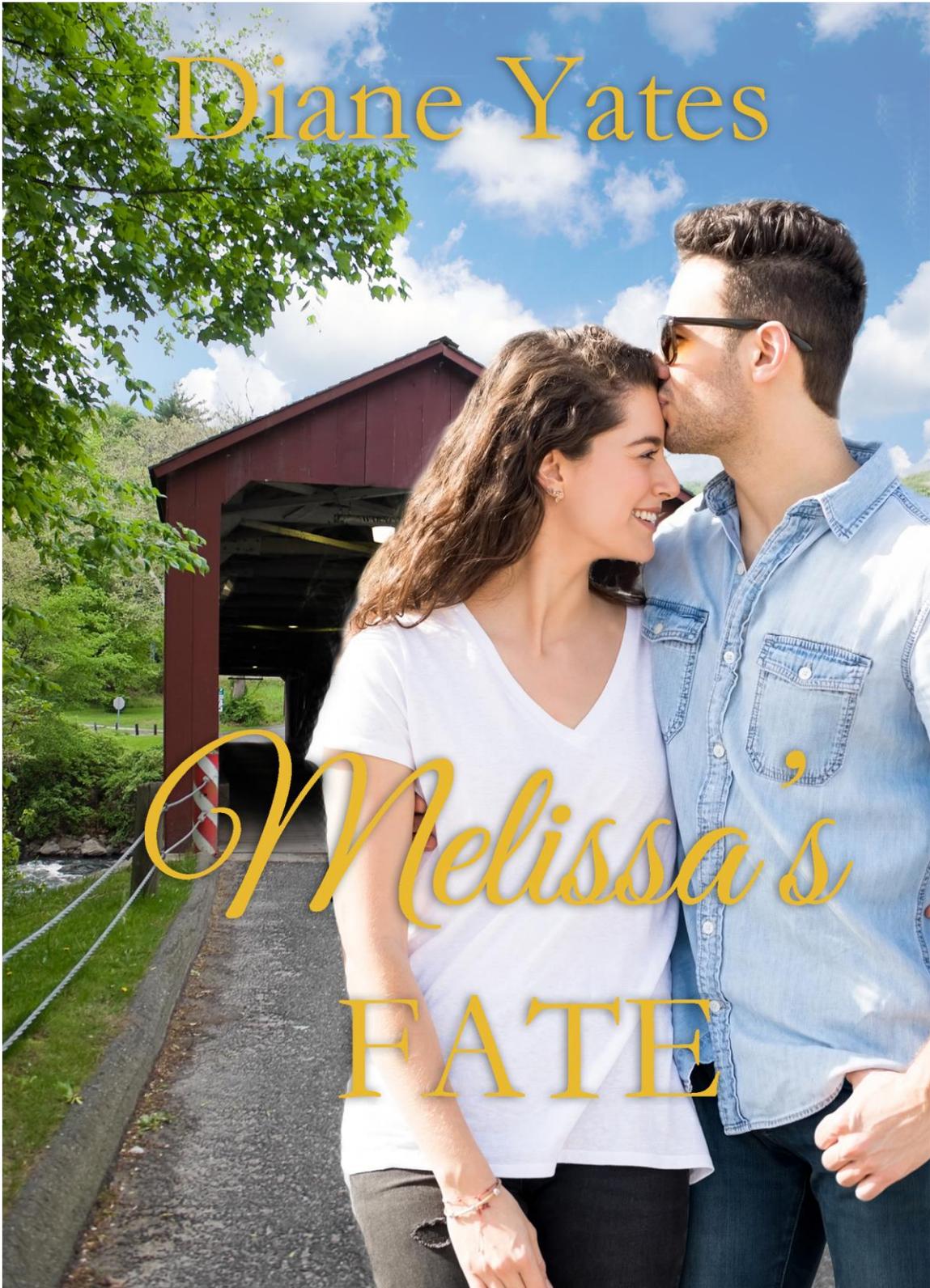


Diane Yates

Melissa's
FATE



Melissa's Fate

By Diane Yates

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Fiction and Literature: Inspirational
Christian Romantic Suspense
Christian Women's Fiction

CHAPTER ONE

February 1992

Beth inhaled and puffed, but nothing she'd ever imagined compared to the pain racking her body. She tried to concentrate on the black-rimmed clock, the kind that hung in classrooms and public places.

"Oh, oh," she groaned as waves of gripping pain started again. She focused on the second hand revolving around the clock's face. Moans escaped along with the puffs of air she expelled from her lungs. Then came a release, a respite for a short while.

The chair beside the bed in the cold, sterile room was empty. To Beth's right, white towels hung on the wall next to a washbasin with cabinets. Behind her to the left, the room's only window rattled with the winter wind, which had brought in the year's heaviest snowfall.

The door swung open, and a plump middle-aged nurse waddled in for her timely rounds. "This'll just take a minute, honey." She plunged the thermometer into Beth's mouth and wrapped the cuff around her arm.

Bringing her firstborn child into the world alone wasn't exactly the way Beth had imagined. She'd always pictured family and friends close by and a loving, devoted husband at her side. Instead, she'd spent her entire pregnancy in hiding. No one knew where she was and she had even changed her last name.

"How are you doing, Miss Reynolds?" The nurse fluffed the pillow under Beth's head.

"How far apart are your contractions now?" Before Beth could answer, her abdomen started hardening, and the pain took over.

The nurse placed her hand over Beth's. "Just relax and breathe. You're doing great."

~

Twenty-Five Years Later

"Ms. Brown?" The young lady snapped her fingers in front of Beth's face. "I said, I'll be touching up your makeup."

Beth nodded.

"Are you okay? You seemed a million miles away."

"I'm fine," Beth lied. Her hands shook uncontrollably while the make-up artist blotted her face with a soft pad and touched up her lipstick. Beth knew this interview would be difficult. It was live television and she had to pull it together. If telling her story could help one person, well... *wasn't that the reason she wrote the book?* Why else would she share the awful happenings of twenty-five years ago?

The studio looked nothing like she expected. The cameras, stools, ladders, and other equipment made off-stage look like a construction zone. Beth sat in one of two blue chairs, separated by a small round table. A Christmas tree was situated behind the chairs and in front of a window. Outside, a steady stream of shoppers, in coats, boots, and scarves, passed by carrying packages. Occasionally, some would stop and peer inside, trying to catch sight of a celebrity. Beth could feel the eyes of the audience seated in front of the stage watching her and the production team's movements.

"Live in three, two," the bright lights turned on.

“Welcome to Another Day in New York. I’m Joan Ayers, and today’s guest is the author of the New York Times bestselling novel, “Melissa’s Fate; The Untold Story.” Give a warm welcome to Beth Brown.” Already on their feet, the audience erupted into applause.

Camera two panned to Beth. She forced a smile, her heart pounding as Joan held up her book.

“Beth, you’re a hard lady to schedule an interview with, so it’s an honor to have you here today.”

“Thank you, Joan. It’s great to be here.” Those were the words she said, but it wasn’t how she felt. Beth dreaded talking about her novel and often wished it hadn’t been published. She had only written her story in hopes of helping others.

“So, your first book has become quite a sensation! Congratulations.”

Beth laughed nervously. “Thank you.”

“How long did it take you to write?”

Beth could easily talk about the creative process, so she relaxed some. “Writing it didn’t take long, less than a year. Publishing it was another story.”

“Tell us about that.”

“Well, when I finished it twenty years ago…”

“Wait,” Joan interrupted. “It took you twenty years to get it published?”

Beth nodded and laughed. “Well, sort of. I submitted it to several agents and received rejection after rejection. I thought, hum, my writing must not be very good.” The audience laughed. “Then, I had the opportunity to meet with an agent from the William Morris Agency.”

Shifting forward, Joan explained, “Wow! The William Morris Agency—that’s a big deal.” Joan crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair again as Beth continued.

“I interviewed with him all those years ago, and even though I couldn’t complete a coherent sentence, he asked for the entire manuscript, which I sent.” Beginning to loosen up, Beth tucked wayward strands of her black hair behind her right ear. “Everything was done by snail mail back then. While I waited for his response, I received several rejection letters and became totally discouraged. I decided enough was enough. So, when I finally received an envelope from the William Morris Agency containing my manuscript,” Beth shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “I assumed it was another rejection. I tossed it in a box, shoved it to the back of my closet, and gave up on ever having it published.”

“So how did it get published?”

“Well, Mom and I were looking for some pictures last year, and she found the box. I took it from her, explaining that it was just one of many rejections. And then, I opened it up.”

Beth, in her Vera Wang jeans and silky cream blouse, totally relaxed as she turned to include the audience. “The agent had attached notes all the way through. Compliments, like, ‘good plot twist,’ ‘really like the ending,’ ‘probably not a blockbuster, but a great story.’”

Again, the audience laughed.

“He only wanted me to change one thing and return it to him.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Joan arched her eyebrows as she touched Beth’s sleeve. “Let me see if I have this straight. You had never seen his notes because you never opened the envelope. You just threw it in your closet, where it stayed for twenty years?”

“As embarrassing as it is to admit, yes.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Well...” Beth smiled. “I did what any self-respecting author would do, I made the changes and returned it, almost two decades later, with a note saying, ‘Sorry, it took so long to send this back to you!’ I’m sure he and the other agents had a few laughs at my expense.”

Joan turned to the camera. “I bet they’re not laughing now. Don’t go away, folks. We’ll be right back after the break with Beth Brown and learn more about her new book, “Melissa’s Fate; The Untold Story.”

During the break, Beth gripped the armrests of her chair.

Joan covered Beth’s hand with her own. “You’re doing great. Just relax and breathe.”

Transfixed, Beth could only stare back at Joan. Where had she heard those words before?

Relax and breathe. You’re doing great. Oh yes, now Beth remembered, and thinking about it, she found herself reliving that time, twenty-five years ago...

CHAPTER TWO

Beth – February 27, 1992

Nurse Martha patted Beth's hand. "Just relax and breathe. You're doing great." Beth grabbed Martha's sleeve. "I want to push. Please let me push. I need..." She fell back on her pillow, stopping short of asking for pain meds. She'd promised herself to go through labor without anything. She'd read that the use of drugs wasn't good for the unborn child and could cause any number of complications, even birth defects. Her baby must have the best she could give it under the circumstances. As the pain began to ease, she breathed more normally.

"There now." Martha blotted Beth's forehead with a cloth. "How long since the last contraction?"

Beth looked at the clock. "It's been about two minutes."

"I think it's time to have the doctor check you. I'll be right back."

Beth wished her mother could be sitting in that chair by her bed, or perhaps, her father. They'd always been there for her. She pictured her mother's sweet face smiling, and she could hear her father's voice saying, "It'll all work out, sweetie." But, it wouldn't work out. Not this time. The loneliness was almost more than she could bear.

At the age of twenty-three, Beth had decided to spend the last seven and a half months in Massachusetts without anyone knowing her whereabouts. She'd considered telling her parents in the beginning but couldn't bear the thought of causing them pain, the shame of knowing their only daughter was to become an unwed mother. They wouldn't condemn her, but she didn't want to disappoint them.

She hated keeping secrets from the two people she loved most. It went against everything she believed, but it would be better this way. Many times, when she was a teenager, her mother had told her to wait until marriage. Beth didn't believe anyone did that anymore but had managed to keep her mother's request until *him*.

If only she hadn't wavered, but the consequences of that one mistake set in motion a complex scheme to reserve the secrecy of her location long enough to allow her to give birth. Somehow, she had convinced her parents she was okay, while missing Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's, holidays which she always spent at home, by telling them she received a promotion at work that required her to help open an affiliate office in California. Beth had placed a quick call to a high school friend living in San Francisco. This friend agreed to receive Beth's letters to her parents. She would then remove the inner envelope and drop it back in the mail, thus giving it a postmark in California.

Beth had promised her mom and dad, that when the office was well established, she'd be returning, but for these past few months, she couldn't return home because of her schedule and the high cost of travel. This seemed to satisfy them but left Beth utterly alone during holidays that had always been precious family time. Maintaining this lie, along with her predicament, and deceiving her parents left her swimming in a sea of regrets.

Beth never once considered abortion and at least here in Massachusetts, far removed from the shame of everyone she knew, her stomach could swell and flutter from the life blossoming inside. Excitement had soothed her heartache when she heard the faint beat of the baby's heart for the first time. Over the months, the budding movement of her womb had grown stronger,

persistently reminding her of the miracle of life. She cherished her unborn child and knowing that she was giving it life sustained her through months of grieving for a love that never existed.

What had she been thinking to allow herself to fall prey to the schemes of the shrewd, deceiving Phillip Drake? Beth cringed when she thought about how willingly she gave her love to him, the very same man that female socialites fought over. She had read many tabloid headlines about *Mr. Drake*, the president of the company where she'd worked, that she knew only too well what kind of a man he really was; the spoiled, wealthy son who took whatever he wanted without responsibility or care. Pain burned from her chest and knotted up on the way to the pit of her stomach.

He'd told her his name was Phil Davis, a mere employee like her, and she never once questioned or recognized him from newspaper photos taken on his yacht, sipping champagne. And why should she? No pictures were hanging on the walls at work, and after all, she'd only worked there for two, going on three months. In the tabloids, he always managed to turn sideways or obscure his face with obstacles, like wine goblets or sunglasses and hats. No, she never suspected him, not until that dreadful day when she saw Victoria Sterling at his side as the two of them climbed into his limo and the driver called him *Mr. Drake*. She hadn't once questioned his true identity until it was much too late, and his seed grew inside her.

Beth had stood in the rain on the sidewalk some twenty feet away, witnessing him with Victoria hanging on his arm, both lost in laughter. Beth had grown faint and nauseated as she realized the awful truth. She should've trusted her instincts that first day she met him on the street. And as for her plight, well, she wished now she'd paid more attention to her parents' teachings. The duration of her pregnancy was the longest she'd been away from them.

Being an only child, she grew up in Hartford where her father, Walter Brown, worked for the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company. They didn't have much, but every Sunday morning her family attended church and visited with friends who came over for Sunday dinner. She missed those times, but she missed her mother and father most of all. She smiled, remembering their encouragement and support, like when she lost the spelling bee championship to Ronnie Lyle in the fourth grade and faced the embarrassment of braces in the seventh. They were proud when she made the National Honor Society and graduated in the top ten of her class.

That was a lifetime ago. Everyone seemed far away, but in reality, Beth was only a few hours from home. The hospital was small, but what did she expect from a community the size of Great Barrington? Dr. Duncan, however, followed her pregnancy during the last seven months with compassion and appeared to be updated on all the latest medical procedures. When her feet started swelling, and her blood pressure increased two weeks ago, he ordered her to quit working and begin her maternity leave from the Rising Paper Company. The mundane job at least paid the bills during her exile and provided much needed medical insurance. She had it all figured out; all except how to eliminate her feelings of guilt.

The door to the labor room swung open again, but this time Dr. Duncan entered. He was a young doctor, about six feet, with rich black hair and big brown eyes.

"Beth, I know you may not think so, but you're doing just fine." He pulled back the sheet covering her swollen abdomen. He gently lifted her hospital gown, fixed his stethoscope in his ears, and began listening to her stomach.

She knew he was checking to hear the baby's heartbeat during its laborious journey into her world. "Dr. Duncan..." she began, but he held up his hand, demanding silence.

A frown formed on his face as he vigorously moved the stethoscope from one place to another on her stomach. He suddenly jerked the plugs out of his ears and dashed out of the room.

She heard a commotion in the hall, and both doors to the room flew open. Dr. Duncan and several nurses raced in, pushing a cart.

They all approached her bedside, sheets flying and anything else that inhibited them from that area of her body.

“What is it, Doctor? Is something wrong? What's wrong? Please tell me.” She gripped the bed rail as the next pain commanded her body.

She could no longer control the intense pain as she feared something must be terribly wrong. “Oh, God,” she screamed, “please help me.” One nurse at the head of her bed wiped her forehead with a cool rag.

“Beth, Beth? Look at me.” Dr. Duncan stood beside her. “I can't hear the baby's heartbeat. We're going to hook up this monitor to track its heart rate.”

The pain subsided as she processed those horrific words. She started shaking. “What does that mean?”

“The baby may be in distress,” he placed his hand on her arm. “It's possible that the umbilical cord may be wrapped around its neck or there may be some other difficulty. You bear with us while we check it out, okay? We want to make sure everything's all right.”

She nodded and tried unsuccessfully to quell her fear. *Oh, God, please let my baby be all right*, she prayed silently.

One of the younger nurses asked, “Miss Reynolds, do you have family or someone here with you?”

“No,” she paused and stared at the ceiling, her voice cracking, “there's no one.”

The doctor placed his hand on her shoulder. “We may have to take the baby by Cesarean Section. I thought there might be someone...” His voice trailed off.

Her whole body began to tremble as she shook her head. *No, there wasn't anyone to notify*. Tears rolled down her temples, wetting her hair.

The nurse assisted Dr. Duncan with his gloves. “Beth, I need to examine you and see if I can tell if the umbilical cord is wrapped around the baby's neck.”

Beth nodded, but she felt completely helpless, fearing something terrible was going to happen. She had no way of controlling her body or her baby and had to depend completely upon the people around her.

Beth gasped and then screamed from the awful pain of him probing the birth canal. Another labor pain started. She tried breathing, puffing, and concentrating but ended in muffled screaming as the pain became excruciating.

Dr. Duncan watched the reading on the monitor. “I believe it's the cord. We'd better move fast.”

The medical staff reacted instantly. Different ones bellowed out orders concerning everything from obtaining an anesthesiologist to paging a pediatrician, and after each order was that one word, *stat*. Beth hadn't many occasions to be around medical facilities, but it didn't take long to learn 'stat' meant something had to be done now.

Beth had thought a lot about her unborn child over the past months. She wondered whether her baby was a boy or a girl, praying it would be healthy above all else. What color hair or eyes would it have? What would its first word be? Sometimes she wondered if it would favor her or its father, but thinking about that always hurt. Oh, the pain!

The pains were coming closer together now, each one a little harder than the one before. The nurses wheeled Beth out of the labor room and into the operating room with its big chrome light and steel tables with instruments.

Dr. Duncan spoke from the sink where he scrubbed his hands. “This is Dr. Bradley, Beth. He is going to administer the anesthesia.”

Beth didn't even recognize her voice as she acknowledged him. Her heart pounded, and she could hardly breathe. Giving birth alone for the first time was scary enough, but she'd never prepared for a Cesarean Section. She couldn't stop shaking.

Beth knew her little unborn child was fighting for its life, laboring to reach the outside world; struggling against the strangling, choking of the cord that fed it nourishment. Everything happened rapidly, and none of it was supposed to happen this way.

When the anesthetic began to work, the pain diminished, numbing Beth from the waist down. With the nurses and techs in place, Dr. Duncan led the procedure whose purpose was to save her baby. She would pray and trust.

Instruments clanged as they landed on steel trays, but she felt nothing. As she anxiously waited, she listened to the comments of those working.

“Here we go.”

“I need a clamp.”

“I've got her.”

“Get that.”

Beth listened to everything Dr. Duncan and the others said, searching for any sign that it was going to be okay. And then, finally, amid all the activity...the faintest, tiny cry that sounded like music to her ears.

Dr. Duncan's voice rose above it. “Beth, it's a little girl.”

He handed her baby to the nurse. The infant was all pink with the finest, smooth, brown hair and legs that kicked in protest. She had small arms and ten tiny little fingers. Beth smiled, taking in the sight of her precious newborn, but then her eyes were drawn back to her baby's right arm. Above the hand on the forearm, she saw a large dark birthmark, but it wasn't significant compared to the gift of life she'd been given. She cried, and Beth watched her miniature face wrinkle in protest, as the nurse carried her over to be cleaned.

Without taking her eyes off the little one being bathed and warmed, she asked, “Doctor, is she going to be all right?”

He touched Beth's shoulder and smiled. “She's going to be just fine.”

No one offered for Beth to hold her baby, and she didn't ask, though she ached to as she continued to watch the little bundle of life until her heavy eyelids became impossible to hold open and she sank into the darkness of slumber.

~

Phil – February 27, 1992

The limo stopped in front of Seventeen State Street, a building in the business district of Manhattan, which boasted of a solid glass rounded front overlooking Battery Park, the Bay, and the Statue of Liberty. Phillip stepped out, and the cold, New York winter wind ushered him through the revolving door into the lobby. A red-headed receptionist at the information desk greeted him, “Good morning, Mr. Drake.”

“Good morning, Vera.” He folded his newspaper and walked onto the first of six elevators. The door finally opened to the executive offices on the forty-first floor. Phillip walked through the waiting room with its tables, sofas, and chairs made from African Blackwood and upholstered in plush stone-colored velvet. Exquisite lamps and wall décor completed the look.

With the help of his interior decorator, he'd carefully chosen the suite three years ago, because of its intrinsic beauty.

He continued down the hall, passed the boardroom with its huge conference table and wall-to-wall glass that provided a breathtaking view of the bay. To the left was the office of Larry Webber, the Executive Vice President, but Phil walked straight ahead and through the door that read "Phillip R. Drake, President, Drake and Webber."

"Good morning, Mr. Drake." His secretary rose to get his morning coffee and deliver his messages.

"Hello, Sandra. Has Mr. Stone called?"

"No, sir, I haven't heard from him," she answered over her shoulder while stirring in cream and sugar. He walked into his office, set his briefcase and newspaper down, and removed his coat. Sandra, who'd been his administrative secretary for four years, brought in his coffee.

"See if you can get him on the phone and check with Mr. Webber. See if you can arrange something for the three of us for lunch today."

"Yes, sir. Miss Sterling called and wanted to meet with you tomorrow. You have a three o'clock open. Shall I call her back and confirm?"

"Yes, that's fine."

As she left the room, he started punching keys on his computer. Taking the first drink of his coffee, he started another day.

Phillip, a young man wise beyond his thirty-two years, remained dedicated to the company he had built almost ten years ago. He was no stranger to hard work, yet most everyone assumed he inherited his fortune. He was the youngest of three sons. His father founded Drake Aerospace Industries, but Phil preferred to distance himself from his father as much as possible not only in business but also in everyday life.

Finding it hard to focus on work, he leaned back in his chair and stared out the window. A lone ferry made its way across the bay toward Staten Island. The weather outside blew gray, bleak and cold, not much different than the way he felt. After seven and a half long months he still missed her. He had replayed their weeks together over and over in his mind, trying to figure out what he could have possibly done wrong. He had to face facts. Beth wasn't coming back. Somehow, he must pull himself together and go on.

He sighed, leaned over and pushed the button on his phone. "Sandra?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you please request a new Dictaphone from materials? Mine quit working over the weekend."

"Of course."

"In the meantime, can you come in here with a pad, please?"

"Right away, sir." She entered and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"This is to the Blackmon Detective Agency. Dear Mr. Blackmon. I would like to request that effective immediately you would cease all efforts to locate Miss Elizabeth Brown. Since you have assured me that she is safe, and all avenues of exploration have failed to turn up any information, I believe that further investigation is unwarranted. I thank you for your assistance and trust that I will receive your bill in the near future, etc., etc."

When he turned away from the window, he realized that Sandra had only written a few words on the pad. Her eyes widened, and her mouth gaped. He shrugged his shoulders. "What is it?"

"You know that she's safe? I didn't know you'd heard anything from her."

“Yes... yes. Well, I haven’t.” He turned his attention to things on his desk. He couldn’t look at her. The last thing he wanted to do was confide in his secretary the heartbreaking discovery of the investigative efforts.

“I don’t understand,” Sandra kept probing.

“Well, her parents told neighbors that Beth was working in California. The Blackmon agency has been unsuccessful in finding her, but those same neighbors said she calls home regularly.”

“I can't believe it! I can't believe she hasn't called you or written or anything. And why hasn't the agency been able to find her?” Sandra shook her head.

“Beats the heck out of me. I guess she certainly covered her tracks well. I had them check every accounting firm from here to the west coast. I don't know where she could be. I only know that she's not here... and that's by her choice.” Phil had decided not to search any further.

Phil knew his short, spit-fire secretary always spoke her mind, so he purposefully changed the subject. “Have you been able to reach Mr. Stone yet?” He started looking at a document on his desk.

“Uh, no. His secretary said she’d call as soon as he comes in. Mr. Webber did say that lunch would work fine for him.”

“Good. Good.” He looked up from the paper to find her still there, studying him. “That's all, just put Mr. Stone through as soon as he calls.”

“Yes, sir, of course.”

After she left the room, he opened a drawer to put away some files. Pulling the drawer out a little farther, he looked for the picture frame he’d placed inside, face-down a few days ago. He’d removed it from everyday sight because it no longer reminded him of the beautiful young woman he had fallen in love with, the woman for which he’d searched high and low. Instead, it became a painful reminder that Beth chose not to be a part of his life anymore. She had left and not even bothered to say goodbye.

He walked over to the window and looked down at the street below. In the falling snow, the sidewalk flowed with pedestrians all dressed in heavy coats and footwear to match the dreary season. Across the street was Bea’s Bakery, and as he looked at its bright-yellow painted storefront and decorated window, in his mind, the day transposed itself into that first spring day he met Beth eleven months ago...

The springtime sun warmed the crowded, bustling sidewalks, and occasionally a car horn sounded. Phillip sighed as he weaved his way through the people in a hurry to reach Goldstein Jewelers. He maneuvered around an older gentleman and then cut to the inside to go around a large woman when out from Bea’s Bakery, a young lady carrying a large box stepped right into his path. Phil collided with her, knocking her against the front glass of the bakery and causing the box to fall upside down.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Oh, no, my cake!”

“Sorry.” He bent and retrieved it. “You walked right out in front of me. Hope you’re okay.” He handed her the box and stepped around her, eager to be on his way.

She opened the lid to see the disaster. “Oh, look what you’ve done,” she cried. “It’s ruined!”

Phil stopped, glanced at his watch, and turned. “Let me buy you another one.” He pulled some bills out of his wallet.

He watched her eyes travel from the cake to his expensive Italian leather shoes, up to his fine silk suit and diamond cufflinks. Her face changed from shock to contempt and her eyes blazed.

She furrowed her brows and leaned toward him. “Oh, you think that will take care of it? You think you can simply whip out the cash and your carelessness and crass rudeness is excused.

Well, not everything can be replaced by money.” She glared at him and huffed. “Today's my father's birthday, and he's a diabetic. This was a special cake, and I had to place an order for it a week ago. It took you only two seconds to destroy it!”

She pushed the money away. “Believe it or not, money can't buy everything, Mr. Fancy Shoes and Armani Suit.”

“Mr. Who?” People began to stop and stare. *What was her problem?*

“I don't want your money. Please...just go away.”

When she glanced down at her dress, took one hand and straightened out the disheveled mess he'd made of it, he noticed her for the first time. Judging from her attire, she could've used his money! The dress she wore looked years out of style and her shoes inexpensive and worn. But, then he looked at *her*. She stood about five-foot-five and had soft brown hair, with highlights that glittered in the sun, casually curving under at her shoulders, accentuating her beautiful smooth face. She didn't have on much makeup, but her cheeks possessed a rose tint. Her perfectly shaped eyebrows curved above long and thick lashes. Wow! If you overlooked her clothes, she was a natural beauty—and clearly unattracted to him or his money.

“I really am sorry.” He moved closer and, in soft tones, tried to explain. “I was in a hurry. I feel bad about ruining your father's cake. How can I make it up to you? Perhaps another gift in replacement?”

She looked into his eyes and with a sigh, relaxed her shoulders. “No, it's okay. Don't worry about it.” Her voice had softened, but she turned and started walking away.

“Wait,” he called, but she increased her pace. He started to go after her but remembered his meeting at three, and he still had to go to the jewelers...

The buzzer sounded on the intercom and Phil's mind returned to the present.

“Yes, Sandra?”

“I have Mr. Stone on line two, and I've made reservations at Delmonico's for today at one o'clock.”

“Very good, thank you.” He punched the button and within seconds arranged his all-important business lunch.

Later that same day around four-thirty, Phillip left his office to go by Mergers and Acquisitions on the thirty-fourth floor. This particular floor was open with dozens of working cubicles in the center, buzzing with activity, the hall forming a square outlining the area and separating the outer private offices from the menial working stations in the middle. This was the floor where he'd seen Beth for the second time, and when the elevator door opened, his mind flooded with memories again...

Two weeks had passed since he'd collided with her on the street, and he wasn't sure why, but he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. Maybe he felt guilty about his carelessness. He wished he would see her again. Why hadn't he asked for her name or where she lived or something?

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar young lady getting on the other elevator as he had exited. He turned and confirmed his thoughts before the door closed.

He asked the woman at the first desk, “Who was that woman getting on the elevator?”

“That's Elizabeth Brown. She works for William Smith.”

“Elizabeth Brown. William Smith. Got it.” He committed the names to memory.

The first thing that next morning, Phil called HR and asked for the file on Miss Elizabeth Brown.

“Elizabeth Margaret Brown, age twenty-one, address North One-Hundred, Thirty-Third Street, NY, NY,” the file read. “Born, Hartford, Connecticut, graduated with a four-point-o from Lincoln High School and attended two years NYU. Position placement, accounting assistant, Mergers and Acquisitions assigned to William Smith.”

The compensation section revealed her meager salary and only served to make him feel worse. He'd been self-absorbed that day, careless to say the least, completely immersed in his own agenda, too busy to worry about some girl and her diabetic father. How quickly he'd turned to money to smooth over his transgression. It reminded him of something his father would do and the thought of turning out like his old man turned his stomach.

He picked up the phone and placed an order for a dozen roses to be delivered today to Elizabeth Brown, thirty-fourth floor, Drake and Webber, with a card that read “to the girl with the 'upside-down cake,' apologetically, the sidewalk bandit.”

It seemed like a lifetime ago as he remembered these events that led up to their involvement and the love he thought they shared. He knew how much he'd come to love her. A pain struck his heart as he acknowledged she didn't love him or she wouldn't have mysteriously disappeared. *Somehow, I must shake this emptiness. Given time, I'll forget her. After all, she's given me no other choice.*

After meeting with Jeff Jenkins about the discussion with Mr. Stone at lunch today, Phil left the building. As the limo weaved its way through the crowded, snowy, streets of New York, he still felt troubled. Phil had to get Beth off his mind. He must immerse himself in his work, but what he once took pride in no longer excited him.

What's wrong with me? The Stone deal is a good deal, the kind that benefits all parties involved. So why did he feel like he'd be making a mistake? His father had certainly urged him to move quickly on it. The Sterling's wanted to see it go through. On paper, all seemed appropriate, but something still nagged at him.

Maybe he was losing his touch. Knowing Beth had caused him to think differently, view things from a different perspective.

