

characters. The music stopped as a spotlight came on “Linus” who began speaking. Then the spotlight left him to turn onto another. Then . . .

There she was.

David’s heartbeat thumped. His blood immediately heated and coursed through his veins waking up every part of his body. He could have sworn that he heard bells. Or was that the orchestra playing, he couldn’t tell.

Elizabeth stood there in a childlike costume reciting her grievances with her big brother, Charlie Brown. David was entranced. Everything left his mind—his music, his singing, the girl sitting next to him. He was totally focused on the pretty blonde on stage. There was just something about her.

“Her song,” the tune he’d composed after seeing her on The Miss America Pageant, filtered through his mind. He hadn’t come up with words for it yet, but the haunting melody was etched in his brain and heart.

The performance was enjoyable—lighthearted, funny, a perfect Broadway musical. When the final curtain call was completed, David and Carrie were on their feet clapping. The show had been wonderful. *She* had been wonderful. What he wouldn’t give to be welcomed backstage to tell her what a great job she did, to tell her she was the best Sally ever, to tell her he—

“David! I swear, something must be wrong with your hearing.”

Smiling at the young woman, David put his arm around her. “You’re right, Carrie. It’s my fault. Now what was it that you wanted to tell me?”

“I wanted to ask you if we could go back to the stage door and get autographs. I heard the cast members will sign your playbill when they come out. If I can get just a few autographs I think I could die a happy woman.”

Taking her arm he lead her through the crowd of theatre lovers. “Well, I wouldn’t want to be responsible for your sorrowful passing. Sure. Let’s go.”

Outside a large group gathered by the stage door to assail any cast member that might appear. David motioned Carrie forward while he stood back by the street, against a lamppost. He didn’t want to take any chances of Elizabeth seeing him and calling him by the name the stage manager in Knoxville had given him when he’d briefly met Elizabeth—“Bubba.”

Did she remember him? Surely not. He was certain she’d met hundreds of people since then. His worrying was probably for nothing. Still, he didn’t want to approach her unless he knew what to say. Something clever, something smart. Anyway, it wasn’t time to meet her again, not until he’d done something substantial in the entertainment field.

Their meeting in Knoxville could still bring embarrassment. Why hadn’t he told her his real name? Come to think of it, why hadn’t he uttered any syllable of intelligent English?

The stage door opened and security men stepped out to accompany the actors and monitor interactions. The level of noise tripled as the fans sensed the arrival of the performers. When the first several actors stepped out of the door, the crowd cheered.

He would not be a lunatic fan. He would be casual, nonchalant and just stand at the light post and wait for Carrie to get her autographs. No need for him to get excited about . . .

Was the woman ever coming out of the theatre?

Finally a louder cheer went up as Elizabeth emerged along with the actor that had played Snoopy, Mike somebody. His heart hammered in his chest. The tension in him changed slightly from excitement to admiration as he watched the woman work the crowd. Even from the distance, he could tell her genuine pleasure at greeting the fans. She didn’t

rush them, but took her time, signing autographs and posing for pictures.

David crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the post. He could have looked at her all night. Finally, “Snoopy” took her by the arm to lead her away and the crowd started to scatter. Watching her walk away, David took pleasure in her confident, fluid walk.

All of a sudden, she slowed, looked over her shoulder, and caught his gaze.

Chapter Four

So immersed in the moment, he didn't move but grinned, his eyes staying on hers. She continued to walk, meeting his gaze. Just before she boarded a waiting car, she smiled.

He watched the car pull away, and then it hit him. She'd smiled at him. That genuine smile that she'd given him in Knoxville, she'd given again. To him. He wanted to laugh out loud, to yell for joy, to do cartwheels. But he kept everything inside and let it light up his heart brighter than any sign in Times Square.

Words flooded his soul—smile so sweet, destined to meet, soft as morning dew, as a day is new, a warm heat, heartbeat, no clue, in love with you. A wide grin crossed his face. It was coming to him, the words to her song.

He had to get home, to his keyboard and blank sheet music, had to capture this feeling in his music while it was fresh. It was going to be good, he had no doubt. Looking around, he tried to remember where the subway station was as his mind whirled with ideas.

“David, I got a bunch of autographs! I'm so excited!”

He mentally winced. “That's great, Carrie.” How had he forgotten he was on a date? He had to quickly get Carrie home so he could work on the song. They walked briskly down the street as she chatted on about the different actors who had signed her playbill.

“And Mike Bentley called me ‘honey’! I sure wish I'd had my camera to get a picture with him. No one in Folkston is going to believe this. I think I'm going to frame my playbill so I can look at it everyday. They were all so nice. Who'd have thought? And Elizabeth Paige . . .”

That had David tuning in again. “Did you get her autograph?”

“Yeah. See it right here.” She handed the playbill to him. Amidst the signatures was a curvy, very feminine signature *Eliza P.* It looked just like what David would have expected. “And she spoke to me.”

“No kidding? What did she say?”

“I told her I enjoyed the show and she said, ‘Thank you so much for coming.’ Isn’t that incredible!”

David couldn’t help smiling at the woman’s excitement. He put his arm around her as they neared the subway station. “Yeah, that’s pretty incredible.”

“And did you know she was a Miss America?”

“Really?”

The air crackled with excitement. The scent of paint, sawdust, hair-spray and musty costumes tickled David’s nostrils as he greeted the other musicians and found his spot in the orchestra pit. A murmur of voices sounded from the filling theatre as the time approached eight o’clock, the start of the play.

Was he nervous? He supposed but he preferred to think of it as exhilaration, anticipation. A knowing that this was what he was destined to do, perform for a large audience. Okay, so he wasn’t the focus of the performance. Yet. He’d take it.

As carefully as a doctor examining his tools, he checked his guitar, leaning closely to hear the strings, making sure they were tuned to the perfect pitch. Everything around him became a dull drone while he plucked a string and adjusted the tuning pegs until that bright, clear note sounded.

The leader took his place and tapped his stand to get the musician’s attention. *Here we go.*

The next few hours went by in a flash. There was nothing in David’s universe but his instrument and the beat set by the conductor’s hands. The music flowed through him, was part of him, as his guitar joined with the other instruments to help tell the story of the play.

David knew he smiled the whole time, couldn’t help it.

When the last note sounded for the exit music, he expelled a breath, joy practically oozing from his pores. For some reason, his mind went back to his family, their faith, how they thanked God for every-

thing. Maybe he'd go to church this Sunday with Carrie. It was the least he could do.

"Hey, Tyler. We're hitting the bar on forty-fourth. You coming?"

"Does a polecat have stripes?"

The next Sunday he was sitting with Carrie singing along with the congregation. He reminded himself it was only an hour or so out of the week. He'd have plenty of time to do everything else he needed to do before getting to the theatre on time.

When the offering basket came by, he felt obligated to drop a bill into it. After all, he was making a decent salary now. Only fair he shared with others.

Speaking of sharing, he had to remember to call home today. He'd called when he'd gotten the Broadway gig but that was a few weeks ago. They'd want to know how it was going.

He endured the sermon, mentally planning the next week. It was a trick he'd learned growing up, looking sincerely interested in what the pastor was saying while his mind being miles away.

At the final amen, he took Carrie's hand and led her down the aisle of the office building turned church. It wasn't one of the beautiful cathedrals of the city but he supposed the best they could do for the area. He even recognized a few people from the theatre, which surprised him. He gave a slightly embarrassed wave when they saw him.

"David, so good to see you." A large, blonde man with a Southern drawl walked up to him smiling and grabbed his hand, shaking profusely.

"Hey, Todd. Good to see you."

"You, too. Russell told me he'd run into you a few weeks back. You been doing okay, son?"

He wasn't sure why the comforting voice of the man cheered him. Maybe it was because Todd had been like an angel of mercy not too long ago, coming to his rescue after being attacked. He'd always be grateful.

“No complaints.” Seeing Todd smile at his companion, he said, “Oh, this is Carrie Blanchard. Another Southerner.”

“I’m delighted to meet you. From where?”

“Folkston, Georgia.”

“Mmm. Love me some Georgia peaches. I’m hoping my mama sends me a box in another couple of months.”

“Now you’re gonna make me cry.” Carrie dabbed the edges of her eyes.

David chuckled. “Come on, you two. New York’s pretty amazing.”

“Yes, it is.” Todd sighed. “Although I’m about ready for the weather to warm up. Unfortunately, that’s not going to happen this week. I been following the weather reports. Looks like a snowstorm is coming our way.”

“Snowstorm? You gotta be kidding me?”

“Really, that’s what I heard. I wouldn’t be making any plans for Tuesday, kids. I have a feeling everything’s going to close down.”

Carrie blew out a breath. “Well, that’s just not right. I can understand a rainstorm because after all, April showers bring May flowers, but snow? What is Mother Nature thinking?”

David could see a bit of amusement on Todd’s face. “Yeah.” When someone called to him, he grinned and nodded. “Y’all just take care of yourselves and hopefully we’ll see you back next Sunday for Easter.”

The weather was the last thing on David’s mind when he woke the next morning. He was the happiest he’d been since his plane had landed in New York fifteen months ago. With his first paycheck from the play he paid his rent. For the first time he had over five hundred dollars in his bank account, a fortune to a struggling musician. Since his night watching Elizabeth Paige, he’d been abundantly inspired, working on “her song,” as well as several others. Very soon he’d have enough to record his own album and then he was sure he’d be on his way.

Looking at his clock, he saw he had an hour before classes. Since it was Monday, there were no Broadway shows and he was happy for the

rest but at the same time missed the performing. He leaned back, arms behind his head. Yes, he was happy performing, it was what he was created to do.

When his phone rang, he leaned over his mattress to pick up. “David Tyler.”

“David. Glad I caught you home.” Theresa didn’t give him time to respond but continued. “I’ve got a phone interview scheduled tomorrow at ten.”

“Wait, a phone interview?”

“Yes. Donegal Records, out of LA. They loved your demo and would like to speak with you before inviting you to the coast for an audition. Now I worked really hard for this call, darling, so you better make sure you’re sitting by the phone tomorrow morning.”

And the good fortune continued. His face stretched in a wide smile and he chuckled. “That’s awesome, Theresa. Wonderful news.”

“It is and could be pivotal for your career. Now, I want you to simply be yourself. I’m sure they’re going to love you.”

They went over a few more details before ending the call and David laughed out loud. “Yes!” he yelled, punching his fist in the air.

The phone that sat on the floor next to him reminded him he should call his family with all his good news, so he did just that. And was surprised when Becca answered.

“Hey, shortcake, what are doing out of school today?”

“Hey, Davy! I’ve got a dentist appointment this morning so I’m going in late. How are you?”

“The theatre work is going great and I just got a call about an interview with record executives.”

Becca cheered. “You must be so happy.”

“As happy as a tick on a fat dog,” he said, echoing something his father would have said and Becca giggled. “How’s everyone there?”

Becca went down the list of his family members, ending with Pop going into work early and Mama taking Grandpa Lionel into his hardware store before returning to take her to her appointment.

“How’s it going with you, sweetheart?”

Her huge sigh didn’t concern him. Becca could be dramatic when she wanted.

“Tragic. I’ve found a phenomenal photography class, just outside of Knoxville, and I can’t afford it. Mama and Pop won’t help me. Says if it’s that important to me, I can save the money to pay for it myself.” David smiled. He remembered getting the same lecture when he was younger and wanted music lessons.

“This photography class on the level?”

“Yes. I asked my teachers at school their opinion and they thought it was a good school. I talked to several of their students and graduates and they were enthusiastic about the school. It’s just a little pricey.”

“Hmm.” He could totally relate to how Becca was feeling. He’d been there. Which reminded him, now that he had a good income, he needed to hire another voice coach. Maybe even a performance coach. He wanted to work on his keyboard skills so he’d need a professional to help him with that.

“How much they wanting for classes?” When she gave him an amount, he wanted to laugh. Obviously this class wasn’t based in New York. “Well, we can’t have you missing out on your destiny, can we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sign up for the classes, honey. I’ll send the payment to you today. How’s that sound?”

There was a moment of silence before she squealed loudly. “You mean it, Davy? Really? I can go to the photography school?”

The laughter bubbled out of him. “That’s what I mean. You sign up today. Tell them you’ll have the payment before the end of the week.”

“Oh, Davy. I love you so much! If you were here this minute, I’d give you such a hug and a kiss.”

“Save it for me whenever I get home, okay?”

After hanging up, he felt a peace and joy in his soul. It felt good to do something for someone he loved so much. It wasn't throwing his money away. He'd seen his sister's photographs and knew she had real talent to not only frame a pretty picture, but capture a moment of time that was special, classic, meaningful.

A glance at the clock had him jumping out of bed. Lots to do today. After his two classes, he'd be contacting those extra teachers to help him hone his own talent. He'd have to make reservations for a studio to record his album. And prepare for his phone interview.

Yes, things were moving along well.

Until the next day.

It started in the night. The wind picked up, banging his one small window. It sounded like a large, hurt animal moaning in his pain.

In the morning, a glance outside told him it was snowing. Snowing? In April?

He sighed and went to his kitchenette to heat water for instant coffee. As he waited he rubbed his hands together. Why was it so cold inside? The answer came when he checked his radiator. Barely any heat. The frustrated sigh turned into a groan and his temper rose.

A call to the building super did nothing but grow his frustration. Yes, the man knew there was trouble getting heat in the building. Yes, he'd put in a call for repairs but didn't everyone know there was a blizzard outside?

David again looked out his window. Blizzard? Didn't look so bad to him. He rubbed his hands over his chilling shoulders. Well, until the heat was fixed, he needed to dress warmly, he supposed. After donning long underwear, jeans, tee shirt, flannel shirt, sweatshirt, jacket, gloves, and scarf, he considered himself ready to brave the cold weather—of his apartment. He shook his head miserably. As soon as he could afford it he'd be looking for a better place.

He'd just gotten his cup of coffee, or what he thought of as flavored hot water, when his phone rang. A bit early for Theresa or his all-important call. Maybe it was the family checking up on him.

"David!"

He frowned at the worried voice of Carrie's roommate. "Yeah? What's wrong, Sandi?"

"It's Carrie. I'm scared something's happened to her." The girl began to bawl uncontrollably.

"Okay, calm down. Sandi, I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on." He waited for her to get control of her emotions. "Now, what happened?"

Still whimpering and sobbing, she said, "This morning. We were watching the snow from our window and Carrie . . . she said how she wanted to get a copy of the newspaper. It's a momentous occasion, snow in April. She . . . wanted to show it to her family."

David glanced back out his window. All he saw was a white blanket, as if someone had pasted a sheet in front of his window. A tinge of fear started to settle inside him. "She didn't go out in this, please tell me she didn't."

Sandi hiccupped a sob. "Yes. She did." The girl wailed as David looked around for a hat and the heaviest coat he had.

"Sandi, listen to me. Where did she go?"

"She said she was just going to the convenience store around the corner and she'd be right back. That was over an hour ago. Oh David, I'm so scared. She's from Southern Georgia, she doesn't know anything about being in a blizzard."

"What's she wearing?" *Please, please be wearing something bright so I can find you, Carrie.*

"Uh, black pants, white shirt. She put on her pink coat and matching hat and gloves."

"I'll find her. You stay near the phone so I can contact you, okay?"

"Thank you, David."

Leaving his apartment, he went through his head the route Carrie would have taken from her dorm to the convenience store. He was three blocks away from Julliard and then one more to the nearest convenience store. He wrapped his scarf over his face, leaving only his eyes visible and taking a breath shoved the door of his building open to face the elements.

It was like a push from a playground bully that had him falling back against the closing door. The cold was so bitter, the wind so biting it took his breath away. His eyes were already stinging and he had to look down, trying to blink away the moisture.

A voice deep inside him seemed to say to stop and think about his strategy. He'd seen enough movies to know you didn't wildly go out into a blizzard but needed to know at all times where you were since the white could blind and confuse.

"God. Please help me. Help me find her."

He stayed close to buildings, carefully noting his position. Coming to Amsterdam Avenue, he crossed the street and followed the avenue down one, two, then three blocks. He moved under an awning to catch his breath and check his position. His heart pounded in his chest and his hands stung with cold.

One more block to go. As he crossed the street a gust of wind nearly carried him back to the curb and he leaned forward, his feet planted to endure the crushing cold.

A momentary break in the snow gave him a view of his objective. He trudged on, grateful when he saw lights on in the store. Once there, he struggled to pull open the door and enter. The warmth of the store was like ambrosia and he let out a breath, allowing his pained lungs to relax.

"A little rough out there for ya, buddy?" The man behind the cash register laughed at his poor joke. "Didn't think I'd see anybody here today. I wouldn't be here if I didn't live upstairs."

David couldn't quite seem to get his voice back. He nodded and took off his gloves to rub his hands together.

"Radiator's over there," the man said pointing to the wall. "Go get warm."

He again nodded and eagerly complied.

Finally, he was able to voice his concern. "I'm . . . looking for a girl." He inhaled, still unable to breathe deeply. "Short, brunette, southern accent. She was coming in to buy a newspaper."

The man shook his head. "Nope. Got the delivery on the papers before dawn but no one's been in. You sure she was heading this way?"

"She wanted a newspaper. This is the closest place to Julliard."

"Wish I could help you out."

David's concern was turning into fear. Where was she? "Could I use your phone, see if she made it back okay?"

He motioned to the phone next to him. "Sure."

When David couldn't get his fingers to work, the man said, "Give me the number. I'll dial."

David coughed once, and sighed when Sandi's worried voice came on. "She not back yet?"

"No. Where are you?"

"I'm at the convenience store just down the street from you. She hasn't been here."

"Oh no, David, what do we do?"

His mind whirled with possible scenarios. *Peace I give unto you. I am with you.* He heard the voice. Even glanced around to see where it had come from. The man behind the cash register just looked at him.

A deep calmness came over him, thinking of the words. Okay, he'd take a moment to breathe and rationally think.

"She would have come out of the dorm and turned right. All she had to do was go down the block, cross the street, and turn left. So, I'll backtrack to the dorm and see if I can find her."

“What do we do if you can’t? David, I’m so scared, what if she’s lost in this? What if—”

“We’re not going there just yet. You stay put. I’ll get back to you.”

He went to the radiator and let the warmth seep into his bones one more minute before bundling up.

“You want I should do something?”

David turned to the man. “Yeah, if Carrie Blanchard comes in, have her call her roommate immediately.”

“Sure. You be safe out there, buddy.”

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath and went back out into the storm.

Chapter Five

The wind was worse as he trekked through the path Carrie would have taken. After crossing Amsterdam, he stayed close to the buildings, glancing inside each one to see if she could have taken refuge within.

When he made it to the entrance to the dorms, a voice inside told him to go another block over. Not questioning, he started walking, the thick flurry batting his eyes, his boots plodding through the snowdrift.

He was almost to Broadway when the wind lessened for a second and he thought he heard a whine. Just before the wind picked up, the sound came again, a combination sob, whimper, and moan. He turned and through the snow saw an alley. With his heart beating out of his chest, he rushed in that direction.

After clearing his throat, he called out, “Carrie? You there?”

The sobs grew as he approached. He walked closely to the wall, the eave of the building giving him a reprieve from the storm.

There, huddled under a discarded box, was a small lump of white with a little pink peeking through, shivering.

David rushed over, running his arms over her. “Carrie? Are you okay?”

Her sleepy eyes looked up at him, dazed, confused. He gathered her in his arms and said a quick prayer before trudging back down the street. The block seemed as long as a marathon but he continued on, whispering words of encouragement to her, maybe more to himself since he wasn’t sure she could hear him.

At the door to the dorm, he found he had no strength to open it. Keeping Carrie close to him, he pounded, waiting, hoping someone would hear him.

A moment later, several girls walked through the lobby and seeing them, rushed over to open the door. Their voices seemed like a hive of bees swarming in his brain and he couldn’t for the life of him wrap his mind around a coherent answer.

He sat on a couch and held Carrie tightly to his body. Swallowing, he said, "Get Sandi . . . room . . . 2D." He was shivering now, so badly, it was hard for him to hold onto Carrie.

The next few minutes were a blur as people crowded around them. His brain tried to make sense out of everything but before that could happen, he felt himself drift away, into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, the white around him made him think of the blizzard and he shuddered. Not outside, he quickly told himself. It looked like the infirmary. He tried to sit up but his body ached so badly, he fell back, moaning.

"There you are," a kind voice said.

David swallowed hard. "Am I dead?" he croaked out.

The voice chuckled before coming into his sightline. A woman dressed in white, obviously a nurse, said, "You're very much alive. But from the looks of it, and the probably exaggerated accounts of the women here, you've had quite an adventure."

He blinked several times. "What happened?"

"You fainted from extreme exhaustion. And dehydration. How are you feeling now?"

His brow creased and he swallowed hard again. "Hurts all over."

She reached for a cup of water and directed the straw to his mouth. "That's understandable. Drink."

After a sip, he said, "Carrie?"

"She's fine. And very thankful you came along." The woman set the cup down and shook her head. "Can't understand why she was out in the first place. Why would anyone go out in a blizzard?"

He remembered everything now. "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock."

"What?" He popped out of bed, ignoring the crying of his body, coughing hard. "I've got to get home. I'm expecting a very important phone call." The pain was so bad, he worked hard to keep from fainting again.

She carefully eased him back down. “You need to stay here, probably for a few days. Exposure like you’ve had means you’re going to have one heck of a cold coming and unless you live with a nurse, you’re going to need help to get through it.”

As if to punctuate her warning, David sneezed and coughed.

“Could I at least make a phone call?”

“Of course.” She brought over the phone and left to give him privacy.

He had a feeling of doom as he waited for Theresa to pick up. “Theresa?”

“David?” Her irritation was clear. “You’ve better got a good reason for missing the phone call today. The execs were not happy.”

He coughed. “A friend was missing. I was helping to find her.”

“Out in this weather? Are you insane? I can already hear it in your voice, you’re sick. Do you have any idea what damage you may have done to your throat? What could have possessed you to go out in this?”

Compassion. Kindness. Friendship. Loyalty. All those things mattered to David but he had to remind himself that in the cutthroat world of entertainment, ambition and talent were paramount.

So he wouldn’t argue with her. “You’re right. Is there any way we can reschedule the meeting?”

“Do you know how hard it was to get in the first place? David, as good as you are, you’re one of thousands eager to make it big. Because you missed the call, Donegal is no longer interested. Now I’ve got to start from ground zero with other execs to give you a shot.”

The coughing came again. Clearing his throat, he said, “What about the album? Should I still record?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said sympathetically. “Don’t waste your money until I have more fish on the line. And until you get your voice back. You are taking care of yourself, right?”

He glanced around, reluctantly thankful he was in the infirmary. “Yeah. I’m good.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch.” In a change of tone, she added, “Get better, darling. And don’t give up. You’ve got that something special. It’ll happen.”

“Yeah, thanks Theresa.”

He hung up and decided to check his answering service for messages. One was from his mother wanting to know if he was okay in the blizzard. He smiled.

One was from the super saying maintenance would be out tomorrow to fix the heat. Great. Another reason he was thankful for where he was. That message was followed by the management company of the building, informing him that rent was increasing beginning the following month. He bit his tongue to keep from cursing.

But the last message flattened him.

“David Tyler. This is the office of Nelson Productions. The play *A New Normal* will be shutting down at the end of next week, Saturday, April seventeenth, due to lack of ticket sales. Thank you for your participation in our project and best of luck in your further musical endeavors.”

The click of the message and the following dial tone buzzed in his ear. It couldn’t be. The play, his first steady job in entertainment, first crack at the industry was gone? After less than a month?

He replaced the receiver and leaned back against the pillow, his bodily aches not a match for the pain in his heart. He’d lost his job, his income, his future, and a great deal of his will.

It was literally the calm after the storm. The noises the next morning were muted against the layer of snow. In the distance trucks were out clearing roads and people again walked the sidewalks; children laughed, dogs barked. Although his body still ached and his throat hurt, he was finally warm after sleeping fitfully through the night. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have the horrendous cold the nurse had predicted.

Still, after a light breakfast, he was forced to call in sick to the theatre for the next two days. If he had to crawl there, though, he'd finish out the week.

He was surprised when just before noon, he had a visitor. Carrie walked in, holding on to the arm of her roommate, and smiling. "Hey, there."

"How you doing?" he asked, returning the smile.

"Good. Thanks to you." She turned. "Sandi, would you give us a minute alone?" Sandi nodded and left. "I just wanted to thank you for finding me. I can't begin to . . ." Her eyes filled and she worried her fingers together. "I know it was stupid of me going out. I thought I could find my way but the wind and the snow just confused me. I wasn't sure which way to go and I got lost."

She sniffed, her lavender eyes meeting his. "I'll never know how you found me."

He swallowed back the lump in his throat. As much as he wanted fame, success, he knew that friendship was a priceless thing. It was good, what he'd done and he'd never regret it.

And he wanted to give her more. "Carrie. When I was out in it, I . . . prayed. I heard a voice inside me telling me which way to go."

Her eyes got big as saucers. "Really?"

"Yeah. Seems like you're meant to hang around for a while. You'd better make the most of it."

She nodded as tears streamed down her face. "Yes. I will. Hey, this Sunday is Easter. Let's go to that church. We need to thank God, don't you think?"

Thinking through everything he was going to have to deal with, he wanted to debate her. But seeing her bright eyes and the healthy glow in her cheeks made him agree. "I guess so. It's a date."

Even though it was a warm 45 degrees, David donned his heaviest clothes, boots, and jacket and headed for Central Park. He'd done well last night, playing his guitar for the play, but he'd come straight home

and gone to bed. Today, the last day of the play, he had a matinee and evening performance but at the moment he desperately needed the peace of the park.

So much to process. In many ways, he felt as if he were back at square one. With the increase in rent, he wasn't sure how he'd be able to afford his apartment and his all important phone line. He still had classes at Julliard he needed to finish. He needed more training in several areas, meaning extra instructors to hire on. And although Theresa tried to be encouraging, there wasn't anything coming on the horizon with his career.

He stuck his gloved hands in his pockets and walked the park. It always calmed him to be in the small piece of nature in the bustling, hard reality of the city. In the distance he saw a group riding horses on the bridle path. He grinned. He'd love to have the time today to take a long ride.

As they made their way around the bend, he remembered his ride back in the fall. He'd been distracted by the filming of a commercial with his dream girl—Elizabeth Paige. At the moment, she was lighting up Broadway, about a million miles away from him.

For just a moment he allowed himself a pity party. "God. You there? I did the right thing, I went after Carrie and helped her, but ever since then it seems I've had nothing but trouble. Is that the way it is? We only get trouble for doing something good?"

He turned and walked back, lingering at "Strawberry Fields," enjoying the quiet as people mulled around, speaking in hushed tones. A skinny kid settled next to a bench, pulling out a guitar. David's first thought was he was glad it wasn't him trying to make a buck by playing in the park. And then sighing, thinking he may be back at it soon.

The boy set the guitar case on the ground opened and quietly started strumming and singing "Let it Be."

David stopped and listened, enjoying the performance. And the words.

When the boy finished, David dug into his pocket and dropped a bill in the empty guitar case.

So he would go to church. He would be thankful he and Carrie were alive. That was the best he would do this morning. When the cheerful Todd found him after service, he almost moaned. He couldn't drum up his own cheerful countenance.

"David. Carrie. He is risen!"

"He is risen indeed," Carrie said while David nodded.

"I'm so glad you two made it back to services today. It's been a nasty week, lots of problems from the freak snowstorm."

"Tell me about it!" Which Carrie proceeded to do without leaving out a single detail. By the end of the story, David felt his neck heating up at her portrayal of him as a knight in shining armor come to save her life.

"And David even said the Lord told him where to find me." Now he could feel his face heating up and he tried to smile.

"Brother, let me give you a big hug." Before David could retreat, he was enveloped in the man's big arms while Carrie chuckled.

"Oh, honey, I see a friend of mine. I'm gonna go say, 'Hey.' Be right back."

The men watched Carrie leave and Todd smiled. Something he did often, sometimes for no reason. "Nice girl. Good to see you've found someone."

"Huh?" David's voice cracked. "No, we're not serious. Good friends, nothing permanent." He cleared his throat. "Todd, I need to ask you something."

"Sure. What's up?"

He shifted on his legs, thinking of how to best describe what was going on in his mind.

"Yeah, I helped Carrie. And yeah, I believe that God showed me where to find her. I'm thankful but . . ."

When he didn't continue, Todd said, "But?"

He blew out a breath. “Since then I’ve had nothing but bad luck. The play I was performing in closed, leaving me with no income. My rent, which I can’t afford now, is going up next month. And my agent had scheduled a meeting with record execs that we were going to have via telephone—you guessed it—the day I was out in the blizzard looking for Carrie. I just don’t understand it. I did good and I’m being paid back with bad.” He took a breath, glad to have spoken his thoughts to someone who might have a more objective view than what he could manage.

Todd leaned against the table near them and shook his head. “Awful lot of bad all at one time. And you’re right, David, it just ain’t right.”

“Thank you!” He slapped his thighs, grateful that someone agreed with him.

“One thing I’ve learned about New York City. This is a place that can chew you up and spit you out before you can say ‘boo.’ It doesn’t seem to matter if it’s a good person or a bad, things happen to both. The Bible says that rain comes on the just and the unjust. So the question is not why is it happening but what do you do now.”

His brows furrowed thinking it over. “What do I do now, huh?”

The smile started easing over his face. “Yep. And what I see of you, David Tyler, is you’re not going to let adversity get the best of you.”

His face now serious, his hand went to David’s shoulder. “But you don’t have to do it all alone. We’ve got a church full of good people ready to help. I know you have a good family back in Tennessee that would be only too glad to come to your aid. You’re blessed, David.

“Be honest about what’s going on, don’t put on a show for those that love you.”

Chapter Six

He couldn't stop thinking about what Todd said. Okay, so bad things had happened. What was he going to do about them?

Ol' Sue on his lap, he strummed, thinking through the situation. He needed money, sooner rather than later. His eyes went to the ugly red dresser and a business card on top. He stopped and retrieved the card. Albert Nelson had wanted to buy his guitar and had quoted a very healthy price. With that amount of money, he'd be set for several months, plenty of time to find more work, to hopefully figure out how to get ahead.

He grabbed the guitar and sat on his mattress. How could he sell Ol' Sue? They'd been through a lot together. It had been the best Christmas ever when he'd opened the guitar, like he was given the world on a platter. He remembered learning to tune the strings, figuring out different chords, and feeling the calluses grow on the edge of his fingers.

Gently, he stroked the guitar, loving every inch of it like a treasured friend. "How can I sell you? But what else can I do?"

The phone rang and when he answered it, the callers yelled, "He is risen!"

David chuckled. His family. "Yeah, He is risen, indeed."

"We're just sitting down to dinner and wanted to call you, honey." His mother's voice was always excited on Easter. "Now all you go away and let Pop and me talk to Davy." He laughed out loud, hearing the groans from the others.

"You all can talk to him after we do," Pop said. "Hey, Davy. You having a good Easter Sunday?"

Suddenly, his throat filled with so much emotion he was afraid he was going to weep. At that moment, he knew Todd had been right. Enough of the show, he needed to be honest with his parents. "Um, not exactly. I need to talk to the both of you."

“Sure, Davy. What’s wrong?” his mother asked.

He took one deep breath and started. He told them about barely making ends since he’d been in New York. The blizzard, Carrie, missing the meeting, the rent increase, even the lack of heat in his apartment. He let everything flow out of him, like poison from a wound. And blinked hard to steady himself.

When he was finished, he was ready for his folks to give an “I told you so” lecture or encourage him to come home. He deserved anything he got.

“Sweetheart.” His mother’s shaky voice almost caused him to lose it. “Thank the good Lord you’re okay. And I am so proud of my son, that you would go out in a blizzard to help a friend.”

“Yeah, son. First and foremost, we’re proud of you. And thankful.”

“Thanks, Pop.”

“Now, instead of boxing your ears for not coming to us for help like I probably should, we’re just going to put a check in the mail tomorrow.” He mentioned an amount that had David goggling.

“No, Pop. You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will. You all right with that, Dora Lee?”

“Absolutely. Davy, honey. You deserve it. You gave of what you had to help your sister, to make a dream come true. You put your friend’s safety ahead of your own, going out in that blizzard.” Her voice grew serious. “Although, don’t you go out in a blizzard again.”

He didn’t know how it was possible but he chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Now you take this money and pay your rent. You’ll figure out what to do next.”

He couldn’t hold back a sniff. “Yes, ma’am.”

He was back to his classes and occasionally working at the college cafeteria. Not much income, but it was something. His health was back, his singing voice strong, for which he was grateful.

After talking with his parents the day before, he'd sat and made a list of all the possible sources of income he could tap. He prioritized them from best to worst and started from the top.

He called the Nelson Productions and left his name and number, mentioning, not that he had a guitar to sell, but that he was available to perform in any play the company had going, listing the instruments he was proficient on.

He went to the jazz club in the village where he'd performed before, asking if they had work for him. To his surprise they welcomed him back—but only for Monday nights. Again, not much but something.

Back home, he looked at his calendar and made notes on when he could start playing in the park or Times Square for tips.

Thinking he hadn't checked his service, he called. While waiting for the service to kick in, he did something he'd done more of in the past few months than he had in the last dozen years.

He prayed.

“God, if you'd just make a way, let me have a steady income, let me have a little breathing room here, I'll start going to church. Regularly.”

He would have said more but the answering service picked up with his messages. The first one was from Nelson Productions, asking him to come by the offices the next day. They had several plays currently running and were always in need of substitutes, fill-ins, and regulars. Since he'd proven himself in *A New Normal*, the management was sure they could use him. David exhaled fully, feeling that he was on the right path.

The next message was from Theresa. “Call me. Immediately.”

Not sure if it was good news or bad, he dialed her number. “Theresa? What's up?”

“You are going to want to kiss me when I give you the news. You know that dance song you wrote, the one with the good beat that I like? Warner Brothers wants to buy it for a movie they're shooting in a

few months. Your song will be the title song. What do you think about that?"

Somebody screamed. He thought it might be him.

They had a little party at Howie's mid-morning and celebrated David's first sold song—Carrie, Todd, Theresa, Howie, and Sadie—with cake and ice cream and balloons. Of course David sang the song for them, delighting the few late morning patrons. Everybody cheered and applauded.

As the party was breaking up, Todd slapped his back. "I'm happy for you, David. Nice going."

"Thanks. And thanks for the good advice Sunday. It really helped."

"I'm glad. So, we'll see you in church this Sunday?"

"Probably not this Sunday. I'm filling in over at the Barrymore Theatre and I've got to get there early to practice. Oh, and I have to sign final contracts later with Theresa. But I'll be there . . . sometime."

"Well, we'll see you when we do."

"David, I'm so proud of you." Carrie stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek and he put his arm around her, chuckling.

"Thanks, sugar."

Howie beamed. "I've been saying all the time he had it in him. Didn't I say it, Sadie?"

"Sure have, honey. All the best, David."

They all hugged and David and Carrie left the diner to walk the ten blocks back to Julliard.

He glanced at the newspaper and stopped in his tracks. "Wait a minute." After paying for a copy, he read the headlines: Former Miss America to Headline Summer Variety Show on Television.

Carrie leaned her head in to read. "Hey, it's that actress we saw on Broadway. She's got new show on television. Wow. Can't wait to see it."

"Me, too," he murmured.

As Howie was finishing cleaning up from the party, the bell over the front door rang. He turned and his smile widened. “Look who’s here. My favorite Broadway star turned television star.”

The woman gave him and Sadie a warm smile. “It’s amazing news, isn’t it?”

“Sure is, honey. Howie, get the girl her special coffee. Don’t keep her standing there.”

“Come on and sit down. It seems to be the day for good news.”

“Looks like you just had a party.”

“We did.” Howie sighed with contentment. “I love to see good things happening to my favorite people.”

He smiled widely. “Can’t wait to see what happens next.”

THE END

Ready for more Tylers?

Read on for an excerpt of *The Choice*, now available for preorder at amazon.com.

The Choice

New York City
July, 1984

David Tyler hurried down the street in his pressed pants and white shirt, the tune of the city singing in his ears. Horns blew and pedestrians chattered as the new day began. Gulping in a breath of New York air, his body warred between excitement and utter panic.

He'd practically made a career of filling in as a substitute musician on Broadway, playing guitar, keyboard, or drums, wherever needed. He'd sold two songs, one for a movie and another for a television show, which would debut in another month. For the latter, he'd been allowed to sing the song and the immense joy and excitement of that day in the recording studio still swelled in his heart. It was surreal. Davy Tyler, middle child of Ed and Dora Tyler of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, had recorded one of his own songs.

He smiled, remembering the satisfaction of paying his rent for the next few months and purchasing several guitars and a primo keyboard to start his collection of what he hoped would be a varied and eclectic group of instruments.

Yes, he was starting to make a name for himself. He was definitely headed for the bright lights of success.

But his appointment this morning had his knees knocking.

"Hey, Limo. How's it going?" He slowed to speak to the shaggy-haired homeless vet that sat at Columbus Circle playing a harmonica with his cap out for donations.

Limo didn't speak but played a slow riff, his hungry eyes lifting to David. Without a thought, David pulled his guitar from his back and

played, following the riff for a few minutes. It hadn't been that long ago he'd been a street performer, playing for tips.

They finished with a flourish and a gathered crowd applauded, dropping a few coins in Limo's tattered cap.

David crouched. "It's going to be a hot one. You know where the shelter is if you need it, right?" The man nodded. David reached into his pocket and dropped a bill in the hat. "Have a good one." The man nodded as David stood and continued on.

Why wouldn't Limo let him help? All David had been able to do was to get Limo to the shelter during extreme weather or for a holiday meal. Anything more and he'd balk, furiously shaking his head, staying put.

The homeless and downtrodden were prevalent in the big city and it saddened David.

During his brief three and a half years in New York, he'd taken some punches from the Big Apple, too, but he'd persevered. He wasn't where he wanted to be but it would come. He had an agent, Theresa, working on his behalf, confident she'd soon secure a record contract for him. It was hard to wait for success.

The coffee shop sat like a beacon on the corner of 55th and Broadway. He'd just drop in for a cup of ambition. He needed it, especially this morning. As he entered, Howie, the big burly owner smiled.

"Beethoven. What's the word this Monday morning?"

"The word is *coffee*. Black and to go, big guy."

"Always in a rush, going her and there. What's going on that's so important?" He walked behind the counter, pulled out a to-go cup, and poured the hot liquid.

David breathed in the life-giving aroma. "New gig. Could be a steady one."

"Do tell." Howie put a lid on the Styrofoam cup.

"I'd rather not just now. I don't want to jinx anything. Let's just see how it goes first and then I'll let you know."

“Well, I know you’ll do great. Sadie, the coffee for Beethoven’s on the house this morning.”

Howie’s diminutive yet shapely wife had come in from the back and stood by the register. “Right. Break a leg, honey.” Her gravelly Brooklyn accent never ceased to amuse him.

“Thanks, sugar.” He winked, making her giggle.

David lifted the top of his cup off and blew, then took a sip. His mind buzzed at what lay ahead of him. His eyes went to the marquee of the theatre down the street and he sighed deeply. Of all the shows to be called to play for, why did it have to be this one?

The fact that it was a network television show wasn’t what had his insides whirling like a spinning top.

It was the star.

Since the first time he’d seen the woman on television five years ago as she won the *Miss America* pageant, his heart had been captured. She was a dream, a hope, an image of the success and beauty he yearned for in his life.

But his plans had always been to get acquainted with her after he’d become a huge success, on the same playing field. Not as a member of her orchestra.

What if she remembered him from their brief meeting years ago? As Miss America, she played a benefit for a children’s hospital in Knoxville. He’d been a last-minute replacement and struck dumb by her beauty, only nodding in response to her dialogue. She’d thought his name was “Bubba” after the custodian/stage manager/whatever had called him by that name. How embarrassing.

He was probably worried for nothing. She was a big star, probably never even venturing into the orchestra pit. In the few years he’d played in theatres all over Broadway he’d never come close to meeting any of the stars. Probably the same deal here, so he had nothing to fear.

A smile crept on his face. At least he’d get a glimpse or two of the exquisite woman.

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