

Nancy Shew Bolton

THE
Flip
SIDE OF
LOVE



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to love and to music. Two marvelous blessings from Our Creator, and ones that never cease to inspire and enrich my life. May you enjoy this book, and may your life be full of love and music. I thank my parents, my husband, children, grandchildren, siblings and all my loved ones. You are part of the music of my life, and I cherish you.

ONE

Fall 1972

Ruth Snow bolted through the lunchroom doors and straight into a strong, cold blast of wind. Her music folder fluttered up, threatening to go airborne and she slapped it down against her choir notebook. A quick glance at the clouds looming over the community college's buildings revealed heavy gray thunderheads. She couldn't tell if they held rain, snow, or both. Fall weather in upstate New York rivaled the daily headlines in unpredictability.

She smothered a laugh when a student raced by, arms outstretched while he chased some swirling papers, shouting commands at them as though they'd obey. He lunged and captured them, righted his shaky balance, then looked her way. She shot him a grin and raised a victorious fist pump. Another gust of wind tossed strands of her long, fine hair into her eyes. Drat. Mom always said her brown hair would thicken when she grew older. Twenty had arrived with her second year in college and she still had little-girl hair. Oh, well.

Ruth hustled to catch up with Megan and Kate and join their speed walk toward the music building, where the high point of her day waited. Choir practice. The vocal music, enhanced by Mr. Stanley's admirable instruction, provided an oasis and source of pleasure unrivaled by anything else in her daily classes. It also served to counteract the depressing gloom generated

by the current events class she attended before lunch. Sometimes the news they discussed disturbed her so that she had to forego eating.

Other than stewing over depressing global and national news, life would be grand if she hadn't agreed to perform a solo. What a mistake that was. About a month remained until the upcoming choir concert. Prickles of dread attacked her every time she thought of it.

She caught up and matched her stride to the pace of her friends. "Hey, girls."

Megan asked, "Don't you love grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch?"

Ruth nodded and grinned at her friend. "My stomach's still warm inside."

Kate shook her head. "Mine isn't."

Ruth marveled at the way Kate's thick, curly hair remained in place as if there were no wind. Megan flashed a grin at Kate's remark and slipped a wayward blonde lock behind her ear. "Maybe if you ate more than fruit and carrot sticks for lunch, your stomach would be warm too."

Kate snorted and fixed intense eyes and crinkled brows on Megan. "Yeah, warm and a lot larger."

Megan's cheery face turned solemn, and her large, brown eyes trained on the sidewalk. Ruth's shoulders tightened and her jaw clenched before she forced out the words, "Shame on you, Kate."

Kate's eyes widened. "What? I was only kidding."

Megan remained silent and Ruth asked, "Does she look like she thinks it's funny?"

Kate pressed her lips together and averted her gaze. Ruth wouldn't play diplomat and smooth this one out. How unfair Kate could be, so easily, as though

she possessed the right to spout anything she wished. Maybe because she had no siblings to react to her, she didn't understand how much her words could sting.

Ruth's quick anger softened. Sometimes it proved to be such an uncomfortable dance, trying to be friends with both of them. She didn't want to take sides, but couldn't stand back and let them throw darts at each other, either. She sighed. Besides, Megan would endure most of the barbs and then shrink into herself.

No, Ruth had to speak up. "Shouldn't we be past stuff like this? We're adults. This is junior high garbage, Kate."

Megan's voice wobbled. "Don't fight on account of me."

Ruth's throat ached with empathy for Megan. "It's not your fault. What Kate said was mean, even if it was a joke."

Kate halted and stood near the entrance of the music building. She rolled her eyes and barked, "OK, already. I'm sorry."

Kate's gaze rested on Megan and her voice softened. "I am sorry, Megan."

Megan glanced up at them. "OK. No offense. Gotta run or I'll be late." Megan delivered a quick wave and scurried into the adjacent building.

Ruth lowered her voice. "Why do you do that to her? I know how she feels. You don't. You've never been fat."

A group of brightly clad, laughing students approached, in tie-dyed regalia, long hair tossing in the wind. Kate shot them a disapproving glance and waited until they'd gone inside before she muttered, "Idiots. Probably laughing about all the Watergate news."

Ruth passed up the opportunity to debate her in another Nixon argument or defend the other students again. "Never mind them. I want you to stop needling Megan."

Kate flipped a hand in the air. "You know how much she likes boys. It would be good for her to lose weight like you did. She'd get more dates and attention and be happier. Also, she's short. Short people look larger with the same weight, so she needs extra encouragement to slim down."

Ruth rubbed her forehead. "Let me get this straight. So you said what you did to help her? Why not tell her that instead of putting her down? You shouldn't make her feel guilty for enjoying her lunch." She pointed at Kate. "Besides, I ate as much as she did, and you didn't say anything to me. She's fine as she is."

"She's not fine as she is. She gets constant crushes on jocks, and you know as well as I do that jocks don't date overweight girls. Only greasers or hippies do and she never looks at them."

Ruth exhaled in frustration. Why did Kate agree with all the bird-brained terms for everyone? It was 1972 after all. How short-sighted to clump people into a labeled box. Maybe she should ask Kate which box she'd put her own self in. A slight grin quirked her lips at the thought. Kate would invent her own unique classification, but only for herself.

Kate raised her eyebrows. "Truce?" Kate's open expression hinted at the possibility of mutual understanding. Maybe.

Ruth shrugged. "I guess so."

They hustled through the entryway. Intermittent swells of music or song sounded when a practice room

door opened, and from the nearby auditorium, the disordered tones of the orchestra tuning up hummed through the hallway.

Kate grinned at Ruth. "Ready for the crazy man?"

Ruth hung her coat and backpack on a peg next to Kate's. "Mr. Stanley's not crazy, just intense. He's very talented."

Kate shook her head. "He's why I quit choir, and yes, he is crazy. I bet he gets into fistfights with that temper of his." She acted out the swagger of a big, strong man and punched her fists into the air.

Ruth laughed. "You make him look like a bully. He's just got a quick temper."

"Quick temper, my eye. Remember the time he pulled Rick's goatee and yelled at him to open his mouth more when he sang? That was it for me, and for Rick. Quitting time. I'm much happier playing violin in the orchestra. Our conductor isn't nuts."

"That was over a year ago. Why don't you forget it?"

Kate huffed out a laugh. "Hah. No way."

"Hold whatever opinion you like. I think he's a great director." Ruth headed to the choir room and turned to wave.

Kate called, "Maybe you're nuts too."

She flashed an exaggerated grin and chuckled at Kate's scowl. Ruth hadn't bothered to try and persuade Kate not to quit. Kate's opinions were as immovable as a granite slab. But Ruth had launched several attempts to coax Rick out of quitting. He'd fixed her with a dreary expression and announced, "I don't like singing that much."

Ruth did. She'd never quit choir—ever. She entered the choir room to the sounds of murmurs and

chair legs squeaking on the floor. Mr. Stanley riffled through papers on the lectern at the front of the room, his brows crinkled while he peered down. She studied him. He'd be handsome if he didn't scowl so much. Ruth knew he was close to thirty, so his juvenile flashes of temper struck her as hilarious in a teacher, especially one as decisive and focused as he.

His short, trimmed beard suggested a desire for tidiness, yet he tousled his hair during practice, through energetic head and arm motions while conducting or frustrated head rubbing when he responded to mistakes. He looked wind-blasted by the end of each session.

She perched on a chair in the soprano section and opened her music folder. Mr. Stanley cleared his throat and rolled up the sleeves of his dark blue dress shirt. His students knew the signal well. They ceased their conversations and the rustling sound of everyone opening their folders filled the room. He raised his baton and they stood.

Ruth delighted in the warm-up exercises of what he called "moving chords." Under his commanding direction, their vocal tones would mesh, then swell and contract, travel from major to minor, clash in dissonance and resolve into harmony. Moving chords always shivered her into goose bumps. As practice continued, the students' voices warmed up while their attention and focus improved under their director's resolute style.

While they sang a difficult section of one of their pieces, Mr. Stanley barked, "Bass singers. You sound like you ate peanut butter for lunch. Clear your throats and try again."

Ruth glanced over at the bass section and caught

Chuck's eye. His lean body stood relaxed and his features appeared calm as always, but mirth danced in his eyes when he grinned at her. After the rumble of throat clearing subsided, Mr. Stanley trained his attention on the wayward singers. His brows drew down while his blue eyes glittered as though sparks would fly out. The poor bass section caught grief in nearly every class. Why didn't they practice more?

"Again," Mr. Stanley shouted, and raised his hands and eyebrows, an expectant expression on his face. After the third bungling try, Mr. Stanley slammed his baton down, causing more than a few students to startle. The baton skittered onto the floor, furnishing the only sound in the room. His face thunderous, he yelled, "You sound like you're puking out of your lousy, skinny necks."

He grabbed a sheaf of papers off his lectern and flung them above the bass section. Ruth's eyes widened at the display. Most of the boys ducked or stood dejectedly, but unflappable Chuck gazed up. The sheets fluttered down around him and he commented in an impressed tone, "Wow."

Ruth suppressed a laugh. As fast as Mr. Stanley's wrath flared, it drained from his features. He pressed his lips together, the short beard hairs under his lower lip sticking out straight for a moment. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair and heaved a sigh.

"How can you possibly not know this section by now?" He stared at the boys, boring his gaze into them one by one. After a pause, he sang the passage in his clear, melodious voice. "There. Now, how hard is that? Please pick up the sheets and we'll try again."

Ruth's brows furrowed. Mr. Stanley should have to pick them up. He'd thrown them. Well...at least he

said please.

Students retrieved the scattered papers and handed them to Chuck, who sauntered forward and deposited them on the lectern. His curly mop of hair bounced while he took long strides back to his section. Good old Chuck. Nothing fazed him.

Mr. Stanley nodded. "Thank you. Let's break into smaller groups and work on this portion. Bass section, you stay here with me. Other groups, go to a practice room. Bob, lead the tenors, Janice the altos, Ruth, sopranos." He glanced at his watch. "Be back here in fifteen minutes."

Ruth rolled her eyes at Chuck and grinned while she filed out with the sopranos. Elena, elfin and pretty, flicked back her long, black hair and shot her a sly grin. She sidled up and whispered, "Teacher's pet. He never yells at you."

Elena laughed when Ruth furrowed her brows at her. "It's just because he knows I practice a lot. He yells at anybody he thinks isn't trying hard enough, no matter who they are."

"Does he have to be so rude?"

Ruth smiled. "No."

They shared a giggle while the sopranos swarmed into a practice room. Ruth installed herself at the piano, played their melody, then cued and directed them. Fifteen minutes later, they'd nailed it.

Elena elbowed Ruth on the way back to the choir room and said, "Maybe you should help the bass section."

"No, ma'am." Ruth chuckled and shook her head. "I would not want that job."

"Why not? Hanging out with all the guys? I've spotted a few of them giving you the once-over." Elena

shot her a smirk. "You could have your pick."

"I think I'll pass." Maybe Elena could casually date. Not her.

While they hurried, Ruth's comical imagination pictured Mr. Stanley poised in front of the intractable bass section, brandishing a whip and a chair, like a lion tamer. She swallowed down a laugh before she entered the main room with the other section members. Nope, she surveyed the room. No whip and chair and everyone looked unscathed.

Once main practice ended, Mr. Stanley announced, "Soloists, report to my office. Remember, we've only got a month until the concert." His intense gaze scanned them. "So, all of you, practice, practice, practice. We start day-long rehearsals with the orchestra this weekend. I expect you all to be there."

A few subdued grumbles sounded while everyone shuffled out. Mr. Stanley called, "And no groaning."

Ruth peeked back at him, surprised to see a crooked grin on his face while he gathered his sheets of music. What a roller coaster ride he could be. Why had she let him talk her into a solo? She trudged toward his office where the other three soloists milled around the door. Singing with the main group thrilled her, but to sing alone? Yikes.

She studied the faces of the other singers—Barry, Claire, and Karen. They didn't appear nervous. Her stomach churned when she envisioned herself at the concert. An icy shiver descended down her back. She couldn't very well back out now after she'd agreed. Maybe laryngitis would rescue her. She usually came down with it once or twice a year during flu season.

Now I'm looking forward to the flu? Maybe Kate's right and I am nuts.

For goodness sake, with everything going wrong in the world, singing a solo shouldn't be scary. But it was. She'd avoided them all through high school. Once in college, she thought her courage would increase. Then this year after Mr. Stanley's pep talk with her, she thought she'd have the guts to do it and so she'd agreed. But her confidence dimmed with each passing day.

Mr. Stanley breezed up and made a forward gesture with his hands. "Go on in, folks, it's unlocked."

They filed in and stood obediently near the piano. He parked at his desk and reached for a pen. "Who needs a pass?"

Ruth and Claire stepped forward. He scribbled on their passes, handed them over, and admonished, "Don't take too long. We've got a lot to cover."

Ruth nodded at his serious expression and left with Claire. She considered her serene, willowy friend as the female equivalent of Chuck, except for the wild hair. Donning their coats in the hallway, Ruth matched her stride with Claire's. They burst through the doors into the overcast, brisk afternoon. A rumble sounded and a few tiny snowflakes fell. Perfect. Thunder snow.

Claire regarded her a moment. "You're nervous about the solo, aren't you?"

Ruth nodded. "I didn't want to sing one, but Mr. Stanley's been pressing me since last year. I finally caved in. Wish I hadn't."

Claire chuckled. "It's not so bad, and you'll feel great afterwards. I sang my first one last year. I didn't expect to enjoy it so much, but I did."

"The only time I ever sang alone I hated it."

Claire's brows rose. "Really? Why?"

"It was beyond embarrassing. During a recital at

school, I got so nervous when I sang my part, my voice warbled and broke and I couldn't finish. I sounded horrid. Some of the kids laughed and my friend Denise said she'd never seen anyone's face that red before." It still hurt her to remember it.

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

Claire smiled. "Well, you're over twice that now, and you've got a great director who'll make sure you're ready."

Doubts prickled in her mind, yet Ruth's nerves lifted at the words. Maybe her voice wouldn't fail her and it would be fine.

Claire turned to head toward the low, sprawling building to the left. "See you back at the office." She grinned and raised her hands. "And cheer up. Kissinger said yesterday that peace is at hand."

"Yeah. I wish."

She continued on while the wind whipped her hair and she hustled to deliver the pass. It took longer than it should have for the instructor to take a pause and sign it, and a mental image surfaced of Mr. Stanley's irritated face. She knew he hated it when students waltzed in late. Only part of her wanted to hurry, the rest of her didn't look forward to singing a solo in front of her more experienced peers.

She scooted back to the music building, annoyed at the stupid wind tangling her hair. Now it would be necessary to stop in to the bathroom and brush out the snarls. Rushing in, she scanned the empty room and fished the brush from her purse. She winced while she yanked out the tangles.

Little-girl hair. *I should just give up and wear braids or a ponytail.*

She had no gift for hairstyles and couldn't have pulled one off anyway with her fly-away, baby-fine locks. She turned her head to watch the play of light on her soft hair. At least there were some copper highlights with the brown. And her sky-blue eyes were nice. She liked her face, but it would be so cool to be exotic looking. Oh, well.

She heard Barry's voice before she'd walked halfway down the hall. He must have the largest lungs in the known world. Ruth decided to wait outside the door and listen, rather than interrupt. Such a powerful voice. She wouldn't be surprised if he could vibrate walls with it. When a vocal break ensued, she slipped inside.

Mr. Stanley glared over his shoulder. "I thought I told you to hurry."

She opened her mouth to answer, but he'd already turned back to Barry. Claire shot her a sympathetic glance.

Mr. Stanley grabbed a small tape deck and handed it to Barry. "You've got the notes down, but your volume needs more shading. Take this into a practice room, fast forward to your solo, and sing with it, paying careful attention to volume changes."

Barry nodded and left the room. Only she and Claire remained. Mr. Stanley turned and directed, "Claire, let's get to it, then you can join Karen down the hall and practice your duet."

Claire's poise and stance exuded confidence. Maybe after Ruth had a successful solo behind her, she'd be the same way. A few run-throughs and corrections later, Claire exited, flashing Ruth a thumbs-up.

"C'mon, Ruth, make it snappy." Brows up, he

waited while she stepped to the piano. He played the intro to the solo and glanced up to cue her, but stopped abruptly just as she opened her mouth to begin. "Hold it. Loosen up. You've got your shoulders clenched like you're trapped in a closet. That'll affect your singing." He stood and rolled his shoulders. "Like this, and breathe deeply."

She copied his motions, embarrassed at how silly she must look. But he knew best.

After a few minutes he studied her. "All right. Here we go."

She sang well, intently obeying his facial cues and verbal commands. Prior to the longest run of her solo, she failed to draw in enough air and ran out of wind before the end of it. She pressed her lips together and glanced down.

His curt voice cut through her discomfort. "You know what you did, don't you?"

She regarded the ceiling a moment and brought her eyes to him. "Yes."

"Don't do it again."

She nodded. Easy for him to say. He'd probably love to sing alone in front of millions. This time she sang the solo devoid of emotion, fixated on the technical aspect.

He stared at her when she finished and asked in a blank tone, "Is that how you plan on singing this?"

"Yes...well...sort of," she trailed off, daunted by his scrutiny.

"How, sort of?" He raised one eyebrow.

"Well, the same way, but not so...cold."

"Good answer." A grin flickered across his mouth. "Let's try again."

This time she remembered everything and waited

for his response. "Have more confidence in your ability, Ruth. Also, you're not using your diaphragm enough. Who on earth taught you to sing like that? You'll hurt your throat because you're putting too much stress on it." He stood up to illustrate and hooked his hands on the sides of his waist.

"Watch my hands." He sang parts of her solo. She marveled at his excellent tone and carefully watched the way his hands bounced out when he sang.

He finished and regarded her a moment. "Understand? It's a powerful muscle and if you use it properly you can do more with your voice and take the stress off your larynx. You already have a delicate throat, so you really need to practice this more. We've got a little time. Put your hands on your sides and try it."

He stood in front of her and she started the solo. He raised his hand, palm out, halfway through. "A little better, but you're still using your throat too much. You've got to use your diaphragm more. Here, put your hands on my sides and feel while I sing."

He positioned her hands on his sides and sang the hardest portion of her solo. She could feel his warmth and his diaphragm muscle push against her hands through the lightweight fabric of his shirt. He sang and observed her with intent focus. Shyness sparked when she grew uncomfortably aware of him. She trained her eyes on her hands.

He finished, inched closer, placed his hands on her sides, and commanded, "Now you try."

Ruth sensed a blush threatening, but swallowed hard and pushed it away. Her puzzling discomfort would only end if she sang as he directed. She steeled her resolve and began. When she reached the long

passage, her tension caused her to run out of air before the end.

He threw his arms up and bellowed, "For crying out loud, Ruth. How can you repeat the same error? Where'd you leave your brain?"

His outburst punctured her shaky resolve. Ruth dropped her head, eyes closed, embarrassed. He thrust his hands back on her sides and ordered, "Now do it right this time."

Overcome with stressful, jumbled emotions, she cried in silence. She didn't dare look at him, sure he'd become more upset at her lack of compliance. She tried to push against the heavy discomfort. The stillness stretched. If she could just breathe.

"I'm sorry." His voice held a soft tone she'd never heard him utter. "I am."

She couldn't manage the courage to lift her head or speak. Why didn't he remove his hands, back off, and let her recover for a moment? She heaved a shuddery breath.

"Ruth?" Gentle, tentative, so unlike him.

His voice compelled her. Head lifted, she opened her eyes and blinked the blur away. Her gaze met his. Unrecognized emotion emanated from him and generated a response in her midsection. The space between them turned weighty and magnetic. His eyes grew dark, deepening in a way that made her breath catch. His hands pressed harder on her waist while his head drifted closer to hers. Her head tilted upward toward his face like a flower to sunlight, yet the rest of her remained still, mesmerized.

A sharp knock sounded, shattering the atmosphere as they both flinched. Mr. Stanley removed his hands, turned, stood still a moment, and then