

EVEN SINNERS HAVE A FUTURE



MARIANNE EVANS

forgiveness

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Marianne Evans

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Dedication

During the course of my writing ministry, there have been so many who graciously lifted me up, believed in me, prayed for me. To list you all individually would be impossible, but you know who you are, and you also know you hold a precious place in my heart. So, to my family, my friends, my incredible readers ~ I'm beyond grateful to each and every one of you. Our God reigns!

What People are Saying

This talented author satisfies both heart and soul. ~
New York Times Bestselling Author, Ruth Ryan Langan

On Devotion

Winner, Booksellers Best Award for Best Inspirational
Novel

Winner, ACRA Heart of Excellence Award for Best
Novel with Romantic Elements

Evans writes a book with a wonderful message of
forgiveness filled with hope.

~ 4.5 Stars, Long & Short Romance Reviews

Love one another, for love comes from God. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:7-10

1

Chase Bradington slid a pair of large-frame sunglasses over his eyes, twisted a smile into place, and walked into the sickest form of choreographed PR nonsense he could imagine.

The main entrance of Reach came open; likely a receptionist or some other nearby staff member had been recruited to clear a path between the substance abuse rehab center and the salvation of a black stretch limo that waited for him at the head of the curved drive, engine purring.

So close, and yet so far.

Reporters, gathered at least four-deep along the stone walkway, went wild with shouts for attention. A batch of fool cameramen trampled moist soil which was now dotted pink, purple, and white by destroyed hyacinth. Brightly colored petunias and phlox fared no better. All that appealing greenery laid to waste in an over-charged blitz to score something as meaningless as the image of a troubled country music star leaving a

life recovery center. Chase fought back a self-condemning wince at the circus display.

A few weeks ago, he had spent hours on his knees planting those flowers, gaining some familiarity with horticulture, enjoying warm sunlight on his back and the feel of damp earth pressed against his fingertips. Surprisingly, he'd enjoyed the flower-spiced landscaping sessions while he talked things over with his mentor and sponsor, Mark Samuels.

That same aroma filled the air now, amplified by the dewy release of crushed petals.

Heathen journalists.

Nevertheless, he didn't flinch...and he didn't stop. He sank behind the protection of this orchestrated exit and coached himself the whole way. *Smile. Wave. Move fast. The first cut is the deepest.*

Camera flashes ignited like strobes; clicks, whirs, and shouts pounded against his temples as chaos built to a nasty crescendo. "Chase! Welcome back! How are you feeling?"

"A whole lot better than six months ago, that's for sure. Thanks for comin' out, y'all!" The words formed the only sound bite he felt comfortable offering, but they came wrapped in a carefully warmed tone and his easy, trademark smile. The world at large, however, was kept clear of his eyes, and his struggles, by the mask of dark shades.

"The Opry...are you headed to the Opry?"

"After checking in at home, yeah, you bet. The Opry is my comfort zone; performing at the Country Classics benefit tonight will feel mighty good." This time the smile was real. He meant every word—even if terror gripped him at the thought of a return to the stage without...

He clenched his jaw, disengaging the thought as he neared the door of the limo.

Survive this and you've officially crossed the starting line to re-finding your feet. Move, Bradington. Get to the car and move on.

One reporter, a TV gal, judging by her carefully primed style, that slick business attire and shimmery blonde hair, kept her back to him. Instead, she spoke into a mic and addressed the lens of the camera positioned before her. "Thirty-year-old Chase Bradington, the man fans and industry insiders once called the next country music legend, is seen leaving the confines of Reach this afternoon. Located in Franklin, Tennessee, Reach is a secluded and exclusive retreat for addicts on the mend."

From there, words faded to smoke and haze, burning off until just one remained. Addict. He was an addict. Chase flexed his jaw until it relaxed, forcing himself for the millionth time to face and accept that truth—harsh as it was. Into that acceptance came a loosening of the shoulders, along with the words of his sponsor, Mark Samuels.

Chase, you're addicted to alcohol, and that addiction overwhelmed you for a time, but the addiction didn't win. You've learned how to beat it. Remember the lessons; use the tools you've been given, and don't ever let this battle define you. It's part of your journey, sure, but it's not the full story. Nor is it the end of what your life is meant to say.

Chase bucked up and tossed a last wave to the crowd, smiled while he folded into the rear seat of his plush ride. The door closed immediately; cool air and blessed silence wrapped him in welcome arms. He melted into the seat, tipped his head back and closed his eyes. He whipped off the sunglasses and tossed

them onto the leather seat. A long, heavy sigh passed through his chest as the vehicle rocked, pushing off from the entrance of Reach...and the safety net that had caught him when he fell so hard.

While distance grew and northbound traffic along Highway 65 led him closer to his condo, Chase rubbed his lower lip with a fingertip, lost in the passing view of fieldstone viaducts, green space, cars, homes, and office buildings.

Thoughts swirled into the memory of his evaluation session this morning, his exit interview.

"I'm a little concerned about the level of intensity you'll face. The demands placed upon you are going to be grueling and tough. It's a return to everything that brought you down in the first place, now isn't it?"

"You doubt me?" Chase bit back a rise in defensiveness while seated across from the facility director, a seasoned and sensible middle-aged man who had most likely overseen a great deal of human tribulation during his tenure.

"No, I don't doubt you. I wonder about what's best for you. I hope you're not pushing toward freedom before you're fully prepared."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's only been half a year since Shayne's death. Six months since you were found unconscious in the bedroom of your home, inebriated to the point that you required immediate medical intervention. You missed a performance, lost ground on your career."

"Those are the facts I've dealt with ever since I entered rehab. I'm not proud of where I was, but that's not where I'm at now. It's time for me to start living again."

Elliot Carmichael pulled a pair of readers from the

bridge of his nose and fiddled with the ear stems. “Chase, you’ve made great strides, but returning to music, to the road, to the parties, and all the trappings of tour life might wear you down. It’s easy to retreat and hide behind the life of a performer—”

“But music, performing, is my home. That home busted apart because of my own stupidity. I get that. I own that. I’ve had to take responsibility for my fall, but I’ve also got to build it back up, repair the damage and start over the best way I know how. Right?”

Chase’s words were quietly spoken, chosen with care, but nothing less than resolved. They formed a slicing lance through the topic. But just then, his thoughts flowed from the past to the present, and his gaze happened to rove the buildings, the rush of traffic that formed a slight blur outside the car window.

At a stoplight, he spied a small single-story building made of brick that was part of a retail strip center. This particular shop featured a nondescript, one-word sign out front. The word on that sign whipped up an impulse so strong that his throat instantly burned, stirring an urge so acute it knocked him out of breath, left him licking his lips to somewhat alleviate an instant and parched dryness.

The sign read, simply: Liquor.

His hands shook. His fingertips were unsteady as they hovered over the intercom button that would connect him to the driver up front. Heat flowed beneath his skin—paired with a mind-dizzying need. He pushed the button. Hard. “I need to make a stop before we get to the condo.”



Minutes later, Chase stared ahead at a square, gray granite headstone placed in neat alignment with dozens of others along the rolling grass of a carefully tended cemetery. The scent of freshly mown grass swept far and wide, but humid air closed around him, causing his chest to tighten, intensifying a lump that clogged his throat.

He'd made it past the liquor store. Barely. Still, he had forced his way past that temptation and won a small victory.

The first cut is the deepest.

Instead, he stood amidst the grave markers at White Chapel Cemetery. Towering trees with gnarled and twisty branches laden with late-summer leaves brought life to the landscape. The scene painted a serene, soothing view, but the comfort didn't sink any deeper than the surface of his skin. He wasn't clutching a bouquet of flowers. He wasn't standing before the headstone of his closest friend—the nearest thing he'd ever known to a brother—hand-in-hand with a loved one or family member. Rather, Chase confronted death's blow the same way he had for close to a year now.

Alone. Guilty.

Life's not about the birth date. Life's not the end date. Life's about that dash in between.

Chase had come upon those words, that phrase, more than once during recovery. Right now, they struck home. Most likely they were part of the lyrics of a poem, or maybe a song. That's how he processed most of life anymore—in stanzas, in melodies and rhythms. Composing verses helped him to cope—and breathe.

Regardless, the origins of the phrase didn't matter,

only its truth remained and he embraced it the best way he knew how. Chase scuffed at a pair of rocks near the toe of his cowboy boots. Bending, he cleared overgrown grass from the base of the stone. He tossed the excess aside.

*God, Grant Peaceful Rest to Shayne Williams
Beloved Son, Beloved Friend*

Shayne. Just six feet beneath the spot where he stood. Chase choked back the clog at his throat, blinked furiously against the sting in his eyes. The inscription on the headstone stirred him to reach out, to slide restless fingertips against the deeply grooved words. At his request, the last two words had been chiseled to permanence.

They had both been 'lonely-onlys,' neither having siblings to mess with or dream with. They were brothers not by blood, but by choice, especially when they'd discovered a mutual passion for music.

Shayne had always been the more sensitive one. The poet. The word crafter who possessed a natural gift for song writing. Critics always said Shayne Williams could pack a lifetime of emotion into a three-minute song, and they were absolutely spot-on.

"But we weren't ready for the ride, Shay. I certainly wasn't mature enough to handle what came at us, and you looked up to me. You followed my lead because I was the front man. In the end, I'm the one who fell, and you...the more talented one to be sure...died because I wasn't paying attention. I was swept into an attitude of excess that ruined everything." Chase gulped and choked on the husky words. Hot tears tracked. "God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Chase shook his head—a futile attempt to force

clarity. He wavered, and tried to home in on anything but the end date on his friend's headstone. A sweeping glance of the graveyard should have given him a small measure of peace; instead, Chase felt only heat—the flames of a hell that licked inexorably at the heels of his feet, no matter how hard he continually battled.

Bracing, he stared into the distance, able to see the shimmering waves of steam that crested through the air. A laden wind kicked up layers of dust that blew irritating particles into his eyes. He pressed a thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose. The instant he closed his eyes, memories rushed in as thick and oppressive as the heat that kissed this late July day.

All of a sudden, he was seventeen-years-old again, living with his folks in a rundown but serviceable ranch just outside of Murfreesboro. Like a lot of would-be musicians, Chase dreamed of The District, of downtown Nashville and honkytonks lit by neon signs and the scent of success. These were the hot-spots, the golden tickets to stardom. Country music—was anything better? Early in his high school years, Chase discovered, and built upon, a passion for singing and performing. He and his rough-hewn posse of four created a garage band. With their rangy good looks, tattered blue jeans and simple black t-shirts, they formed a band, which their audience—young ladies most especially—seemed to enjoy. At school dances, at neighborhood gigs, on amateur, small-scale stages, they covered the latest songs. Back then, he'd been all playful attitude and confident swagger. Music was something he didn't have to struggle to understand. It was natural. It spoke to his soul. It drove him.

But then came an unexpected meeting with a

producer who had heard and fallen in love with their debut song "Color of Life". A record deal followed. What came next was a rocket ship to venues across North America and the kind of airplay that turned "Color of Life" into a country/rock anthem and brought about a level of exposure the likes of which Chase and his friends had only dreamed.

Especially Shayne.

Trouble was, it became easier and easier for Chase to move from spot to spot like a target and believe his own marketing spin and press propaganda than to keep his increasingly troubled head on straight. His world had spun out of control.

The first tour was Chase's first taste of success...and he wanted more. The first and second albums were his first taste of financial security...and he wanted more. Music provided his first taste of affirmation...and that one tipped the scales against him, and he ended up taking Shay down as well.

Chase had spent long months struggling in recovery to come to terms with the fact that he had failed his friend so miserably.

Shayne married his high school sweetheart, Corrine Lucas. Corrine and their little boy, Gunther became constants on the road. Soon after those joy-filled events, Shayne was dead.

A vivid streak of red flashed through the air just in front of Chase, jarring him from his thoughts as it landed in a graceful swoop directly on top of the curved slab of gray stone. A cardinal. The bird hopped and flitted, then launched into the branches of a nearby tree and began to chirp. Birdsong. From a male cardinal. If that didn't beat all. Nowadays Chase knew enough to recognize a blessing from heaven when he

received it.

The strident chirp and warble of his red-feathered companion left Chase pondering the advisability of his return to the stage tonight at the Opry. Was the clinic director right to be concerned? Chase wasn't sure. All he knew was that music wrapped him like battle armor. Music was his gift and call, his salvation...and his disgrace. All the same, music provided a healing that medications never could.

Shayne was gone, and nothing would bring him back, but Chase had made life-changing decisions during the past six months. Never again would he fall prey to self-destruction. Somehow, someday, he'd find a way to redemption. He'd find a way to repair the damage he'd done to Shay's wife and son; he'd honor the man he had loved like a brother.

2

A compulsion to pray overcame Pyper Brock. Seated on a leather couch in the Women of Country Music dressing room back stage at the Grand Ole Opry, she attempted stillness and calm, but couldn't quite get there. Instead, a spiritual deluge took place. Urgency. A weird and uncomfortable foreboding tightened to a coil through her chest.

She submitted, closed her eyes and drank in the sweetness of heavenly breath moving through her body.

I come to you in the light; I come to you in the darkness; I come to you always. You're Mine, and you're precious to Me.

The Spirit's words worked against Pyper's skin. The moment of assurance lent strength to a night she knew was going to be huge for her and her entire family.

What mystified her, though, was a subtle vibration of warning, a sense of being called to...to what? To battle? To some form of preparedness? Foreboding didn't fit into the puzzle pieces of her life at the moment, but she opened her eyes and straightened against plump pillows and focused on her mom who stood near a picture covered wall not far away. The jitters quieted, yet didn't quite go still. "Mama, can you come here a sec? Can we pray together before makeup invades and we're not alone anymore?"

“Sure, Pyp.” They sat together, but Pyper’s head continued to swim in an ocean salted by disquiet.

Her mom’s brow puckered. “You thinking about the performance to come?”

“No. It’s...” She couldn’t figure out specifics quite yet, so she shrugged. “No. I just want to find some peace.”

That dodge didn’t lie, but it didn’t tell the whole truth, either. Pyper sensed something momentous on the horizon, but it felt like blinders obscured her vision. For now, anyway.

So, she sent her trust to God and joined hands with her mom, but didn’t begin to speak right away. Patient as ever, Amy Brock waited on Pyper in a silence that gradually worked against Pyper’s rattled nerves. “It must be the magnitude of the honor dad is about to receive, but I feel edgy...like something big is set to explode.”

Her mother stroked gentle fingertips against Pyper’s cheek. “Something big *is* happening, sweetheart. You’re helping to spring the surprise of a lifetime on your dad. It’s going to be great. You’re going to be great.”

Pyper squeezed her mother’s hands. “I know...and you’re right...but it’s more than that. It’s...”

Rest in Me. Call on Me. Seek Me and you shall always find Me. Trust Me with what’s to come.

An instant later, Pyper’s body relaxed. Anxiety dissipated and a supernatural surrender took place. From there, prayer came as easy as her next heartbeat. “Father,” Pyper began quietly, in a voice that bore testament to her Tennessee upbringing, “watch over us tonight. Bless Dad, and help us honor You as we use music to bring praise to Your name. Calm my restless

heart; still my nerves and touch this night with the power of Your love.”

“Amen and amen.”

The response was tender, but no less emphatic. That made Pyper smile. She squeezed her mother’s hands once more. Everything would be fine. Everything. Sustained, Pyper leaned forward to deliver a tight hug. A sharp knock sounded at the dressing room door which came open a moment later, admitting the makeup and costume team.

An entire *team*. The idea made Pyper chuckle. When she stood to move from the couch to an empty makeup chair, she captured her mother’s gaze and delivered a sassy smirk. “Can you even believe the amount of effort that goes into making me presentable for the stage?”

Her mother laughed. “I guess I better leave them to it. I’ll be right back. I’m going to check in on your dad and your brother or they’ll wonder where I am and get suspicious. We can’t have that.”

“Give them both a hug from me.”

For the next quarter hour, Pyper sat straight and tall in the makeup chair, centered behind a wall-length, stage-lit mirror.

Her mother reentered the room followed by a production assistant.

“Fifteen minutes, Miss Brock,” he said.

“Thanks, Sam. Appreciate it.” Pyper flashed him a smile. Following the call to arms, she looked at her mother via mirrored reflection while makeup techs finished brushing a thickly waved tumble of dark blonde hair. “Mama, how am I going to get through this duet with Dad? I feel like bawling, and I’m not even on stage yet.”