



Karen  
**KINGSBURY**

F A M E



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## CHAPTER ONE



THE PART SHOULD'VE been easy to cast.

*Dream On*, the romantic comedy that would star Dayne Matthews, called for a small-town girl, an upbeat, outgoing type, with dreams of the big city and a genuine innocence that overshadowed everything about her.

Dayne had spent the morning watching half a dozen top Hollywood actresses file through the room for an interview and a quick read, and so far none of them fit the bill. They were talented actresses, friendly, beautiful. Two he'd starred with in other films, two he'd dated, and two he'd hung out with at some party or another.

He'd shared the night with three of the six.

They were girls whose faces decked the covers of every gossip rag in town, and in theory, any one of them could play the part of a small-town girl. How hard could it be? The actresses Dayne had seen today could be upbeat and outgoing, and they could certainly pull off the role of a dreamer.

But something was missing, and by three that afternoon Dayne knew what it was.

The innocence.

Dayne leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms as the last of the six read through her lines. A person couldn't fake innocence—not even with an Academy Award performance. Innocence was something that grew in the heart and shone through the eyes. And it was the innocence that was lacking with each of them.

Mitch Henry, casting director, was pacing near the back of the room. He finished with the final actress and bid her good-bye.

On her way out she looked at Dayne and gave him a teasing smile. “See ya.” She was one of the ones he'd dated. Actually, he'd lived with her off and on for a month or so. Long enough that their pictures made the tabs a couple of times. Her eyes locked onto his. “Call me.”

“Yeah.” Dayne pretended to tip an invisible hat, but his grin faded before she left the room. He turned to Mitch. “Who's next?”

“Who's next?” Deep lines appeared between Mitch's eyes, his tone frustrated. “Do you know how hard it was to get six A-list actresses in here on the same day? The part doesn't even require the kind of talent we had in here, Dayne. Any one of them would knock it out of the park.”

“They're good. They're all good.” Dayne uncrossed his arms and tapped his fingers on the table. “But something's missing.” He paused. “I'm not seeing innocent, Henry. Sophisticated, flirty, take me to bed, yes. But not innocent.”

“Fine.” Mitch tossed his clipboard on the table and yelled at a passing intern to shut the door. On the table were the files belonging to the six actresses, and when the door was shut, Mitch took a few steps closer. “We're on a schedule here, Matthews.” He gripped the edge of the table and leaned in. “Hollywood isn't exactly a stable of innocence.”

“Okay.” Dayne pushed his chair back, stood, and walked to the window, his back to Mitch. He stared out through the hazy blue, and a face came to mind. A face he hadn’t forgotten in nearly a year. He held the image, mesmerized by it, and an idea started to form. It was possible, wasn’t it? She worked in theater. She must’ve dreamed of the silver screen somewhere along the way, right?

Dayne felt Mitch’s eyes on him, and he turned around. “I have an idea.”

“An idea?” Mitch scratched the back of his head and strode to the door and back. “We don’t need an idea; we need an actress. Filming starts in four months. This film is too big to wait until the last minute.”

“I know.” The idea was taking root. It was definitely possible. What girl wouldn’t want a chance like this? Dayne sucked in a slow breath. He couldn’t get ahead of himself. “Listen, Mitch, give me a week. I have someone in mind, but she’s out of state.” He leaned against the windowsill. “I think I can have her here in a week, by next Monday.”

Mitch folded his arms, his expression hard. “Some girl you met at a club, Matthews? Someone you made drunken promises to? Is that what you want me to wait for?”

“No.” Dayne held up his hand. “She’s the real deal. Give me a chance.”

A moment passed when Dayne wasn’t sure which way the casting director was leaning. Then Mitch swept up the six files and the clipboard and shot him a look. “One week.” He was half-way out the door when he turned once more and met Dayne’s eyes. “She better be good.”

Dayne waited until he was alone to look out the window again. What had he just done? Buying a week meant putting the other talent on hold. It meant playing with a budget of tens of millions of dollars so he could find a girl he’d seen just once and

ask her to read for a starring role opposite him in a major motion picture.

All when she might not have the interest or ability to act at all.

The idea was crazy, except for one thing. In the past year the only time he'd seen genuine innocence was when he'd watched this same girl light up the stage at a small theater in Bloomington, Indiana, directing the chaos of a couple dozen kids in costumes at the close of what was apparently the theater troupe's first show.

He remembered most of what he'd seen that day, but still the details were sketchy. The location of the theater was easy, something he could definitely find again. But he had almost no information on the girl except her name.

Dayne gripped the windowsill and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. He could fly out and try to find her, but that would bring the paparazzi out of the woodwork for sure, make them crazy with questions about why Dayne Matthews was in Bloomington, Indiana.

Again.

He turned and grabbed his keys and cell phone. There had to be a way to reach her, to ask her out to Hollywood for an audition without the story making every tabloid in town. Dayne shoved the phone in his pocket and headed down the hall toward the elevator.

A coffee, that's what he needed. A double-shot espresso. Most of his friends in the industry had found offbeat coffee shops, places where they were less recognized. Not Dayne. He was a Starbucks man; nothing else would do. If the paparazzi wanted to take his picture coming and going with his double espresso—and they almost always did—that was fine with him. Maybe he'd get an endorsement deal and he could stand out front and pose for them. Dayne chuckled. That would send them packing. Take all the fun out of it.

He opened the back door of the office building and felt a blast of warmth as the sunshine hit his face. The weather was perfect,

not the usual June fog. He crossed the studio's private parking lot to his black Escalade near the bushes and high privacy fence. Usually the studio back lots were free of the press hounds. Sometimes a lone photographer would climb the trees or sit on adjacent hillsides with high-power cameras trained on the office door. But only when a big deal was coming together or someone was in need of rehab—something like that.

Today things looked calm. This time of the day there wouldn't be too many camera hounds on the hunt. Besides, his SUV was new. Only a few of them would know it was him behind the tinted windows. He pulled out of the studio lot and turned left on La Cienega Boulevard.

Two blocks down he looked in his rearview mirror and saw a familiar Volkswagen. Paparazzi. Even now, even with his new vehicle. He shrugged. *Whatever. They can't crawl into my mind.*

Once in a while he liked to lead them on. He glanced in his rearview mirror again and shrugged. He could use a little amusement. He turned into the Starbucks strip mall, but instead of stopping in front of the coffee shop, he parked near the Rite Aid, three doors down. He grabbed his baseball cap, slipped it low over his brow, and headed inside. There wasn't another person in the store. Dayne dashed to the magazine rack and found the current editions of each of the four national gossip rags—the colorful, busy magazines that reported all manner of information regarding celebrities.

Bloodsuckers, he and his friends called them.

The old, white-haired man at the register didn't recognize him. "That'll be nine fifty-eight." The guy hummed "Moon River" as he slipped the stack of magazines into a bag and handed it to Dayne. "Nice day, huh?"

"Yeah, beautiful." Dayne gave the man a ten-dollar bill. "June's not usually this sunny."

"God's smiling on the Dodgers." The man winked. "Five wins in a row, I tell you. This is the year."

“Could be.” Dayne grinned. He relished the moment. A sales clerk—probably a retiree—making casual conversation with him. Moments like this were sometimes all the normalcy he had anymore. “See you later.”

“Yep.” The man shook his fist. “Go Dodgers.”

Dayne walked outside, scanned the parking lot, and found the Volkswagen and the camera aimed straight at him. Then, with broad, dramatic gestures, he jerked one of the magazines from the bag and appeared to stare, shocked, at the cover. He covered his mouth and pretended to be absorbed in some scandalous story.

After a minute he saw a group of teenage girls headed his way. They hadn’t recognized him yet, but they would. He slipped the magazine back in the bag, saluted the photographer, and slid back into his SUV. The fun was over. Enough of the cameraman. He hit the Lock button on his key chain, made sure his windows were rolled up tight, then pulled into the Starbucks drive-thru lane.

By the time he hit Pacific Coast Highway the double espresso was gone, and he’d forgotten about the photographer or whether the guy was still behind him. The girl from Bloomington. That’s all he could think about now. How was he going to find her without flying to Indiana? And how crazy was he to tell Mitch he could get her into the studio for a reading in a single week?

Dayne passed the usual landmarks—the Malibu Surfer Motel and the Whole Foods Market. His home was just past that, sandwiched between others belonging to people in the entertainment industry. A director and his singer wife on one side and an aging actress and her much younger husband on the other. Nice people. All drawn to the ocean, the watery view of endless calm and serenity. The picture of everything their lives lacked.

Dayne took his bag of magazines inside and made himself another cup of coffee. Black, no sugar. Then he slipped on a pair of



sunglasses and went outside onto his second-story deck. No photographer could see him up here, not with the steep walls built around the deck's edges. He sat down, just barely able to see over the edge out to the Pacific Ocean.

One at a time he took out the magazines. Of the four, his face or name was on the cover of two. Dayne studied the first one: "Dayne Matthews: Hollywood's Most Eligible Bachelor Hits the Party Scene."

"I did?" he muttered and turned to the article. There were many more photos on the two-page spread, each one showing him with a different woman. One he was kissing. One was a waitress and no matter what the photo showed, he wasn't making moves on her. The bar had been loud, so he'd moved in a little closer when he ordered. Beneath that photo the caption read "Even barmaids are fair game."

"Nice." Dayne frowned. What would the waitress think? She was only doing her job, and now she had her picture splashed all over grocery checkouts throughout the country.

He flipped through the pages. There had to be other pictures of him; there always were. A few pages in he saw a short article in the section titled "Police Blotter." The small heading read "Is Dayne Matthews Being Stalked by a Woman? Police Find More Clues."

Dayne rolled his eyes. Often there was a nugget of truth to the articles in the gossip magazines. Police had notified him three times in the past month about a stalker, someone who was mailing strange letters to the police department threatening violence against Dayne Matthews.

So far Dayne hadn't seen any sign of a stalker. The matter wasn't something he thought about for more than a few minutes when he was talking to the police. But leave it to the rags to have the latest scoop. He read the article, looking for anything truthful.

Police say they've received another letter from the person writing threatening letters about Hollywood heartthrob Dayne Matthews. This time handwriting specialists say the letter is from a woman.

One source close to the story said he was fairly certain the person writing the letters was a deranged fan, someone intent on harming Matthews. "She could be a phony, someone looking for attention, but still," the source said, "we can't be too careful."

Exact details of the letters were not available, but a source told our reporter that the person writing the letters is demanding a day with Dayne Matthews or his death.

Police will keep us posted on the story.

Dayne blinked and a chill ran down his arms—more because of the breeze off the Pacific than any fear the article might've stirred up. A day with him or his death? Were people really that crazy? He scanned the story again and dismissed it. Anytime information came from the ever-popular and oft-quoted "source," Dayne and his friends knew to ignore it.

Real truth came from real people—not imaginary sources.

He turned the page, looking for additional stories. This was his ritual, his way of staying in touch with the audience and its view of him. Whether the stories were true or not didn't matter. If they were in print, he wanted to know about them. He kept flipping. Near the front was a section titled "Regular People." Sure enough. There he was coming out of Starbucks with his double espresso. The caption read "Dayne Matthews loads up at his favorite haunt."

Ten pages later was a photo of him and J-Tee Ramiro, a hot Cuban singer he'd dated a month ago. Okay, maybe they never went on an actual date. But they spent the better part of a week together, and the paparazzi hadn't missed a moment. The shot was of the two of them sharing a salad at a small café near Zuma Beach. The point of the story was that J-Tee was seeing someone

new and that she had better rebound abilities than half the guys on the LA Lakers.

Dayne thumbed through the rest of the magazine. For the most part the thing was made up of pictures. It was why the photographers followed him, why they followed anyone with celebrity status. Whatever the rags paid the paparazzi, it was enough to keep them coming back for more.

And some of the pictures were ridiculous.

A section near the middle of the magazine showed half a dozen actresses and the undersides of their arms. “Who’s Flabby and Who’s Not?” the banner headline shouted. The photos were close-ups of actresses caught pointing or raising their arms in a way that showed less-than-perfect triceps muscles.

Dayne rolled his eyes and turned the page. In the past few years the rags had gotten even uglier. One of his friends—an A-list actress named Kelly Parker—was definitely feeling the effects of the pressure. She used to go out dancing or shopping with friends. Now she rarely left her house, and the last time he talked to her the spark was missing from her voice.

He flipped another ten pages, and something at the bottom of one of the layouts caught his eye. A breeze off the ocean rustled the pages as Dayne squinted. It was a small article with two photos—one of Marc David, Dayne’s friend and fellow actor, and the other of a bedraggled man behind bars.

Beneath the photos it said “*Hollywood’s People* sent a reporter to investigate Marc David’s recent trip to Leavenworth and guess what we found???” Dayne inched himself up in his chair. His heart raced, and he felt blood rush to his face. What was this? Marc was his friend, but the guy had never mentioned anything about Leavenworth. Dayne kept reading.

Marc says he was raised by his mom with no whereabouts of his father. Not true, *Hollywood’s People* found out. Not true at all. Marc’s dad isn’t missing. He’s Jo-

seph L. David, a two-time felon, rapist, and drug addict serving time in Leavenworth. Our reporter followed Marc to the prison. Sources say Marc's known about his father all along. Now you know the whole story and so do we!

Dayne felt his stomach turn. He slammed the magazine down on the table, reached into his pocket for his cell phone, flipped it open, and dialed Marc's number.

His friend picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Marc, it's Dayne." He stood up and moved to the balcony wall, staring at the surf. "Hey, I just picked up *Hollywood's People*. It came out today." He paused. "Is it true?"

There was the sound of a long breath on the other end. "About my dad?" Marc sounded tired. "Yeah, it's true."

"But you never . . . I thought he was missing."

"That's what I told everyone." Marc moaned. "Man, this stinks. My parents split when I was young, and after that my dad made some mistakes. Got into coke and speed and ran out of money. Robbed a few liquor stores. My mom tried to keep it from me, said it was too ugly. I was at New York University when I figured out how to reach him. He got some help. Then I started getting big, and we decided to keep it a secret."

"He's at Leavenworth?"

"Yeah."

"Man . . ." Dayne closed his eyes and shielded his face with his free hand. He didn't mention the part about Marc's dad being a rapist. "I'm sorry."

"It was bound to happen someday. The press . . . they're sharks."

"How's your dad now?"

A sad chuckle came from the other end of the line. "That's just it. He's been clean for five years. Found Jesus, made a change. He gets out in two years. My mom and him are even talking."

The pieces were coming together. No wonder Marc hadn't wanted anyone to know about his father. The tabloids would print all the dirt and miss the part about how the man was doing today, how he'd changed for the better.

And that's exactly what happened.

"The picture?" Dayne glanced back at the magazine on the table, still open to that page. "He doesn't look too good."

"Yeah, I know. They found his booking pictures. They must've doctored it up. He wasn't behind bars when the police took those."

"Nice. So today the guy's clean shaven with sober eyes, but they run that one."

"Exactly." Marc was quiet a moment. "Dayne . . . I called an attorney. It's gone far enough."

Dayne felt a surge of adrenaline, the way he used to feel back at boarding school when he and the guys would get in a tight game of soccer. "Serious?"

"Yeah." Marc inhaled slowly. "My dad's never raped anyone. The rag threw that in, just made it up."

The hot feeling was back in Dayne's face. "Go for it, Marc. Make it hurt."

"That's the plan." Marc's voice was strained. "I talked to my dad. He's okay. We'll get through this."

"You will." Dayne clenched his jaw. He watched a seagull dive into the water and come back out with a fish. Every now and then a celebrity would sue one of the magazines and win. It didn't happen often, and the rags didn't care because they made enough money to defend an occasional lawsuit. But it still felt good.

Marc David taking on *Hollywood's People* magazine. Dayne straightened and scanned the beach for cameramen. There were none. "Listen, Marc, you'll have my support all the way."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot." His tone grew softer. "Hey,

Dayne, I gotta go. One quick thing.” He paused. “What do you hear from Kelly Parker?”

“Kelly?” Dayne returned to his chair and put his feet up on the railing of the balcony wall. “She never goes anywhere. The paparazzi are freaking her out.”

“That’s what I thought. Tell her to call me, will you?”

“Definitely.”

When the call was over, Dayne tossed his phone on the table, pulled the magazine closer again, and stared at the picture. Suddenly the image changed in his mind, and it was no longer Marc and his father. Instead it became a family. His family. The biological family who didn’t know he existed. He pictured them the way they’d looked that day in Bloomington. Eight or ten people with a few small children walking together through the parking lot of the local hospital, the same weekend he’d seen the girl at the theater. One of the little girls with them was in a wheelchair.

Even with the sun hot on his face, a chill made its way through him. He shut the magazine and threw it back on the table. What would the press do to the people he’d seen that day in the parking lot? What skeletons lay in the closet of the Baxter family? For starters, John and Elizabeth had given him up for adoption and apparently never told their other kids.

But what about the wheelchair? Was there a birth defect or an accident that put the child there? Whatever it was, the rags would find out and gleefully splash it across a centerfold given the chance.

Dayne stood and filled his lungs with the damp, salty air. He leaned his forearms on the railing and stared far out to sea this time. What were the Baxters doing now? No doubt they were still grieving the loss of Elizabeth. The private detective his agent used had found out the information almost immediately. Elizabeth Baxter died of breast cancer just hours after he had visited her briefly.

Down the beach a way, a young couple was holding hands and flying a bright yellow-striped kite. Dayne studied them, the way they easily kept their faces out in the open. Did they know how wonderful it was, being out of the limelight? Or did they long for fame the way so many did in Los Angeles?

He shifted his eyes upward. At least he'd found Elizabeth before she died. The conversation they'd shared was enough to answer his hardest questions—who was his birth mother and why did she give him up.

Elizabeth had loved him and longed for him. She had searched for him at one time and wondered about him all of her married life. In her dying days, her single prayer had been to find him, hold him once more the way she'd held him as a newborn, and tell him she loved him.

Those bits of truth were enough.

As for the others, his biological father and siblings, he'd made the right choice by leaving them alone. Dayne leaned hard against the railing. He'd only seen them for a handful of minutes as they walked from the hospital to their cars. They looked like nice people, loving and close. The sort of family he would've been proud to call his own.

But he could hardly land on their doorstep announcing the fact that he was their parent's firstborn. The paparazzi would capture the moment from the bushes for their next cover story. No, he could never contact the Baxters, never tell them the truth about who he was. They deserved their privacy. Dayne narrowed his eyes. He could see the headlines: "Dayne Matthews' Secret Family Revealed." He couldn't let that happen.

Even if he spent the rest of his life thinking about them.

He took his cell phone from the table, slipped back inside the house, and closed the screen door. Suddenly he knew how he was going to find the girl, the one from the Bloomington theater. He dialed his agent's number.

"Matthews, how you doing?"

“Great.” Dayne didn’t pause long. “Hey, I need a favor.”

“Oh yeah?” There was an edge to his agent’s voice, but it was a humorous one. “Mitch Henry tells me you need an actress.”

“That too.” Dayne managed a weak laugh. “That’s the favor. I need you to find an actress in Bloomington.”

“Matthews.” The humor was gone. “Not Bloomington. I thought we agreed.”

“No, this isn’t about my family. It’s about a girl, an actress I saw there. At the community theater.”

Silence shouted at him from the other end. Then he heard his agent draw a long breath. “You saw a play at the community theater when you were in Bloomington?”

“Yes. Well, no.” Dayne walked the length of his kitchen and stopped near the sink. The view from the window was the same as the one from the deck. “I mean, the girl wasn’t in the play; she was the director.”

“The director?”

“Yeah. She’s perfect. Everything the part calls for.” Dayne felt a grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

“How do you know she can act?” His agent sounded tired.

“Call it a hunch.” Dayne took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. “Come on, man; do it for me. She’s perfect; I’m telling you.”

“I have a question.” There was resignation in his agent’s voice. “You didn’t sleep with her, right?”

“Come on!” Dayne threw his free hand in the air. “Don’t believe everything you read in the papers, friend.”

“Okay, but did you?”

“Of course not.” Dayne pictured the girl, the way she’d looked onstage surrounded by kids. “I never even talked to her.”

“Great.” His agent let loose a long sigh. “So I send the investigator to Bloomington to find a girl who’s perfect for the part, even though you’re not sure she can act and you’ve never spoken to her.”



“Right.” Dayne felt himself relax. His agent liked toying with him, but in the end he’d do whatever was asked of him. It was why Dayne had stayed with him for so long.

“Do you have anything else? A name? Something?”

Dayne didn’t hesitate. Her name had been on his tongue all afternoon. “Her name’s Hart. Katy Hart.”



## CHAPTER TWO

MORE THAN A HUNDRED kids and their parents were lined up at the door of Bloomington Community Church—Christian Kids Theater’s practice facility—when Katy Hart pulled her faded red two-door Nissan into the parking lot for the second time that Monday afternoon.

The first time had been half an hour earlier. That time, she’d driven the speed limit, casually noting the thunderheads in the distance as she passed through the downtown area and pulled into the parking lot ten minutes early, the way she’d planned. Not until she was at the church door did she realize she didn’t have the key.

That set off a race back through Bloomington and into Clear Creek, where she lived with the Flanigan family. A frantic search through her bedroom finally turned up the key, but now she was fifteen minutes late, and if the line waiting outside was any indication, she needed to move fast.

Auditions for *Tom Sawyer* were set to start at 4 p.m.

Katy and her creative team had just three hours to get the kids

through the audition process and another hour to make a decision about who would get called back for a second audition. At eight o'clock the church staff needed the building for a meeting, and she'd promised that everyone from Christian Kids Theater would be out by then.

Katy bit her lip, grabbed her canvas bag, and darted out of the car. As long as CKT didn't have a permanent home, schedules like the one they had today were part of life. At least Bloomington Community Church was willing to open their doors every Monday and Thursday and twice on the weekends so CKT could hold classes and practices. A facility of their own would've been nice, but Katy didn't dwell on the fact. She picked up her pace. *I'm thankful, God. Really, I am.*

The minute they saw her, the kids began waving and grinning. "Katy . . . Katy!"

She ran along the line to the side door and spouted apologies as she opened it. A burst of stuffy hot air met her. Katy frowned and stared up at the dark ceiling. The church staff had promised to leave on the air conditioner. She'd have to check it once the registration started.

Katy hit the light switch as the parent volunteers hurried to a few tables set up in the lobby. The children moved in behind them.

"You know the routine." Katy waved at the kids, calming their voices long enough to be heard. "Have a photograph of yourself and your tryout form completed and signed by your parents. Get in line and someone will give you a number. Anyone without a photograph can line up in front of—" Katy peered around a group of kids to see which parent was manning the Polaroid camera—"Mrs. Jennings. I'll take the first ten in five minutes inside the sanctuary."

Three people would join her on the panel. Rhonda Sanders, the choreographer and Katy's closest friend, and Al and Nancy Helmes, a couple whose passion for music and helping kids

made them pillars of the CKT community. Al and Nancy would act as music directors for *Tom Sawyer*, and they'd be in on the audition process as well. The couple had an amazing love for each other and for their eight children—three of whom were part of CKT.

Once in a while Katy would catch the couple, their heads bowed in prayer before a meal or eyes locked on each other even in a room of people, and she'd wonder. Would she ever have that sort of love? A love that rolled up its sleeves and worked together, played together, and raised a family together, all while looking happier and more enamored with each other all the time?

Katy hoped so.

She gave a few more directions to the moms working the check-in table, and then she spotted Cara Helmes, one of Al and Nancy's daughters.

"Hi, Katy! Another audition!" Cara grinned, her eyes dancing the way they always did.

"Best one yet!" Katy gave the girl a hug. "I'll see you down there."

Cara nodded and headed down the aisle with her parents toward her spot in the second row, where she would sit ready and waiting for the auditions to begin. Cara was twenty-two and had Down syndrome. She had an open invitation to attend any of CKT's performances or auditions, something she looked forward to more than anything in her life. Cara was quick with a hug or a smile for the kids. No matter how poor a practice they might have, Cara would clap as if it were a Tony Award-winning performance. She never had a bad thing to say about anyone, and the kids and families of CKT loved her. Katy and Rhonda had agreed that in some ways Cara was CKT's guardian angel.

"Katy, Katy . . ." A chorus of frantic voices brought Katy back to the urgency of the moment. She looked down and saw three fourth-grade girls. One of them was out of breath. "I forgot my

music!” Tears welled in her eyes. “My mom wants to know if there’s time to go back and get it.”

Katy put her hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Calm down—everything’s okay.” She smiled. “You have plenty of time.”

More kids called for her attention, and one after another she addressed their needs. Yes, they needed a photo in order to try out. No, they couldn’t sing without accompaniment. Yes, they could sing a song from church.

Normally she would chat with the kids, ask them about school and their families. But today would be all business. CKT might be a children’s theater troupe, but it was Katy’s passion, her purpose. *Tom Sawyer* could be their best show ever. Yes, it was CKT’s first production of the summer. Never mind the stuffy church or the long lines or the fact that she was late or even the threatening thunderstorms that could very easily knock out the electricity. This audition would be as professional as the others. Katy held her bag tight to her side and headed for the double doors leading to the sanctuary.

“More kids than ever.” Heath Hudson came up alongside her and handed her two pencils. Heath was a twenty-seven-year-old salesman with an uncanny ability to run a soundboard and a strong fascination for theater. The talk among CKT families was that he had a fascination for Katy too. “You look hot.”

“Oh.” Katy stopped short and looked at Heath. “Is that a compliment?”

“Uh . . .” He was only an inch taller than her, so she could see his forehead was damp with sweat. “Not hot that way, but . . . well . . . I mean, you are hot that way, of course, but . . .”

“I’m teasing.” Katy stifled a laugh. She had every reason to like Heath Hudson. They’d gone to the movies a few times, and kids were always giggling and winking at them whenever they were together. But she couldn’t quite convince her heart. She took the pencils, then patted Heath on the shoulder. “It’s okay. I know what you mean. I *am* hot; we’re all hot.” She gestured toward the

ceiling. “The air-conditioning isn’t working.” She wrinkled her nose and took a step back. “Maybe you could check that for me, Heath. Whadya say?”

“Sure thing.” Heath straightened and cleared his throat, more composed. “I’m on my way.”

She was halfway down the center aisle toward the front of the church when the rest of her creative team caught up with her. Nancy Helmes started with the updates while they were still walking. “Adam Franklin threw up in the lobby.”

“What?” Katy set her things down on the first pew and stared at Nancy. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Nancy moved to the piano a few feet away and opened the lid. “His father said he’s been nervous all day. Ate a burger and fries for lunch and, well . . .”

Her husband, Al, made a face. “It wasn’t pretty.”

Rhonda opened a card table and set it in front of the first pew. “Sarah Jo Stryker’s here too. Her mother says they barely made it. Straight from a commercial audition in Indianapolis.” Rhonda raised an eyebrow. “She pulled me aside and asked me if we knew what we were getting with Sarah Jo.”

“Huh?” Katy let her hands fall to her sides. “What did she mean?”

“She told me Sarah Jo was going to be a star one day. We’re lucky to get her while she’s young and inexpensive.”

Katy exhaled hard and set her yellow notepad and pencils on the card table. Most CKT families were levelheaded people, thrilled with a chance to have found a drama troupe where moral standards were high and faith was at the foundation of all they did. Teamwork was stressed, and after eight weeks of practice and rehearsal, everyone involved felt equally important on opening night.

But in the year since the group’s start in Bloomington, every now and then someone would miss the point. They’d come thinking CKT was a launching pad to something bigger, better.

Something paid. Katy hadn't met Sarah Jo or her mother, but her phone calls with the woman had told her there was trouble ahead.

Katy blinked. "She really said that?"

"Yep." Rhonda glanced at her watch. "I think she's in the fourth group."

What were people thinking? "If she talks to you again, tell Mrs. Stryker—" Katy grabbed her notepad and a pencil and pretended to write something down—"I've got it noted about Sarah Jo and how lucky we are." She paused. "The rules are the same as always, by the way. In an audition like this, props and elaborate dance steps only take away from the singer. The kids know that."

A clap of thunder shook the building, and Katy turned toward the back of the room. Krissy Schick, the CKT area coordinator, was there waiting for the signal. "Ready?"

Katy took a deep breath and nodded to Nancy, Al, and Rhonda. They were all seated at the table. A few feet away, one of the moms was at the CD player, seated and holding a stopwatch. Katy looked back at Krissy. "Send them in."

In a flurry of motion, dozens of parents and kids with numbers pinned to their shirts hurried into the sanctuary and immediately took their seats and quieted themselves. Rules were that anyone could watch auditions, but people could only come and go between the groups of ten. The first group of children auditioning for parts separated themselves from the spectators and took the front row adjacent to where Katy was seated.

Another clap of thunder filled the auditorium. Katy held her pencil tight. The temperature was still smoldering inside, and she glanced over her shoulder for Heath. If he'd found the air conditioner, it wasn't working. Maybe rain would cool things down.

Katy looked at the assortment of kids seated in the first row. "Number one?"



Tim Reed stood, walked to the mom at the CD player, and gave her his music. There were a few seconds while he explained to the woman in hushed tones which song he was singing. Then he took the center of the stage, faced Katy, and smiled. “Hi, my name’s Tim Reed. I’m sixteen years old, and I’ll be singing ‘King of New York’ from *Newsies*.”

Katy nodded and sat back.

Tim Reed was one of the nicest kids she’d ever met. In past plays, he was the first to help the younger boys with their makeup, first to clean up the greenroom, and quick to pull out his guitar and sing praise songs with the rest of the cast between Saturday shows. He was homeschooled and had recently earned Eagle rank from the Boy Scouts. On top of that he had a natural ability to sing and act. Tim had played Charlie Brown in CKT’s first production and had earned a lead part in every play since.

Katy smiled as the music began. This one would be easy.

The song built and grew, and Tim nailed it, hitting the highs just right and letting his vibrato show on the lows. Each person auditioning would have one minute before their music would be cut. Tim finished at just under, thanked the panel, and returned to his seat.

Katy pulled her notepad closer and wrote: *Tim Reed—Tom Sawyer?*

Next up was a rail-thin boy with short, wavy hair making his first attempt at a CKT production. He had a life preserver around his waist and a green swimming mask on his face. In his hand was a yellow rubber duck. After he set up his music and took the stage, he nodded to Katy.

She sucked the inside of her lip to keep from laughing. “Go ahead.”

“Okay.” His voice was nasally because of the mask. He pulled himself up some. “Hi. I’m Eric Wade. I’m twelve years old and—”

“Eric?” Katy shook her head. The boy might as well have been underwater for how garbled he sounded. “Do you have a cold?”

“No.” His shoulders fell a little.

“Then take off the mask, honey. We can’t understand you.”

Eric slipped the mask off and dropped it to the floor. “Is that better?”

“Yes. Let’s try it again.”

It was no surprise that Eric’s song was “Rubber Duckie.” He sang it while feigning first a freestyle stroke and then a backstroke up and down the length of the stage. It was impossible to tell whether he was on key or not. Katy could only guess what the rest of her creative team was writing.

She jotted down *Eric Wade—maybe next time*.

The stream of kids continued until the first ten were finished. Katy stood and stretched and spoke loud enough for everyone in the sanctuary to hear her. “We’ll take two minutes, and then we’ll need the next ten.”

During the break, Heath found her. “Good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”

Katy folded her arms and angled her head. Audition days were always like this. “The good.”

“Okay, I found the air-conditioning controls and turned it on.” Heath puffed out his chest. His breath had the faint smell of garlic and onions. “Because your wish is my command.”

“Wow. How’d I get so lucky?” A weak laugh sounded from Katy’s lips. “The bad?”

“The bad news is it’ll probably take an hour to cool down, and right now it’s hailing outside.”

“Oh.” Katy nodded. “That’s not bad news.” She hurried up the aisle, her eyes still on Heath. “We’ll just open the doors.”

In a blur, she rushed into the lobby, flung open the double doors, and was instantly slapped in the face by a sheet of hail. “Oh, brother.” She shut the doors again and spun around.

The parents and kids in the lobby were all staring at her, trying not to laugh.

“That’s why we had the doors closed.” One of the dads grinned.

“I see that.” Katy brushed her clothes off and shook the hail from her arms.

Tim’s little sister Mary came up and tugged on Katy’s blouse. “You have snow on your head.”

“Yes, thank you, Mary. I thought I might.” She ran her fingers through her hair and dashed back into the sanctuary. “Okay,” she shouted. “Group two, get ready.”

Katy was running back down the aisle when she spotted one of the college girls who would help with the show. She was seated at the back of the sanctuary next to her boyfriend. He had his arm around her, his eyes lost in hers, their heads tilted toward each other.

The picture filled Katy’s senses and drew her back. Suddenly the ache in her heart returned, raw and painful and lonely the way it still felt even two years after leaving Chicago. She glanced once more at the couple. They were laughing about something and holding hands, lost in a world of their own.

Katy hesitated. That was her not so many years ago, wasn’t it? The college girl sitting with her first love—her only love—in the back of an auditorium while their class rehearsed near the front. Back then she had dreams of marriage and babies and living in Chicago forever. But it hadn’t worked out that way, and here, now, she missed that time with an intensity that took her breath away.

She turned her attention back to the front of the church and picked up her pace. Tears stung her eyes. The pain hit her at the strangest times, smack in the midst of an entire building full of people who loved and adored her. She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Let’s go! Group two, get your music ready.”

A single breath and Katy felt control coming over her. The life she had in Chicago was gone; she would never go back. Her eyes were dry again, and she forced herself to focus on the whispery

jitters and rustling lyrics sheets and excitement brimming all around her. This was her home, where she belonged.

And it was enough.

Katy sat at the table and stared at her notepad. *This is all I need, isn't it, God? Isn't that what You told me? Being a part of three dozen families with a hundred kids calling my name? These are the plans You have for me, right?*

There was no answer, not even in the quiet places of her heart.

"Katy, you with us?" Rhonda tapped Katy's foot under the table. "Let's get these kids through here."

"Right." Katy looked at the first row, where the next ten kids were waiting. "Number eleven, take the stage."

Katy didn't lose focus again.

After the first thirty auditions, a woman came up to Katy and touched her shoulder. "You're Katy, right? The director?"

Katy turned in her seat. "Yes, hello." They'd only talked on the phone, but Katy had no doubt this was Sarah Jo's mother.

Alice Stryker moved in closer and lowered her voice. "Sarah Jo's been practicing the part of Becky for some time now." Mrs. Stryker pinched her lips together and gave Katy's shoulder a light push. "I already made her a Becky Thatcher dress."

"Mrs. Stryker—" Katy tried to keep the shock from her tone—"the team won't be choosing kids for the roles until after tomorrow's callback."

Her expression changed and she uttered a polite laugh. "Of course, dear. I'm just planting seeds for tomorrow, since parents can't watch the callbacks and I'm convinced Sarah Jo can play the part."

Mrs. Stryker was gone before Katy could catch her breath. It would take everything in her to call Sarah Jo back after her mother's unfair expectations.

Katy was still replaying the woman's words when Sarah Jo approached her. Katy watched the girl's tentative steps, her wide,

hesitant eyes. For the first time she considered that maybe Sarah Jo was nothing like her mother.

“Miss Katy?” The girl glanced over her shoulder as she ran her tongue along her lower lip. Her face was downcast when her eyes met Katy’s again. “I’m Sarah Jo.” She held out her hand. “Whatever my mama said, I’m sorry. She—” the girl swallowed, her expression tense—“she has her ideas about me.”

Katy’s heart melted. “Oh, honey, it’s okay.” She took hold of Sarah Jo’s hand. “Don’t worry. Everyone’s a little excited at auditions.”

“Yeah, I guess.” The hint of a sparkle appeared in Sarah Jo’s eyes. “Thanks.”

Katy watched Sarah Jo blend back in with the other kids and noticed two of the Flanigan children, fifteen-year-old Bailey and twelve-year-old Connor, the Flanigan’s oldest children, near the back of the room. Connor had earned a part in each of the first three shows, but Bailey was an unknown. Since Katy lived with the Flanigans and felt like part of their family, she had worried for a week about whether Bailey would have what it takes to get a part and whether it would be uncomfortable with Jim and Jenny, their parents, if either of the kids wasn’t cast in the play.

During the break before their auditions, Jenny Flanigan came up to the table and took hold of Katy’s hand. “No favors, Katy. Treat them like anyone else.”

They were just the words Katy needed to hear. “Thanks.” Her heart swelled and she squeezed Jenny’s fingers. “I needed that.”

Bailey was first up when they got started again. Her audition was upbeat and right on key. Everything about it proved that Katy had nothing to worry about. The Flanigan girl was a natural, a willowy beauty with a sweet voice. She moved easily onstage, and Katy guessed she would be a wonderful dancer. Katy made a note next to Bailey’s name to call her back, maybe for the part of Becky Thatcher. She could always ask Alice Stryker to have the dress adjusted.

Sarah Jo was next, and Katy held her breath. *Okay, let's see what she's got.* Sarah Jo sang "Part of Your World" from *The Little Mermaid*, and after the first line, Katy understood Mrs. Stryker's determination. The girl looked unremarkable—thin with wispy brown hair—but she sang with her entire being, letting the song flow through to her fingertips as she stretched out her hands during the chorus.

Very simply, Sarah Jo Stryker lit up the room. Her voice was amazing, beautiful and full, mature in a way that sent chills down Katy's spine. She was composed and self-assured, presenting the song in a way that made everyone in the room see her as Ariel, the conflicted mermaid.

No wonder her mother expected Sarah Jo to be famous. If the girl wanted a career on the stage, she definitely had the voice and stage presence for it.

When she finished, a burst of applause came from the group seated in the sanctuary. Sarah Jo gave Katy a weak smile and a slight shrug.

Katy's heart went out to her. It was clear Sarah Jo expected to be penalized because of her mother's behavior. Katy returned the smile with a nod. She stared down at her notepad and pursed her lips. Apparently she'd have to find a way to work with Mrs. Stryker. She poised her pencil over the paper and wrote *Sarah Jo Stryker—callback*.

Next up was Ashley Zarelli, a sweet, dark-haired seventeen-year-old who had overcome a troubled past. As an infant, Ash had been left in a dresser drawer for the first two months of her life. A local senator and his wife took her for the next eleven months, but then the state stepped in and placed her back with her biological mother. Life spiraled downward quickly, but not until Ash was four years old did the state take her from her biological mother for good and return her to the couple. She'd been part of the Zarelli family ever since.

Tani Zarelli, Ash's adoptive mother, once told Katy that as dif-

difficult as her daughter's life had been, she was certain the Lord had given her a message regarding Ashley. That one day she would be a teacher of His Word. It was a promise Tani and her husband held on to when Ash was younger and suffered from low self-esteem and nightmares.

As the Zarelli girl took the stage, Katy was struck by the faithfulness of God. Here was a precious teenager who had been left for dead by her biological mother, now glowing with the light of Christ. Ash's involvement in the theater was a living picture of God's promises alive and at work. In the last CKT performance—*Charlotte's Web*—Ashley had worked with Tim Reed to lead the cast in Scripture reading or prayers.

She sang a song from *The Sound of Music* and did well enough to earn a callback.

The auditions continued right up until seven o'clock, with one hundred thirty-six children from both ends of the CKT age range—eight-year-olds auditioning for the first time to eighteen-year-olds taking their last chance at a part.

Once the kids and their parents were out of the building, Heath Hudson approached Katy. "Want me to wait for you?"

Katy's mind went blank. "Do we have plans?"

"No, I just, uh . . ." Heath's cheeks grew a shade darker. "I thought maybe I'd wait in the other room and we could get coffee when you're done."

"Heath, that's so sweet." Katy took his hands in hers. "But we'll be a while, and when we're done I need to get home." She paused. "Okay?"

"Sure." Heath gave her hands a squeeze and separated himself, taking a few steps back. "I'll see you Friday at practice."

"Right." Katy gave a friendly wave. "See you then."

When she turned back to her creative team, both Nancy and Rhonda had knowing looks on their faces. Katy held up one hand. "Stop. Don't even start." Being single around so many

families meant someone was always trying to set her up. But that night they had more to talk about than Heath Hudson.

“I won’t give you a hard time, Katy.” Al crossed his arms and gave his wife a teasing poke in the ribs. “You girls are terrible around each other. Can’t she say hello to Heath without you setting a wedding date?”

They all laughed, but the silliness faded quickly. The creative team huddled for the next hour and decided on forty-three kids for callbacks. There would be some sixty kids in the play, but not everyone needed a callback to get a part. The second day of auditions was only to cast the speaking parts. Some children would earn smaller ensemble parts merely on the strength of their first audition.

Katy’s stomach was in knots by the time she drove back to Clear Creek and pulled into the Flanigans’ driveway. The knots were normal. Auditions were the hardest of all. In a perfect world, every child wanting a part in the play would get one, but Katy had parts for less than half the kids who tried out.

And something about the way she felt was different this time.

The lights in the house were off, which was good. She didn’t want the distraction of conversation, not tonight. Not only because of the task that lay ahead the next day, while she and her creative team held callbacks and cast the show, but because of something else, something that made the knots in her stomach worse than usual tonight.

Katy lay awake trying to figure out what it was, and she kept coming back to the same thing—the memory of the college girl and her boyfriend at the back of the sanctuary. Even after three hours of auditions and another hour of discussion, Katy couldn’t get the picture out of her head.

The longer she thought about it, the more it made sense. Because for all the richness of CKT and all the ways she felt part of the biggest family anyone could ever hope for, there was no de-



nying the basic truth. Katy had no one to call her own, no boyfriend or special someone as a prospect for the future.

As she fell asleep she was convinced that the thing causing knots in her stomach was more than anxiety over casting *Tom Sawyer*, something more than worrying about what part Bailey Flanigan or Sarah Jo Stryker or Tim Reed or Ashley Zarelli might earn at callbacks. It was something no one else could see or understand, something so big it threatened to send her packing her bags straight back to Chicago.

A deep and crushing loneliness.