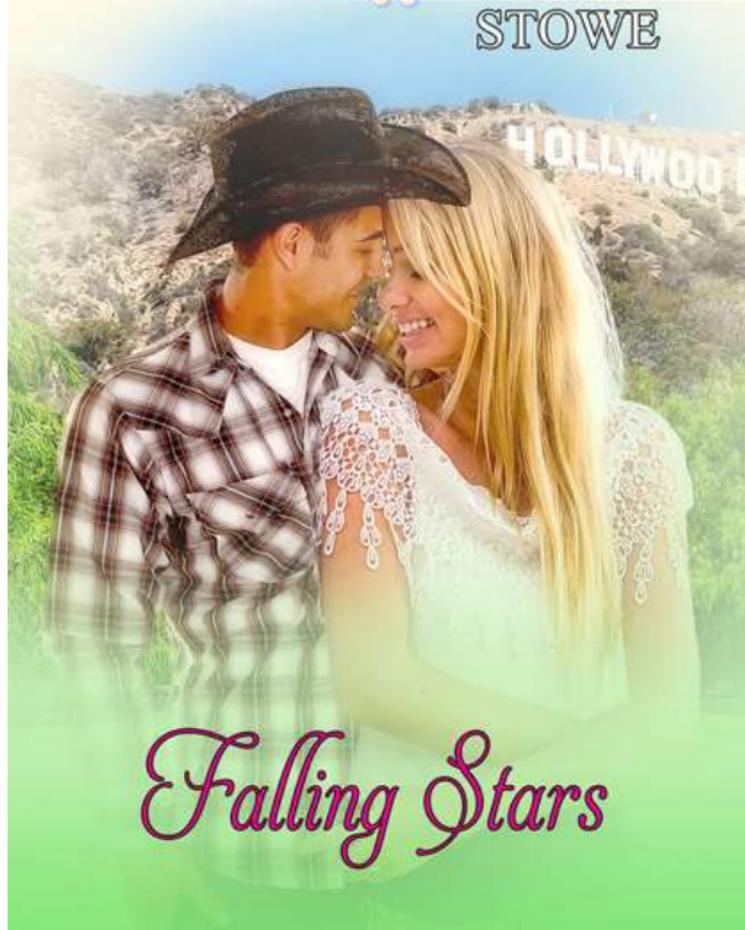




TANYA
STOWE



Falling Stars

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Tanya Stowe

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Dedication

Dorothy, thanks for all the fun research trips.

What People are Saying

A dash of ancient Indian legend. A generous helping of black market artifacts. A pinch of snark, a handful of hope—and chapter after chapter of topnotch writing. I can't imagine any reader of romance and/or suspense not being utterly and completely captivated by *Santa Fe Sunrise*. Five GREAT BIG stars!

~Deela DL

Never Ending Night is a beautiful story of two grieving people who find peace through learning to trust again. Ms. Stowe has a sensitive heart that makes the characters come alive. I cared about them and couldn't stop reading. This is a heartwarming page turner.

~Lady Jane

1

Sunny Bates held her breath as Jackson Maise unfolded all six feet, three inches of his body from the limo. Of course, she knew he was over six feet. She knew all his pertinent info: number one country song in the USA six weeks and counting, a worldwide summer tour that broke stats as soon as ticket sales opened, and a new album in the works, reportedly better than his groundbreaking first. Still, she hadn't expected him to be so...so tall.

On this Saturday morning, he stood to his full height on the curb outside the network offices, and Sunny had to look up. At five eleven, she wasn't used to looking up to many people. Dimples punctuated both sides of those firm lips...when he chose to smile. But most of the time he wore a slight frown that made those brown eyes seem as if they could look right through a person. Brown hair with touchable, sweet caramel highlights peeked out from beneath his black cowboy hat.

Whoa. Where had those thoughts come from?

They weren't the pertinent details she needed to focus on and certainly not the ones that had convinced her that Jackson needed to be the next new judge on *Rising Stars*. It had taken Sunny's team almost a year to convince him to join the judging panel of the popular singing talent show, and she was blowing their first face-to-face meeting with her unprofessional attitude. She held out her hand. "Welcome to Hollywood, Jackson. It's good to finally meet you in person."

"Sunny, it's my pleasure."

There it was. The trademark smile that broke hearts and probably had as much to do with Jackson's popularity as his songs. That grin brought out his dimples and made Sunny's stomach do funny twists. "Pleasure" took on new meaning when Jackson Maise said it with a smile.

He grasped her hand. Long fingers wrapped all the way around her hand. His was warm and strong and...calloused from work on his family's thoroughbred ranch. Definitely different from the hands of most of the male performers she encountered.

Sunny, be a smart girl and focus on the ranch, his family, the important info. Not the package.

She released his hand—even if the motion was a bit reluctant—and gestured

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toward the door of the building. "I hope you're enjoying your hotel. It's one of our iconic spots, close to the Hollywood sign, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and the Walk of Stars. You mentioned you liked visiting historical spots, so I thought you might enjoy the Gable-Lombard penthouse."

"It's fine. Thank you."

His tone didn't sound as if everything was fine. Sunny halted. "If the hotel isn't to your liking we can move you to another place."

He shook his head. "No, that's not necessary. The hotel's great. It's just that I spend a lot of time on the road. Hotels are not my favorite places. I'd like to get settled into my own place as soon as possible."

Relief swept through Sunny. "That's no problem. My team has already picked out three locations. All we need is for you to choose which you would prefer. We can do that as soon as you like."

"Great. The sooner the better."

"Well, your addition to the program's panel is one of the studio's best kept secrets. They'd like it to stay that way until the press conference in..." she checked her phone, "exactly one hour. As soon as that's over, I'll make arrangements for you to visit the places we've picked out...unless of course, you want

to rest. I mean jetlag..."

He shook his head with a ghost of a smile, and Sunny wished he'd flash the real thing. She wanted to see it again.

"I'm fine. You got me here in plenty of time to prepare." He grasped her arm and halted her forward movement. "Sunny, I just want you to know I really appreciate all that you and your team have done for me. All the planning and preparation, even to the point of getting me here early for the press conference. Not many folks would take care of those details."

And that was another reason Jackson Maise continued to be a fan favorite. Fame hadn't gone to his head.

"Thank you," she said. "Some people in our business expect these things. It's really nice you noticed."

He touched his fingers to the brim of his hat, tipped his head, then motioned toward the door for her to go first. Even though she appreciated his gentlemanly gesture, she couldn't help wishing he'd flash that hundred-watt grin. There was something addictive about those firm lips, about the way those dark eyes pierced and made her feel as if she was the only person in the room.

They crossed the lobby and headed toward the elevators.

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"By the way," he said as the doors closed and they whooshed up to the executive offices, "my mom wanted me to thank you once again for the flowers. She says she's still having a hard time believing she's sixty. The flowers eased her path."

Sunny laughed. "Well, you can tell her for me, she's my hero. I only hope to be as active and look so good when I'm her age."

He tilted his head. A slight frown creased his brow, and his gaze took in her physique and face without any hint of leering. "I don't think that's going to be a problem."

A wash of unexpected pleasure swept through Sunny. Her breath caught, and her cheeks heated up. Thankfully, the doors opened, and Jackson stepped out. Sunny blinked and followed him, feeling as if she were escaping a heated cage. *Thank goodness there are only seven floors on this building. That brooding half-frown can be as devastating as his smile.*

The elevator opened onto another smaller lobby. This one boasted floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over a small park across the street.

Jackson strolled to the window and looked down, giving Sunny a few moments to catch her breath. She needed it.

She was used to men making comments

on her appearance. Tall, long-haired blondes with green eyes tended to garner lots of attention, especially in an industry based on pretty faces and muscled torsos. But most of those comments slipped off men's tongues like coconut oil. Jackson's words packed a punch because they seemed sincere. More importantly, he didn't press his advantage or try to score more points. That caught Sunny off guard.

He stood with his back to her, his black cowboy hat pulled low, his lean torso wrapped in a tight blue shirt, and his fingers tucked into the pockets of his snug jeans. His hips were cocked, one foot slightly in front of the other. He seemed confident, sure of himself, but at the same time, a little unsure, out of place.

Sunny wanted to wrap her arms around him and give him a hug...all six foot three inches. She stepped beside him at the window and looked at the small park across the street. "That place will be lovely in a few more weeks."

"That's a lot more green than I'm used to seeing back home this time of year." A hint of his Tennessee accent slipped out.

"Yes, spring does come early in Southern California." She said the appropriate thing, but she silently wondered why he worked so

hard at eliminating his accent and when exactly spring would make an appearance "back home." She had no business asking either question. She shouldn't even be thinking them.

Making Jackson comfortable, to allow him to enjoy his experience here as one of *Rising Stars'* judges, was important, but she wasn't in the "wooing" process. She didn't need to know why he did what he did or what was behind those brooding frowns. That wasn't part of her job.

Fortunately, he settled her internal conflict by turning and gesturing down the long hall of closed doors.

"I expect they're waiting for us."

She nodded. "They are, but you can take your time. You're the star of the moment."

"Yeah. For the moment."

His droll tone gave her pause, but a wry thought made her smile. "Well then, you might as well enjoy it while it lasts."

"That's exactly what I'm trying not to do."

Once again, his comment caught her off guard. What did he mean? Was he unhappy with their arrangement? Would the next few months be filled with "unhappy star" antics? Those types of ploys didn't seem in character for what she knew about Jackson, but if he was truly unhappy, things could go sour very

quickly.

Sunny didn't have a chance to ask as he moved down the hall. His long-legged stride had her hop-skipping to catch up. He seemed determined, and she wasn't about to get in his way. She barely had time to scoot in front of him and open the door.

Jackson stepped into the sunny conference room with more floor-to-ceiling windows.

The smell of coffee drifted toward them.

Sunny inhaled deeply. What she wouldn't give for a caramel latte right now.

The executive team, including her godmother and mentor, Toni Shiloh, was indeed waiting, standing with coffee cups from a restaurant chain in their hands. As soon as they entered, Toni broke loose from a group of men and headed their way.

Toni's father and Sunny's father had started out in the record business together. Her father's career had ended abruptly with his death, but Toni had continued forward as the top producer of some of the industry's leading Gospel artists. Toni earned every accolade she'd received as one of the industry's few female, African-American executives. Throughout her struggles, she never lost her convictions or wavered in her faith.

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Sunny admired no one more than Toni, especially since her godmother's stalwart faith had helped carry Sunny and her mother through her father's drug addiction and eventual overdose.

When the creators of *Rising Stars* needed a strong recording industry name to front their endeavor, they turned to Toni. She had insisted on bringing along Sunny, who started as an assistant but quickly worked her way up to producer.

Now, Sunny had forged her position and polished her reputation by getting Jackson Maise on the judges' panel. With Toni's help, Sunny would soon be able to form her own Christian movie production company. But first, Sunny had to make her reluctant star happy.

As Toni approached, Jackson slipped off his hat and ran a hand through his perfect hair...not that it needed it. No crimped strands. No hat line around his forehead. Just sleek, gorgeous brown hair with caramel streaks. How did he do it? Sunny gave a slight shake of her head, remembering just in time to introduce Toni. "Jackson, this is Toni Shiloh."

Toni extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Jackson."

He grasped her hand and dipped his

head. "Ma'am."

Sunny hid her smile as Toni raised one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows. Sunny's mentor was a no-nonsense woman. One thing she couldn't abide was false fronts. If she thought Jackson's country boy manner was fake, he'd be on her hit list immediately. As soon as Jackson turned to greet the other executives stepping forward to meet him, Toni turned her questioning gaze to Sunny.

"As far as I can tell," she murmured for Toni's ears only, "he's the real deal."

Toni's eyebrow quirked again as Lee Stockard, head of the program, shook Jackson's hand. "We're very pleased to have you on board. We think you'll add a new and interesting dimension to our program."

"Music is what I know best, sir. I can definitely contribute there."

Stockard smiled with a full set of teeth that put Sunny in mind of a shark. "We think you can contribute in many ways...or at least Sunny thinks so."

All gazes turned toward her, making her feel like a hot studio spotlight had switched on. Were they judging her performance already? *Great. Just great.*

Jackson was the full package: music, looks, and charm. She'd been his victim enough times in the last few minutes to vouch

for that, but she wasn't about to admit it in front of these men...maybe not even in front of Toni. Sunny's usually glib tongue failed her, and she stood frozen.

"Well," Jackson's slow, easy Tennessee drawl filled the empty space. "If Sunny says so then it must be. She overcame all of my concerns and got me here in spite of my inclinations to stay home. I'd say she knows her stuff."

Several of the men nodded.

"Yes. I think I agree with you." Stockard barely acknowledged her presence before taking Jackson's arm and leading him toward the massive wood desk at the back of the room.

As Jackson turned, Sunny flashed him a brief smile of gratitude. It was returned with a slight nod and just like that, things were back on track. Sunny released a deep sigh and shifted her tense shoulders into a more relaxed pose.

Then the door banged open. "Finally, the new kid decided to make an appearance."

Sunny recognized the voice and cringed.

Rising Stars' most popular judge sauntered into the room.

She'd hoped to keep Jackson and Brody Bodine apart until after the press conference. But, apparently, Brody had other ideas.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned to face rock's newest bad boy.

~*~

Jackson was probably the only one in the room who noticed Sunny's quickly concealed cringe as the newcomer entered the room. She'd pasted on a smile and turned to greet Brody Bodine. Jackson had caught the expression because he couldn't seem to take his eyes off the lovely Ms. Bates.

He'd seen and talked with her on video conferencing. She was a beauty, but the real, walking, talking woman with a sweet citrus scent had hit him straight in the solar plexus. Like her name, she had those typical, sunny Southern California looks: golden skin and blonde hair almost to her waist, tinged with silver...maybe from a bottle. Maybe from the sun. At least Jackson hoped she was the outdoor kind of girl he wanted to spend time with, because there was no doubt in his mind she was the kind of girl he liked to look at. She was slender with slight curls wriggling through that hair and the sunniest smile he'd ever seen. But her eyes were the real magnet. Bright green. As clear and colorful as emeralds. He couldn't stop staring at them.

They had clarity and purity, and if the

saying was true, those eyes were the mirrors to her soul. As far as Jackson could tell, that soul was just as pure and clear-focused as her gaze. Sure, she'd promised him a lot of things to get him on the panel, but so far, she hadn't promised anything she hadn't delivered. In an industry pumped full of talk and not so much action, Jackson appreciated her truthfulness.

"Brody. We didn't expect you today." She smiled at Bodine, but Jackson could see a tightness in her pose...something that had not been there moments ago.

"And that's exactly why I decided to show up...because you didn't expect it. You know me, Sunny girl, I never do the expected." Brody sauntered across the room and held out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Maise."

Jackson studied the man for a moment, gauging the real emotions behind the friendly facade: tousled, sun-bleached hair that looked as if he'd just stepped off the beach, thin brown beard, perfectly shaped and cut with a slight goatee and mustache, casual cargo pants and a skin-tight buttoned-up shirt, and a woven blue bracelet with dangly ends on his wrist right below another leather band. He managed to look careless and put together at the same time.

Bodine only had one tattoo, a star symbol on the skin between his right thumb and forefinger. Not the usual look sported by most current hard rockers. But by his own admission, Bodine always worked toward the unexpected.

Frowning, still wondering about the rocker's hidden agenda for arriving just in time for the press conference he wasn't supposed to be attend, Jackson grasped the hand. "Pleasure to meet you, too."

Nice firm handshake. No nonsense and maybe no pretense. Jackson found himself the object of a pretty intense scrutiny as Bodine gripped tight.

At last, he released Jackson's hand. "I have to say I was impressed with your album. Pretty good numbers for a first effort."

"Thanks. I have a great team."

Bodine nodded. "That's the secret, isn't it? A great team. I like to think we have that here on *Rising Stars*."

At last, the real purpose for Bodine's visit. Jackson had watched enough of the program to know Bodine was the leading star of the show. Confident. Quick thinking. Bodine had instantly become the fan favorite among the judges. His presence here today meant he intended to keep it that way. Bodine was here to mark his territory.

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Jackson folded his arms across his chest. Fine with him. He had no intention of staying long enough to engage in a popularity contest. His agent suggested a season on the show to keep Jackson's name in the public eye while he worked on his second album. Hopefully, by the end of the program's summer shooting schedule, his album would be wrapped and on its way to a release. And Jackson would be on the first plane back to Tennessee.

Bodine was welcome to his little fiefdom of tweens and teens on the *Rising Stars'* circuit.

Truth be told, if it hadn't been for one blonde with pretty green eyes, no amount of suggestions from Jackson's agent could have convinced him to spend six months in Los Angeles. But Sunny had intrigued him with her fresh face and honest approach. He was curious to see if she was genuine, a rare commodity when one had four hundred thousand followers on social media and received women's underwear in the mail on a daily basis.

"Well, shall we head down to the conference room? The press is in for a real treat with two of our star judges here."

Was it Jackson's imagination, or did Sunny's tone sound tight? Were they in for a