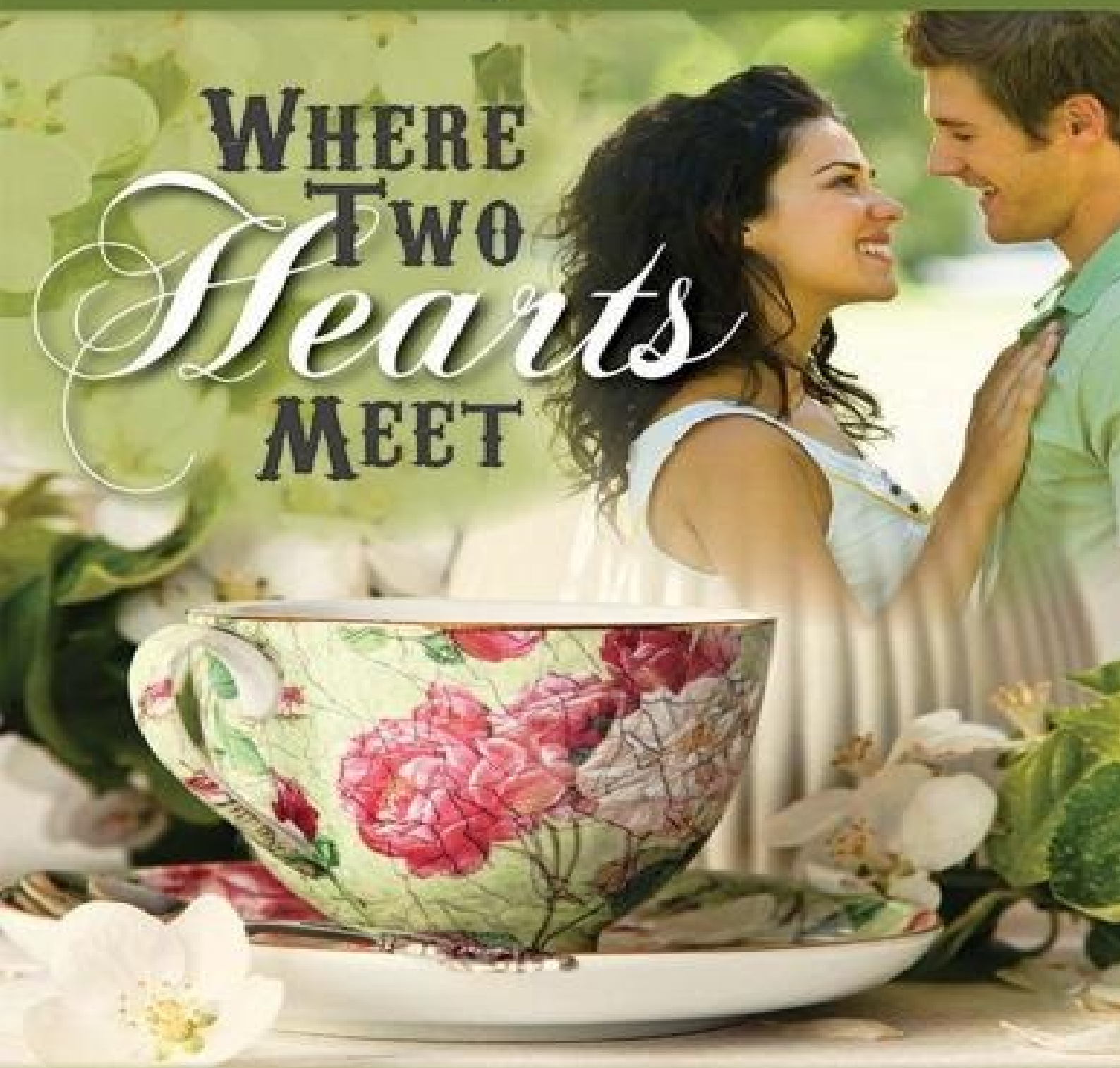


Two Sweet Something
Teashop NOVELLAS

WHERE
TWO
Hearts
MEET



CARRIE TURANSKY

**WHERE TWO
HEARTS MEET**

**Two Sweet Something
Teashop Novellas**

**Tea for Two
and
Wherever Love Takes Us**

By

Carrie Turansky

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Dedication

To my daughters Melissa, Elizabeth, Megan, Melinda, and Galan.

You are each a joy and blessing beyond compare . . . so beautiful and special to me.

I love you!

“Love keeps no record of wrongs . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5,7

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About the Author

Tea for Two

By

Carrie Turansky

Chapter One

The bell over the front door of Sweet Something Teashop jingled, and the mailman stepped inside. A brisk March breeze followed him and swept through the shop, ruffling the white lace curtains at the front windows. He pushed the heavy oak and glass door closed, making the bell ring again.

Allison Bennett, co-owner of the shop, walked up front and greeted him with a smile. “Afternoon Howard.”

He nodded and handed her the small stack of mail. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. Can I get you a hot cup of tea or coffee?”

“Not today. This weather has me behind schedule.” He adjusted the plaid wool scarf around his neck and frowned toward the window. “I gotta keep moving.”

“You sure? You look like you need to warm up.”

He shook his head. “Thanks. I’ll be all right.”

“Okay. We’ll see you tomorrow.” She watched him duck out the door, trudge past deep piles of slushy snow lining Nassau Street, and step into Princeton Interiors next door.

Leaning closer to the front door’s cool glass, she glanced up at the gray, brooding sky, and then down the empty sidewalk toward Princeton University. This morning she’d read an article in the *Princeton Packet* calling this the worst winter in thirty years. She sighed and shook her head. No doubt about that. Foot traffic along Princeton’s historic Nassau Street had almost disappeared, taking most of her customers with it.

A dizzy, sick feeling washed over her as she thought of all she’d invested in her business over the last twelve months. If the weather didn’t warm up soon, they could be in big trouble, maybe even forced to close Sweet Something permanently.

She closed her eyes, trying to still her churning thoughts. *Please, Lord, help us get through the next few weeks. Send us an early spring.* She looked out the window again, imagining all the shoppers and business people who would stroll down the street and in the door for lunch or afternoon tea once the temperature rose and the sun came out. They’d come again. She had to believe it. Not just for herself, but for her sister’s sake.

“Was that the mailman?” Tessa Malone, Allison’s older sister, wiped her hands on a tea towel and glanced toward the front door. Short dark hair framed her pleasant face with a wispy fringe, and her cheeks glowed from working in the warm kitchen. Pretty green and gold beads dangled from her ears. She crossed from the antique desk that served as a hostess podium and stepped down into the glass shop area to meet Allison.

Allison shifted her gaze to the mail in her hand. “Yes. Hopefully he didn’t bring us any more bills.”

Tessa’s dark eyebrows dipped. “Better check and see.”

Allison leafed through the pile, flipping past a colorful grocery circular from McCaffery Market and a coupon for a free session at Princeton Biofeedback Center. On the bottom of the pile, plain white envelope with a neatly printed address caught her attention.

“I hope it’s not one of those fund-raising letters from Princeton Hospital.” Tessa pointed at Allison. “Don’t even think about giving them any money right now.”

Allison let Tessa’s words pass without comment. She knew her sister’s tendency to mother her came from their twelve-year age difference and close sister-bond. They shared management of the teashop, and though most of the financial investment came from Allison, Tessa faithfully oversaw the baking and food preparation.

Allison slid her finger under the edge of the envelope and tore it open. Peeking in, she caught a glimpse of a cashier’s check. “Oh my goodness. Look!” She pulled it out with a trembling hand.

Tessa leaned closer and scanned the check’s inscription. Her dark eyes bulged, and she snatched the check from Allison. “Three thousand five hundred dollars! Look at the memo line: *FOR ALLISON AND SWEET SOMETHING.*” She stared at Allison. “It’s just like the other one.”

Allison nodded, recalling the cashier’s check for five thousand dollars she had received shortly before she opened the teashop on Valentine’s Day a little over a year ago. “I can’t believe this. Who would send me this much money?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone heard we were having financial problems.”

“I haven’t told anyone. Have you?”

Tessa shook her head. “And I’m sure Matt wouldn’t say anything. He’s a stickler about ethical things like that.”

Allison nodded. She trusted her brother-in-law completely. He was an experienced CPA and handled all the finances for Sweet Something. “I know we really need this, but it’s a little spooky. How would someone know how much we need to cover the rest of this week’s payroll and the increase in our rent?”

“They must have a direct line to *You Know Who* upstairs.” Tessa lifted her gaze toward the ceiling, and she wasn’t talking about the architect who rented the office above the teashop.

Goose bumps raced down Allison’s arms. “Right. But I’d still like to know who He used to send it.”

Tessa’s eyes lit up, and she grinned. “I bet it’s Peter.”

Allison pulled back and wrinkled her nose. “No, it couldn’t be.”

“Why not? He has the money, and you know he’s interested in you. He’s here practically every day.”

Allison couldn’t imagine Peter Hillinger, the owner of Princeton Interiors, giving money to anyone anonymously. It wasn’t his style. He wore perfectly tailored clothes from the best stores in Princeton and drove a new black BMW. And Peter never missed an opportunity to mention his successful business, even though he’d inherited it from his father less than three years ago.

“It would be easy for him to see how slow things have been.”

Allison shook her head. “I don’t think Peter would do something like this.”

“Well, he certainly could if he wanted to.” Tessa pursed her lips and seemed offended that Allison didn’t agree.

Allison glanced at the check again, remembering Peter’s thoughtful comments about the teashop, his interest in her artwork, and his new habit of attending church with her. He seemed sincere. Maybe she was being too judgmental. Whoever had sent the check was very generous and most likely listening to the Lord. How else could he know their need?

“I suppose it could be Peter.” Allison chewed her lower lip as she considered the idea. “But I got the first check over a year ago at church through Pastor Tom, and Peter didn’t start coming to church with us until we invited him last fall.”

“Okay, so Peter might not have given you the first check, but this one has to be from him. What else could it be?”

Allison shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Tessa grinned. “I think you should say yes next time he asks for a date.”

Allison’s stomach tensed. She turned away and tucked the check back in the envelope. “He hasn’t asked me out since I turned him down for Valentine’s Day.”

“All he needs is a little encouragement.”

“But it doesn’t seem fair to encourage him. We’re just friends. That’s all I—”

“Friendship is a great place to start. Spend more time with him. Give it a chance.” Tessa touched Allison’s cheek, a look of concern in her eyes. “There’s someone special out there for you. I know it. But you have to be willing to let go of the past, open up your heart, and try again.”

Tears misted Allison’s eyes. Of course her sister was right. She needed to bury those painful memories once and for all. Six years was long enough to wait for someone who was never coming back.

* * * *

The tantalizing scent of freshly baked blackberry pie drifted toward Tyler Lawrence as he stepped into the warmth of Sweet Something Teashop. Rubbing his hands together to warm them, he glanced around the cozy interior.

Antique sideboards and small tables displayed interesting collections of china teapots, cups, and saucers. Whimsical birdhouses and small table lamps with painted shades sat on the shelves between the front windows. Little packages of specialty teas in cellophane bags tied with pink ribbons stood in neat rows ready for purchase. He hadn’t expected Sweet Something to have a gift shop as well as a tearoom. But, knowing Allie’s love for art and her romantic, creative style, it made sense.

The shop’s feminine ambiance announced its owner as clearly as if her name had been painted on the WELCOME sign. He glanced into the quiet tearoom and saw only two tables occupied.

Allie stepped down into the gift shop and past a large armoire filled with round hatboxes, dried flowers, and antique crystal dishes. Her gaze connected with his, and recognition flashed in her eyes.

Tyler smiled. “Hi, Allie.” She looked just as beautiful as she had the day he’d left Princeton six years ago. She’d cut her rich caramel-colored hair in a new style that brushed her shoulders. A few soft lines at the corners of her eyes testified to the passing years, but those were the only hints

change he noticed.

She stared at him, questions shimmering in her dark blue eyes.

“I heard about your shop. I thought I’d stop in and say hello.”

She darted a glance over her shoulder and then back at him. “I’ll get you a menu.” She turned and walked toward the tearoom, leaving a faint flowery fragrance in her wake. She wore a mocha-colored blouse with soft flowing ruffles at her neck and wrists, and a long, slim black skirt. He spotted brown leather boots through the slit in her skirt as she stepped up into the tearoom.

He followed, sending off a prayer for grace. He didn’t deserve it, but over the past two years, he learned God’s grace and forgiveness could cover a multitude of sins. He needed both of those from Allie as well.

In all those years he’d seen her only once—a little over a year ago on Christmas Eve at church. The scene flashed through his mind as he crossed the tearoom. He had returned to Princeton to spend the holidays with his mother for the first time in five years. After the service, he’d unexpectedly bumped into Allie and fumbled a lame apology, saying something about being sorry he hadn’t kept in touch. Of course that was true, but it didn’t even begin to address the real issues between them. It certainly didn’t ease his guilt or erase the pain in her eyes.

Allie led him to a small table for two in the corner.

He sat down and smiled up at her.

She averted her eyes and handed him a menu printed on light pink paper. “We have several choices for lunch, or our tea and dessert menu is on the back. Can I get you something to drink?”

Her cool formality cut him to the heart. “Can you sit down for a few minutes?”

“No, I’m busy,” she said, without missing a beat.

“It doesn’t look like you have too many customers right now. Couldn’t you take a break? I’d like to hear more about Sweet Something. How long have you been open?” Of course he knew the answer to that question, but he hoped it would draw her into a conversation.

Her gaze dropped to the menu in his hand. “All right, but let me take your order first.”

“I’d like tea and something sweet. What do you recommend?” She hesitated a moment. “The apple cinnamon scones are popular, or if you’d like something more substantial, you could try the blackberry cobbler or lemon lush. They’re in the glass case over there if you’d like to take a look.” Allie seemed to relax a little as she described the dessert choices.

“What’s your favorite?” he asked, keeping his tone light.

“They’re all good. Tessa does our baking.”

“Your sister works here with you?”

“Yes.” Allie smoothed her hand down her skirt.

“That’s great. How’s she doing?” He hoped this question might transition the conversation to a more personal level.

“Her husband’s business failed a couple years ago. They lost their house and most of the savings.” She spoke in an even tone, but her eyes revealed her concern.

“I’m sorry. That sounds like a tough situation.”

“Matt and Tessa are trying to get back on their feet. That’s why we opened Sweet Something.” Allie’s face flushed, and she bit her lip.

Tyler realized he’d better shift the direction of the conversation. “I like the way you’ve decorated the shop.” He hesitated, glancing around the almost empty room again. “How’s business?”

“We’re doing all right.”

“Really?”

Her bravado melted. She lowered her gaze, frowning slightly. “Actually, the weather has hurt us. There’s not much parking on the street, and the closest public lot is four blocks away. Most people don’t want to hike that far on slushy sidewalks when it’s freezing.” A look of tired resignation filled her face.

“Maybe I can help.”

She cocked her head, looking doubtful. “What do you mean?”

“Please, sit down. Let’s talk.”

She stood a moment more, then finally took the seat on the opposite side of the table.

“I have a new job with an ad agency here in Princeton. Maybe I could do a little promotional work for you. You know, raise your visibility and get some more customers coming through the door.”

Her face flushed. “We’ve already used all our advertising budget for this year.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t charge you. I’d do it on my own time.”

She sat back, shaking her head slightly. “I couldn’t let you do that.”

“Come on, Allie.” He leaned toward her, his excitement growing. “I could create a logo, a neon sign, and a menu. I could check out your local advertising options and see what’s available. It won’t cost you a penny, I promise.” Confidence flowed through him. With his help, her business could flourish no matter what the weather sent her way.

Suspicion clouded her eyes. “Why would you do that for me?”

A painful realization twisted through him. She didn’t trust him or his motives. Why should she? She only knew him as the man he’d been six years ago, when he’d left town with no explanation and broken every promise he’d made to her.

“I just want to help you.” He pulled in a ragged breath, struggling to remember the apology he’d had so carefully crafted back at his office. But it evaporated like a frosty breath on a winter day.

She stared at him, her expression unreadable, as though she’d constructed a wall around herself.

“Look, I know I messed up before, and you have no reason to trust me. But honestly, all I want to do is make up for what happened. We had something special, Allie. I’m sorry I let you go.”

Her deep blue eyes flashed a warning, and her mouth firmed into a straight line. She rose from her chair and turned away.

Tyler stood. “Allie, wait. That’s not what I wanted to say.”

She spun around, and her piercing gaze nailed him to the spot. “I don’t want your help with my business, and I’m not interested in discussing the past.”

Regret swamped him. If he could only go back and change his foolish choices. But that was impossible. He'd already reaped a harvest of pain from those mistakes, but it looked like harvest season wasn't over yet.

He turned to go, but something made him look over his shoulder. Allie stood by the table watching him, sorrow clouding her eyes. That gave him the courage to turn around and walk back toward her. "If you change your mind, I'd still like to help you get the word out about Sweet Something." He took his business card from his pocket and held it out to her.

A spark of some indefinable emotion flickered in her eyes. She reached out and accepted his card.

Chapter Two

Allison wiped the stainless-steel counter while visions of yesterday's confrontation with Tyler clouded her mind. The warmth of the teashop kitchen and slow pace of the afternoon lulled her into a dreamy fog.

Or had the air suddenly become strangely hazy?

She stopped to sniff, then spun toward the oven. Little blue-gray curls of smoke leaked out around the edges of the oven door. She gasped and lunged for a heavy-quilted oven mitt.

Tessa rushed in from the tearoom. "Something's burning!"

"I know!"

"Hurry, we don't want the smoke alarms to go off again." Tessa flipped on the overhead fan and unlocked the back window.

Allison jerked open the oven door. Clouds of smoke puffed into the room. Coughing, she grabbed the cookie sheet of scorched scones and crossed to the open window. In one swift motion, she flipped the cookie sheet and dumped the smoking triangles onto the brick walk out back. They looked more like smoking volcanic rocks than anything edible. Even the poor birds wouldn't be interested in the mess.

Allison moaned and tossed the cookie sheet into the deep stainless-steel sink. "I can't believe I did that twice in one day!"

"Me neither." Tessa flapped a blue-striped kitchen towel back and forth.

"I'm sorry. I should have set the timer."

The air began to clear, and Tessa hung the towel on a hook by the sink. "You've been distracted all morning. Does this have anything to do with Tyler stopping in yesterday?"

Allison scowled. "No!"

Tessa crossed her arms. "Come on. Admit it. You were thinking about him instead of keeping your eyes on those scones."

Allison pushed her hair back from her warm face. "Okay, I was. But you'd be distracted, too, you'd heard what he said. I can't believe he thinks he can just walk back in here and have a friendly conversation after six years with no communication."

"You never heard from him that whole time?"

"No!" She faltered, remembering that wasn't exactly true. "Well, I did see him on Christmas Eve a year ago." She fiddled with her watch clasp. Confusion swirled through her as she recalled his tender look and halting apology. She forced those thoughts away and focused on the painful end of the relationship six years ago. He'd made her believe he loved her. They'd even talked about getting married, but then he'd left without even saying good-bye. She still didn't know why. She sighed and rubbed her stinging eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Tessa laid her hand on Allison’s arm. “I didn’t know it still bothered you.”

“Neither did I, until yesterday.” She steeled herself against those painful memories. “He has a lot of nerve, waltzing in here and offering to do promotional work for Sweet Something.”

“Wait a minute. He wants to do promotional work for us?”

“Yes. Can you believe it?” Allison tossed the oven mitt onto the counter. “He works for some agency and thought we might like some free advertising advice.”

Tessa gasped. “He wouldn’t charge us?” She grabbed Allison’s arm. “Please tell me you said yes.”

“Nooo!” Allison vigorously shook her head.

“And why not?”

“You remember what happened! Not only did he walk out on me, he dropped out of grad school, got arrested for DUI, and our friends said he was just a . . . player.”

“A player?” Tessa leaned back against the counter.

“You know—a guy who goes from girl to girl, playing with their emotions, just looking for . . .” She lifted her eyebrows and sent her sister a meaningful glance.

“Oh . . . well, that was a long time ago.”

Allison touched her heart. “It doesn’t feel like it to me.”

Tessa frowned, but only for a moment. Then her face brightened. “That was personal. This is strictly business.” She crossed her arms. “I hope you weren’t rude to him. What did you say?”

“Well . . . I think I said I didn’t want his help.” She’d practically kicked him out of the shop, and his calm response totally stumped her. Where was the cocky, self-assured man who always had a quick comeback or persuasive excuse for everything?

Tessa groaned. “Allison, how could you? Call him right now, and tell him you’ve changed your mind.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Oh, yes you can. We need his help. And if you’re worried about things getting uncomfortable, just insist on keeping it strictly business.”

Conflicting thoughts tumbled through Allie’s mind. Spending time with Tyler would be awkward. But wasn’t keeping her business afloat worth dealing with a little emotional upheaval? Certainly she could set aside her personal feelings and deal with him on a professional level. After all, she was an experienced businesswoman now.

She looked up at Tessa. “You’re right. I can do this.” She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out his business card.

Tessa leaned closer. She read it and sucked in a quick breath. “He works for Kent & Sheldon?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“That’s one of the most prestigious ad agencies in Princeton. I heard the CEO is a Christian. He gives a lot to charity, and his agency only works with companies who are ethical.”

Allison studied the card. Why would Tyler choose to work for a company like Kent & Sheldon?

Tyler raised the collar of his navy wool overcoat and tucked his small portfolio under his arm. He hopped a slushy puddle and crossed Nassau Street with the WALK signal. A bone-chilling breeze whistled around the edge of his collar and cuffs, but the sun had come out. The sidewalks were dry, making it a little less intimidating to walk around town.

The last forty-eight hours had been a mad dash of creativity as he'd followed up on Allie's surprise phone call. With permission from Ronald Sheldon, he'd taken time off to research teasheer and come up with several creative ideas for Sweet Something.

He smiled, remembering Allie's comments. "I'm sorry I was so quick to dismiss your offer. I've talked it over with Tessa, and we'd appreciate any advertising advice you could give us."

In a businesslike tone, she reminded him that their budget might not allow them to implement his ideas right away, but she'd like to see what he had in mind. He assured her he could come up with several options for free or low-cost advertising, and he'd do the graphic design at no charge.

"Let me work on this for a couple of days," he told her. "I'll get back to you. Shall I call you home?"

"Call me at the shop," she said quickly. "I appreciate your help, but this is strictly business. I'm not interested in anything else."

That had deflated him a little, but his goals were to help Allie's business become successful and try to make up for the past. Anything else between them was up to the Lord. He didn't intend to push or manipulate the situation, no matter how strongly the old attraction pulled him. Pure motives. Pure actions. That had to be his focus now.

Tyler slowed as he passed Princeton Interiors, the shop next door to Sweet Something. Warm light glowed on a dazzling array of expensive antique furniture, chandeliers, and unique home decor. One glance at the busy shop, and he could tell the owner did a brisk business.

He continued on and pulled open the door of Sweet Something. As he stepped inside, he looked past the gift shop into the tearoom. Customers filled more than half the tables. Tyler smiled. That ought to raise Allie's spirits and give her business a boost.

Allie hurried down the steps, her gaze fixed on the group of three middle-aged women who had come in before him. He stepped back and watched her welcome and seat the women at a round table in the center of the room.

Today Allie wore a royal blue blouse, the same color as her eyes, and a dark print skirt with swirls of sable brown, olive green, and deep blue. A white apron edged with lace topped her outfit.

He looked for other servers, but saw only one young woman weaving between the tables, carrying a tray of dirty dishes toward the back of the shop. Two other tables nearby still needed to be cleared.

He stepped into Allie's line of vision. When their gazes connected, her smile faltered for a moment but then returned. She nodded and walked toward him.

He smiled. "Looks like business is improving."

"Yes, this is the best day we've had in quite a while." Her cheeks flushed a pretty pink, and she sent him a cautious glance. "I know I asked you to come at three thirty, but I don't think I can meet

with you today. Tessa had to leave early to take her daughter to the orthodontist, and two of my servers called in sick.”

“Sounds like you’re in a bind.”

“Kayla and I will be tired by six, but we’ll make it.” She glanced at the clock and pulled in a sharp breath. “I have a group of ten from the Princeton Historical Society coming at four, and haven’t rearranged the tables in the other room.” The bell jingled, and two young college-age girls in faded jeans, heavy jackets, and knit hats came in the door.

Allie hesitated, looking torn. “I’m sorry. I have to take care of them.” She excused herself and seated the girls. The other server hurried past with a tray of three small teapots, cups, and saucers.

Tyler surveyed the scene a moment longer and made his decision. Slipping off his coat, he followed Allie across the room. “Where can I stash this?”

She turned to him, questions in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I really can’t meet with you today.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going to help you.”

“What?” Her blue eyes widened.

“I’ve never actually served tea before, but I can rearrange tables, seat people, or do whatever else you need.”

She stared at him as though she couldn’t quite believe he was serious.

“Allie, you’re shorthanded, and I have the rest of the afternoon off. This sounds like the perfect solution.”

“But you can’t do that,” she sputtered. “You’re a . . . professional, not a waiter.”

“True, but I’m also a friend who wants to see your business succeed.”

Her expression softened. “You’re serious?”

“Sure. Where do I get one of those aprons?” He gestured toward the lacey one she wore.

She laughed, and it was a beautiful sound, almost like the tinkling of delicate wind chimes. “All right. You’re hired. Come with me, and I’ll show you where you can hang your coat.” She led the way into the kitchen.

A few minutes later he had taken off his suit jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and tied a more masculine version of Allie’s apron around his waist. She led the way to a side room and quickly mapped out the new table arrangement. Then she laid out one place setting on a side table as an example and showed him where the dishes were kept.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She smiled at him over her shoulder, then returned to the tearoom and left him to his work.

Kayla, Allie’s only other server, swept in and dropped off a pile of fresh table linens. The young blond didn’t look more than eighteen. She hung around and asked him several questions. He gave brief answers as he moved tables and covered them with tablecloths. She finally turned to leave the room, sending him a seductive smile. He turned away from her obvious invitation, thankful those old temptations didn’t have as much pull as they used to. A few years ago it might have been more of a struggle, but he was committed to a new path now.

Setting the table took a little longer than he’d expected. He finally stood back and surveyed the

work with a satisfied smile.

Allie walked in carrying two small teapots holding arrangements of fresh flowers. She stepped up beside him, her gaze searching the table. “This looks perfect.” She set the flowers on the table and beamed him a dazzling smile. “Thank you, Tyler.”

He pulled in a deep breath and felt like he could walk a mile in the cold with the memory of that smile to warm him. “What’s next?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do anything else. This was a huge help.”

“Hey, I’m not leaving now. I signed on for the whole afternoon.” He straightened a knife and spoon at one place setting. “When this group shows up, you’re going to have your hands full. I can greet and seat your other customers. And if that doesn’t keep me busy, I can clear tables.”

Allie protested, but he insisted. Soon he was doing double duty as host and busboy, while Allie and Kayla took orders and delivered food and drinks. The afternoon passed swiftly, and before he knew it, the clock by the front door struck six, and Allie flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED.

With a relieved sigh, she smiled and gestured toward the closest table. “Why don’t we sit down and take a look at your designs?”

He reached to untie his apron. “I’m sorry. I’d love to show them to you, but I’m supposed to meet a client at the Nassau Inn for dinner.” He glanced at his watch. He needed to hurry or he’d be late.

She bit her lip a moment, then lifted her gaze to meet his. “Are you busy after that?”

He could hardly hold back his smile. “No. I don’t have anything else planned tonight.”

Allie took a business card from the basket and wrote something on the back. “I live just a few blocks from Nassau Inn. Here’s the address. Could you stop by after dinner?” Her hand trembled slightly as she passed him the card.

Suddenly, he realized how much it had cost her to give him the invitation. He smiled and nodded. “This dinner won’t take long.” He’d make sure it didn’t.

“All right. I’ll see you later then.” She sent him a tentative smile.

His hopes soared.

Chapter Three

Allison hurried up the steps and unlocked her front door. Her Persian cat, Miss Priss, jumped down from the back of the couch to greet her.

“Hello, sweetie.” She gave Miss Priss a quick pat on the head and kissed her cold nose; then she hurried into the bathroom to brush her hair upside down, wash her face, and dab on some makeup. She changed twice before she finally settled on dark brown slacks, a white turtleneck, and a dark brown sweater with a snowflake pattern across the front.

Glancing in the mirror, Allison plastered on a smile and tried to think positive. But those last fifteen pounds she always intended to lose remained firmly attached in all the wrong places. She tugged at the bottom edge of her sweater, wishing it were a little longer. Why hadn’t she kept up her exercise routine this winter, or at least said no to all those desserts Tessa asked her to try?

Blowing out a resigned sigh, she turned and walked away from the mirror. It didn’t matter. There was not a date. They were simply going to look over his designs and discuss promotional ideas for Sweet Something.

R-i-i-ight. She rolled her eyes and knew she hadn’t even fooled herself. She hurried into the kitchen and fixed a pot of coffee.

The doorbell rang. Her heart jumped. She hurried across the living room but then slowed and pulled in a deep breath. *Lord, help me calm down and not act like a complete idiot.* They were going to discuss business and that’s all. Relaxing a little, she pulled open the front door and greeted Tyler.

He smiled, looking as handsome as ever, his face flushed from the cold and his brown eyes glowing. A few snowflakes melted in his light brown hair and dusted the shoulders of his navy blue coat. She invited him in. He took off his coat, suit jacket, and scarf, and she hung them in the closet.

“This is very nice.” He looked around her living room with an appreciative glance. Tyler had always noticed color, texture, and style. She guessed it was part of his artistic nature. Allison liked that about him. He understood her need to use her creativity and be surrounded by beauty.

“How about some coffee?” she offered. “I just made a pot. Or I have tea or cocoa.”

“Coffee sounds great. Thanks. It’s freezing outside.” He rubbed his hands together and followed her into the kitchen. He slowed and slipped his hands into his pockets as he studied the painting on the wall near her kitchen table.

The painting featured a cozy living room setting, with two red wingback chairs pulled up by a stone fireplace where a welcoming fire glowed. A round table set for dessert stood between the chairs. A sleepy gray cat sat curled up in one of the chairs, and an open Bible lay on the footstool by the other.

He leaned closer, looking as though he wanted to take in every detail of the painting. “This is an original, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” She pulled two mugs from the cabinet.

“Who’s the artist?”

Allison looked up and met Tyler’s gaze. “I am.”

“I thought so.” He smiled at her for a brief moment then turned back to the painting. “Why not your signature?”

“It’s there, but when I had it framed, the mat covered it.” She filled the mugs with steaming coffee and carried them over to the kitchen table.

He spun and looked at her with a glint of excitement in his eyes. “Do you have other paintings?”

She nodded, wondering why he was so interested. “I have two upstairs in my bedroom and probably a dozen or so stored in the hall closet.”

He sent her a baffled look. “In the closet?”

“Yes. It’s too expensive to have them all framed.”

“You know, there’s a huge market for paintings like this. I saw several artists advertising their limited-edition prints when I scanned some home-decorating magazines, looking for logo ideas for Sweet Something. None of those paintings were as good as yours. You should have prints made.”

A warm glow spread through her. Tyler was also an artist, making his compliment even more meaningful. They’d met in an art class in college. He had chosen to focus on graphic design and advertising, while she had decided on fine art and teaching, but their love of art had been a common thread woven through their two-year relationship.

She glanced at her painting, considering his idea. “That would probably take a big investment in time and money, and I need to focus on the shop right now.” She set the mugs on the table and offered him sugar and cream.

“Why don’t I look into it for you?” Tyler stirred a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. “It might not cost as much as you think.” She started to shake her head, but the hopeful look in his eyes stopped her. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Great!” His smile spread wider. “I can see it now—original paintings and prints by Allison Bennett hanging in galleries all across the country. You’ll become famous, and before we know it that’ll draw huge crowds to your teashop. That’s probably the best promotional idea we could ever come up with.”

She laughed. “Tyler, you always were a dreamer.”

He took a sip and gazed at her over the rim of his mug. “I’ve always known you had a special gift.” He nodded toward her artwork. “That painting proves it. It draws you in, makes you feel like you could step right into that room.” He focused on the cozy scene. “You’ve invited a good friend over for the evening. You light the fire, put on the coffee, slice the pie, and get out your Bible so you can sit down and talk about what you’ve been learning.”

She sent him a curious glance. “That’s exactly what I had in mind.” Most people who’d looked at the painting didn’t even realize the open book on the footstool was a Bible. But Tyler had.

He nodded, looking pleased, and took another sip of coffee. “So, are you ready to take a look at my designs for Sweet Something?”

She agreed, picked up her cup, and led the way to the living room.

Tyler opened his portfolio and spread out his designs on the coffee table, then took a seat beside her on the couch. “I worked with several different concepts, but these three are the strongest. Of course we can always combine ideas and change things around.”

Allison was suddenly very conscious of Tyler’s nearness. His shoulder brushed against hers as he reached to pick up the first design, and the warm spicy scent of his aftershave tickled her nose. She clasped her hands and forced herself to focus.

Tyler explained how he came up with the logos. Then he showed her each one on menus, business cards, a new outdoor sign, a newspaper ad, even gift certificates and discount coupons. “So what do you think? Which do you like best?” Confidence and expectation glowed in his eyes. He seemed to have no doubt she’d like his work.

“They’re all beautiful. I’m not sure how to choose one.”

“Go with your feelings. Which one stands out to you?”

“Well . . . I guess I’d say this one.” She pointed to the logo featuring a delicate teacup and a soft pink rose in full bloom. The swirling green type and soft pastel colors in the rose and cup looked sophisticated yet fresh and inviting—just the image she wanted to project.

“That’s actually my favorite, too.” He turned to her and smiled. His expression softened, and tenderness filled his eyes as his gaze traveled over her face and hair.

Allison felt certain he wasn’t thinking about logo designs anymore. Her heartbeat sped up, and she held her breath, waiting to hear what he would say next.

The doorbell rang. Allison jumped as if someone had poked her with a sharp stick. “Sorry. Excuse me a minute. I’ll see who that is.” She crossed the living room, pulled open the door, and stared in stunned silence.

“Hello, Allison.” Peter Hillinger leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

How could she have forgotten she had a dinner date with Peter? Her mind whirled back to the day she had received the anonymous check. Right after Tyler had walked out the door of her shop, Peter had come in. When he’d invited her out to dinner, she’d been so flustered she’d said yes without thinking it through or writing it down.

“May I come in?”

“Yes, of course . . . I’m sorry.” She stepped back and darted a glance at Tyler. He stood and looked Peter over warily.

A slight frown creased Peter’s high forehead when he saw Tyler. He sent Allison a questioning glance.

She forced a tight smile. “Peter, this is Tyler Lawrence. He’s . . . an old friend, and he’s offering to do some promotional work for the teashop.” She turned to Tyler, her mind spinning as she tried to come up with an explanation. “This is Peter Hillinger. He owns Princeton Interiors, the shop next door to ours.”

The two men shook hands, a challenge obvious in both their eyes.

Peter turned back to Allison. “Our dinner reservations are for eight o’clock, but I think they’ll hold them for a few minutes if you’d like to change.”

She glanced down at her outfit. “Oh . . . yes, I guess I should.” She turned to Tyler, wishing she could explain. “I’m sorry. It looks like we’ll have to finish this another time.”

“No problem. I’ll call you.” He smiled, but disappointment clouded his eyes. At least she hoped it was disappointment and not irritation because she’d cut their evening short.

* * * *

Tyler watched Allie walk down the hall and slip into the first room on the right. Regret burned in his throat. There would be no more opportunity to talk to her tonight.

He felt Peter’s haughty glare even before he turned to face him. Peter wore an expensive-looking black wool overcoat, white silk scarf, and leather gloves. Tyler had spent less than two minutes with the man, but that was long enough to know he didn’t like him. His puffed-up attitude was bad enough, but the way he’d kissed Allie and walked into her house like he owned it, bothered him even more.

“So you’re an old friend of Allison’s?” Peter pulled off his gloves.

“Yes, we’ve known each other since college.”

“That’s funny.” Peter sent him a slight smile. “I don’t remember her ever mentioning you.”

Those words cut deeply, and it took him a moment to recover. “Allie and I lost touch for a few years, but I’m back in Princeton now.”

Peter glanced at the designs on the table. He lifted his brows for a brief moment, looking impressed, then glanced back at Tyler. “Interesting. But I’m not sure Allison needs any of this.”

“I suppose that’s up to her, isn’t it?” Tyler gathered up his artwork, slid them back into his portfolio, and closed the flap.

“I appreciate your wanting to help Allison with her business, but I hope that’s all you have on your mind.”

Tyler gripped the handles of the portfolio, wishing he could knock the pompous expression off Peter’s face. A verse he had memorized flew to the front of his thoughts. *A foolish man gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.* He walked away from Peter and grabbed his jacket and coat from the closet.

Peter followed as though he were the host and intended to show Tyler out the door. “Allison has been through a lot over the past year, helping her sister through everything that’s happened, and she had a rather difficult time getting her business up and running. I’ve been there for her every step of the way.” He narrowed his steel gray eyes, looking as though he wanted to make sure Tyler understood the message behind his words. “We’ve grown very close. I wouldn’t want anyone to hurt her.” Tyler squared his shoulders and locked gazes with Peter. “Neither would I.” He turned and walked out the door.

* * * *

“You invited him over to your house?” Tessa turned from brushing crumbs off one of the tearoom tables and stared at Allison.

“Well, he wanted to show me his design ideas.” Allison straightened the stack of menus, trying to ignore the disapproval in her sister’s eyes.

“Right, I’m sure he had all kinds of *designs* he wanted to show you.”

“Tessa, nothing happened! We had coffee and looked at his promotional plans for about twenty minutes. Then Peter came to pick me up for dinner.” That thought left her feeling like a deflated balloon. After she’d changed and walked back into the living room, Peter was the only one waiting for her.

“So how was your date with Peter?”

“We went to Lambertville Station. The food was good. There was a jazz trio playing.”

“So things are progressing?”

“I suppose. Peter’s just so . . .” She squinted, trying to come up with the right word.

“Mature, confident, wealthy?”

Allison rolled her eyes. “Too bad you’re already married. You could date him!”

“We’re not talking about me. Were talking about you and Peter.”

“I know.” Confusion swirled through Allison. “I like him. He’s thoughtful and interesting, but there’s something missing. It’s like I have to try too hard with him. And I just don’t feel a connection with him like I do with Ty. . .” She swallowed the rest of her sentence and turned to push in the chair at the nearest table.

“You’re not thinking about dating Tyler again, are you?” Tessa tapped her nails on the oak desk they used as a hostess podium.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good. Remember what happened last time. He left town and broke your heart.”

She winced at her sister’s words. “I know. You don’t have to remind me.”

“Sorry.” Tessa softened her tone. “I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let Tyler talk me into anything more than a business relationship.” But as Allison turned and glanced across the quiet teashop, she remembered how Tyler had spent the previous afternoon greeting customers and clearing tables for her. He seemed different somehow—still charming and persuasive as ever, but there was a softening, a gentleness about him that was new . . . and very attractive.

“Allison?” Tessa tapped her on the shoulder. “Did you hear what I said?”

“No. Sorry, guess I was daydreaming.”

“About Peter or Tyler?”

“Tessa, stop! I am not interested in Tyler.” Allison huffed and strode toward the kitchen.

* * * *

Four days was long enough to wait. Allison slipped Tyler’s business card from her apron pocket and picked up the phone. She glanced at the clock by the front door, hoping she could make the call and connect with Tyler before her sister returned from the bank. The shop didn’t open until eleven, so she didn’t need to worry about taking care of customers for at least another hour. She quickly punched in his number and whispered a prayer. On the third ring the receptionist answered. Allison willed her

voice to sound confident as she asked to speak to Tyler.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lawrence is out of the office this morning. May I take a message?”

“Yes. Mr. Lawrence showed me some designs last Tuesday, but our meeting was interrupted. I’ve been expecting him to call so we could set up another meeting.”

“I’m sure he meant to get back to you, but he’s been sick for a few days.”

Her heart jerked. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“I really couldn’t say, but if you’d like to leave your name and number, I’ll let him know you called.”

Allison left the information and hung up the phone. She glanced out the teashop’s front window. Gray storm clouds gathered, and wind whistled in the eaves. Where was the promise of spring? She shivered and rubbed her arms.

Over the past week her financial troubles had become increasingly clear. The anonymous check had been a wonderful gift that carried them through early March, but unless she could bring in more customers soon, her business was doomed.

She closed her eyes. *Father, I can’t live off my savings forever, and You know how much Tessa and Matt need the extra income. We have to start making a profit. I need Tyler’s help for that, but I’m afraid I’ve botched things with him, and now he’s sick.*

Little vines of worry wrapped around her heart as she considered the possibilities. How sick was he? Had he seen a doctor? Was anyone checking on him?

Chapter Four

Allison slipped the heavy basket over her arm and rang Tyler's doorbell. Her heartbeat surged in her ears as she strained to hear any sounds inside his apartment.

Nothing. She bit her lip and rang again. This plan had to work. Her only hope was to make amends with Tyler and convince him to follow through on his offer to do free promotional work for Sweet Something.

Finally, she heard a soft shuffle and the door swung open. Tyler looked out at her through red-rimmed, watery eyes. His baggy gray sweatpants and a wrinkled navy blue T-shirt made it look as though he had just crawled out of bed. He blinked at her. "Allie, what are you doing here?"

Heat rose in her cheeks, and she forced a smile. "I called your office, and they told me you were sick, so I thought I'd bring you some lunch."

"Wow, that's nice. Would you like to come in?" He stepped back and glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry, things are kind of a mess."

"You don't have to apologize. I can tell you've been sick."

He ran a hand over his bristly chin and sent her a sheepish grin. "I probably look worse than my apartment."

He looked adorable, but she quickly squelched that thought. "You look like a guy who needs to sit down and put his feet up." She pointed toward the dark brown leather couch. "Go on." Tyler obediently headed for the couch. He tossed his pillow to one end and straightened the blanket and sheet before he sat down. "So what's in the basket?"

She set it on the coffee table next to a worn, brown leather Bible. That surprised her. Of course she knew Tyler had prayed and asked Christ into his heart when he was twenty-one. She'd been with him that night. But everything she'd heard about him since he'd left Princeton made her doubt his sincerity. If he was serious about his faith, how could he have been arrested for drinking and driving? And worse yet, how could he have a reputation for being involved in a string of broken relationships? Her stomach clenched at that thought.

Focusing on her basket, she folded back the blue tea towel. "I brought you some homemade chicken-noodle soup, blueberry muffins, applesauce, bottled water, tissues, and some cold and flu medication." She felt a little embarrassed by the overflowing collection she'd put together for him. But she needed him to get well as soon as possible.

He sent her an appreciative smile. "I haven't been able to eat much for a few days, but some of this sounds great."

"Good. Why don't I warm some up for you?"

He glanced toward the kitchen. "I haven't cleaned up in there for a couple days."

"It's okay. You lie down and rest, and I'll be back with some hot soup in a couple minutes."

"Okay, thanks."

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