



KIMBERLY M. MILLER

A COLLISION OF MUSIC,
LIFE, AND LOVE

Picking Daisy

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Kimberly M. Miller

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Dedication

For Christopher, Molly, and Anna. Because of you, I know what love is.

You were old enough to know better
But young enough to care
Tired of waiting
Ashamed of faking
A love he didn't share

Forever isn't so long
It's where you'll find me
Waiting
For the one you were supposed to be

Waiting for you
Waiting for me
To turn around and realize the things
You couldn't see
Waiting for someone to say
It really didn't end
Someone more than just a friend

I didn't know
You'd ever go
Instead of waking up to be free
No more dreams, relieved from schemes
Left with what you made of me

No more waiting for forever
No more waiting on me

“...for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

~1 Samuel 16:7

1

After nearly two years, Daisy Parker was finally awake.

Maybe it was the way spring suddenly appeared to shake the cold, gray skies back to swirls of blue dotted with white puffy clouds. It was the end of a long winter. Flower buds now waited to burst forth in striking colors and the spiky grass would soon need to be cut.

And today the birds sang just for Daisy, their music a challenge—an inspiration.

Spring was awake and, just like Daisy, it was ready to play.

She smiled as she tried to ignore the way the melting snow left trails of dirty tears down the once-sparkling window pane. There would be time to deal with the fallout of a bitter winter and its impending hours of clean-up. She shouldn't think about anything but the work that waited for her in the next room, the kind that would help pay bills.

And yet it was easy to shove aside the thought of hours in front of a computer. She wanted to open

windows, go outside, sing... Yes, she wanted to sing.

Daisy went to the piano, remembering how her father's long fingers danced across the same keys eight years before. His absence was still painful. But he would be proud of her even if she still wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with her life. She'd been stuck for so long that getting moving again seemed impossible.

She reached her hands out and started to play. She should get her coffee and go to work, but the draw of the music was too strong to ignore.

Slowly, she found the rhythm again, hoping to release some of the jumbled emotions that confused her. As usual, the music hurt like a stab wound, yet it was a healing balm to her soul. It was a tune she bore the weight of each day.

She closed her eyes as the melody built to a crescendo, fulfilling a promise it made from the start. It was nearly perfect. She had almost conquered her fear of playing the whole song when a door slammed, shattering her reverie.

"Daisy?" Nick Patterson's voice jarred her back to reality. She stopped abruptly, grimacing, her fingers hitting the keys harder than she'd planned as the ballad, once again, came to a jolting and inconclusive end. Like so many other things in her life.

It didn't matter that Nick was barely past seventy years old. His deep voice filled every inch of Daisy's small home. She only hoped the music escaped his notice or she'd be forced to explain herself all over again.

Or worse, he'd try to talk her into leaving the house.

Daisy awkwardly lifted her hands from the keys

and set them in her lap, almost as if she'd been caught breaking the law. But she wouldn't try to hide anything from Nick. He wouldn't judge her despite his strong opinions on everything from her relationships to career choice.

"I brought doughnuts—peanut butter." Nick appeared in the doorway, grinning broadly as he held up the box in his calloused hands. His eyes sparkled under the brim of his worn baseball cap, which bore the name of a team that could no longer be read.

Nick was kind and funny and often brought Daisy groceries or fixed whatever was broken in her house. Sometimes she wished she were about twenty years older so she might seriously consider marrying the man. As it was, she settled for thinking of him as the father she'd lost.

"Mmm..." she slowly placed the fall over the keys and pushed her wheelchair back. She grabbed her lip gloss and methodically put some on, to let him know his arrival was more important than the music.

Daisy nervously ran her hand over the smooth, blonde hair that hung above her shoulders in a style that was easy to maintain yet not terribly risky. It suited her better than the way she'd worn her hair for so many years, down the middle of her back and curled so as to draw attention, something she now avoided at all costs.

"You're looking gorgeous today, princess. Prince Charming stop by yet?" Nick asked with a wide grin. Daisy loved that he complimented her when he sensed she was down, which unfortunately was more often than ever lately.

"Not yet."

Nick's gray-blue eyes twinkled. "Play me

something?"

Daisy smiled and lifted the fall. While she wouldn't play *that* song for anyone, she was happy to play him anything else. She lifted the fall and fixed her hands on the keys, drew a deep breath and closed her eyes as she started playing a slow and beautiful melody.

When she finished, she gazed over at Nick. He put the doughnuts on the end table and then leaned in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. He smiled.

"Now that's something else," he whispered in approval. "How 'bout the other one?"

Daisy cleared her throat. "Did you say you brought doughnuts?"

Nick nodded. "I did."

Daisy moved toward the kitchen where the coffee waited. She was nothing without her coffee.

Nick followed silently. Although a man of few words, his presence in her life was sometimes what made her get up in the morning. After the accident, he'd sat by her bed in the hospital for so long that when she woke he'd grown a full, silvery beard.

"Coffee?" she asked as she got herself a mug. Nick nodded and went to the refrigerator for the cream. He handed it to her.

"You're too good to me, honey," he said as she prepared his mug of coffee. "Any chance you'll consider marrying me? I'd make an amazing husband."

Daisy laughed. "Are you really flirting with me again, Mr. Patterson?"

Nick chuckled wryly as he sipped his coffee. His deep green eyes betrayed his thoughts, however, and Daisy averted her gaze lest she be forced to deal with

them. She cleared her throat awkwardly as she fixed her own mug.

"Got a pretty good visiting pastor this week—and the ladies auxiliary is doing a luncheon after the service. Those women can cook like nobody's business...want to join me? We can even call it a first date."

Daisy's heart nearly stopped beating. And it wasn't because he acted as if he would date her given the chance. They both knew that was the only thing not to be taken seriously.

"Nick." She tried again, avoiding his eyes as she did her best to yank her hair back into a clip. For the last two years, Daisy's church attendance was a familiar argument. But Nick refused to understand it wasn't that she didn't want to go, it was more that she couldn't go. Perhaps he felt she and her problems—or was it her excuses?—were a nuisance he no longer wanted to bother with. She hung her head shamefully, wanting to erase all that haunted her and forced her to hide in her home.

Nick silently sipped his coffee, but Daisy could tell he was working on his next angle. He rarely pressed her, but it was clear he wasn't going to let this go easily. It didn't matter that there were no words to change her mind. And for as much as she'd been praying, the resounding silence from above made her fear there were no answers.

Or maybe God was annoyed with her constant requests.

"Robby's going back on tour again," he said. "I'd like to finally introduce you."

Daisy nearly spit her coffee across the room. This unexpected turn in the conversation blindsided her.

Creative didn't begin to describe this tactic. This was war.

"What is with you today?" she snapped. She finally looked at Nick and saw he was clearly amused, even as he tried to hide his face behind his coffee mug, sipping slowly at the rich brew.

"What?" he finally asked. "Can't a man dream?"

Daisy busied herself with last night's supper dishes, putting them into the dishwasher in an effort to show she didn't care for the conversation. She reminded herself to breathe.

"You've been trying this for years," she muttered. "I'm not interested. I doubt he is either."

"You might be surprised," Nick said and Daisy turned to him. She nodded. It was better to let Nick think he was winning. And he did mean well. He was just misguided.

Carefully, she finished cleaning up as Nick leaned against her low counter, his long legs crossed at the ankles in front of him.

"I think he's still afraid to talk to me. But I trust his brother. Warren says he's different this time." Nick drank deeply from his mug, finishing his coffee. He put the mug into the dishwasher as he continued speaking. "Since you play that piano like it's your religion, it seemed right you two form a professional relationship."

Daisy swallowed hard. "If I tell you I'll think about it, will you drop the subject?"

Nick smiled. "Two things Robby loves—beautiful women and music. He'd be defenseless against you..."

Daisy blushed, reminding herself to bake Nick a pie for all the flattery he was dishing out.

"I'll leave the doughnuts." Nick pushed away

from the counter. "I got some work I want to get to in the barn today."

"Oh no, you don't!" Daisy hustled after him. "What about Steve? He said he'd help you after work, but that's not until six o'clock. Why don't you wait?" Although he was in his early seventies, Nick still lived as if he was twenty. He fixed everything from rooftops to sidewalks with the agility of a much younger man.

Nick waved his hand at her. "I'm cleaning out some hay and replacing a few boards. You act like I'm an old man."

With a sigh, Daisy put her coffee down and moved toward the door. "I'm coming with you," she said. "Let me grab my computer."

2

Robby Grant rose swiftly to the surface of the pool, his long, choppy hair slicked back against his scalp. Spring and summer meant the start of tour season. He loved it—especially now that he was sober enough to enjoy it. While it might still be a bit cool for swimming in the early May morning air of New York, he didn't care. He was finally alive again and he wanted to try everything. He was born again.

As he clung to the edge of the pool, Robby kept one slightly interested eye on the flat screen television near the back door. The entertainment network was reviewing the day's news, little of which was of any interest to him—that is until his picture appeared over one of the host's shoulders. Excited, he lifted himself easily from the heated water and reached for a thick towel.

He regarded the pictures flashing on the screen. He'd made such a transformation over the last few months that he barely recognized himself as the man in those shots. Although he'd always been described as a heartbreaker, Robby knew that at nearly forty years old he was getting over his appearance—or at least he was trying. His hair, though still wild, was consistently clean for a change, his teeth were fixed after a fight that knocked out a few, his skin was healthy and his muscles were finally strong. The pictures were a reminder of how far he'd come from the glassy-eyed,

strung out days that were part of his past. And he intended to keep it that way.

Since Robby got home from rehab, he'd been shuffled from studio to studio, rehearsals to autograph signings and back again. The attention filled that long-empty need for love, but some little part of his heart remained vacant, and he understood why. All that he'd learned in rehab haunted him. If he was capable of the real change his life needed, it would be harder than all the times he'd spent detoxing put together.

As Robby rubbed his arms dry, he stopped for a moment to consider the tattoos covering them. He shook his head. It wasn't that he regretted everything about them but some of them seemed juvenile now. And yet they were a testament to all he was before rehab and all he was choosing to be now. He smiled as he continued toweling off.

"The lead singer of the mega-successful rock group For Granted was released from rehab recently after spending more than six months getting clean. Robby Grant's agent, Lily Horton, indicated that Grant was ready to set off on the band's tour in support of their new album, *Noise*, in a few weeks."

"That's right, Jake," the other host said. "It's been a full two years since we've heard anything out of these guys, so I guess time will tell whether this effort is going to produce as many hits as their previous album, *Traction*."

Robby rubbed the towel over his head. They'd know soon enough that he, at least, was different and there was nothing to stop him from getting back on stage again. While he couldn't speak for his band or their behavior, Robby was confident his new songs were better than all of his old stuff. That he'd written

them before going into rehab and recorded most of them back then as well as of little consequence. His band was frustrated by the wait, but all of the men were on board with the direction the band was taking and seemed to believe Robby was back and better than ever.

"Hey Robb-ie!" the deep voice surprised Robby so that he nearly dropped the towel as he turned to face the stone walkway. The members of his band came forward as a unit, almost mechanical in their gait. Robby went back to rubbing his head dry as they approached. They were an odd lot to be sure, but he trusted his friends—after all, most of the group had been together since high school and until recently, little had changed in any of the men.

"You're nuts! It's freezing," Reggie Harris said as he flopped on a lounge chair near the pool. His jeans were ripped and dirty, as usual, and his eyes were covered by a pair of dark sunglasses meant to hide the fallout from the previous night's partying. Robby raised a silent eyebrow as Reggie wasted no time pulling a flask from his pocket. Apparently, the party was not yet over.

Robby considered telling his friend the guy needed help, but he didn't have the confidence yet to make a stand. Although he was trying, it was still too soon. Reggie was more adamant about his ability to party than Robby ever was—and that's what worried the lead singer. There would be no telling his friend to go to rehab until... Robby let the thought fall away, not yet ready to deal with where it might lead.

"Nice interview with Seacrest," Mike Walker said as he sat. He nudged Reggie who took a longer drink in defiance. Always the peacemaker, Mike would say

nothing to clear the air. Despite his shaggy, multicolored hair and wild whiskers, Mike was a teddy bear. Even at his lowest point, Robby still hadn't managed to get his friend's mood to falter.

"Yeah, figured it couldn't hurt with the tour starting in a few weeks. Besides, my phone's been ringing like crazy. I can't tell everyone no." Robby tossed the towel aside. Dave Shaffer sighed as he sat with the other men. Although the band was named for Robby, and he was its lead singer, Dave and Reggie often consorted to make decisions for them all. It had been one of the many factors that led Robby to the bottle and sometimes instigated epic fights, but in rehab, Robby learned he needed to speak his mind and not retreat inside himself, even if it made someone angry.

Robby's counselor asked him numerous times if he shouldn't consider a solo career or a start with a new band, but he wouldn't listen. How could he desert his friends? Besides, change was hard for him to come by given what he'd already put himself through. At least with his friends—there was solace in a familiar enemy.

As Robby pushed thoughts of the future aside, he noticed his band exchange quick glances before Dave plunged ahead with a topic that clearly was being considered for some time.

"Actually, that's what we came to talk to you about," he said. The tone of his voice caught Robby's attention and he glanced at each of his friends who skillfully avoided his eyes. "Where do you get off saying that we aren't supporting you?"

Robby turned to him, shocked. "What? I...I didn't say that."

Reggie belched loudly. "It's the top story. Check

your phone.”

“As if the media ever knows what’s really going on.” Robby threw his towel at Reggie, who didn’t seem to care when it landed on his head. He slowly took it off and tossed it aside.

“We saw the interview,” Mike said. “You said this tour would be different since you’d been to rehab and the rest of us still partied.”

Robby’s stomach clenched. It was quickly becoming clear that the transformations he’d made in rehab had become obstacles that would change the dynamic of the band altogether.

He glanced at the men who regarded him coolly. He desperately searched for words, trying to figure out how to explain his physical and spiritual awakening. Even though it had been a few months, there were still times it seemed his head was spinning.

Robby thought back, trying to remember when he’d first gotten to rehab. In minutes, it had seemed he was aware of little beyond the peaceful surroundings where he meditated quietly, wrote, or met with counselors and other patients to learn how to deal with the problems he’d so long ignored. The world as he knew it was gone, and restoring himself and his health were what remained. And this time was different. This one changed everything, because rather than delivering Robby to his “doctors” or even the police to take care of him, his brother selected the latest facility himself, based on its religious distinction as well as its success rate for addiction rehabilitation. While Robby never bought into the faith that seemed as important to Warren as oxygen, something about the way the counselors explained things finally made sense. He continued to struggle with how to make it work in his

life. But now at least there was something he believed in for the first time, and he was certain it wouldn't let him down. Regardless of his band's opinions, he wasn't giving up on trying to become a better man.

Calmly, Robby gestured toward Reggie. "What about him? He drinks more than I ever did..."

"Reggie isn't the point," Dave said as he paced the outer edge of the pool. "You aren't better than us, Robby...but ever since you've been back, you don't even hang with us anymore. You don't...swear...you don't drink...all you do is judge us for who we've always been. How is the tour going to work like that? We're already sick of you."

"The feeling's mutual," Robby muttered, trying to remember what his counselors had said about dealing with stress. He came up empty. "Not one of you came to visit me in rehab—or even called for that matter—except to ask when the songs would be done so we could go on another stupid tour."

Reggie belched as he stood. "Don't call this tour stupid or I'll..."

Robby laughed wryly. "You aren't even sober enough to finish that thought."

"This isn't why we came." Mike stepped between the men, his shoulders serving as a barrier from the fight that was brewing.

"Well, what did you come for?" Robby asked. "And you better not say a word about those songs because they're solid."

The final cuts of the new tracks pleased Robby. Sure, it was more of the same thing he'd always done, but if something wasn't broken, and so much of his life already was, he didn't foresee changing anything musically. The songs would win awards, go to number

one, and make Robby even more money. He sighed. His agent was still on his case to do something with the money he already made. In rehab, Robby finally understood what she meant. In making more money than he could ever spend, he'd avoided his real needs—to be loved for who he was as a human being, and he finally understood he also had a drive to make someone proud of him. How to go about that, however, was still a mystery. He was certain he'd never been told he'd done something right and there was a distinct need inside him to discover that place of peace. While he wasn't sure those songs were the ticket, music was his life, and it seemed the only place for him to start looking for peace.

"The songs are fine," Dave said, sounding bored. "What's not fine is your holier-than-thou attitude."

Reggie belched loudly and tossed his empty flask aside. "We replaced you," he said simply. "What do you think about that?" He laughed to himself.

Dave's blue eyes went steely as he glared. Clearly, that was not how the news was supposed to be delivered.

"That's not funny," Robby said, his heart skipping a beat. But even as he looked at his friends—men he had made incredible, award-winning music with for over twenty years, he knew it was true. The ground seemed to sway beneath him.

Mike paced again. "It's nothing personal, man. We can't wait anymore, and we can't take the chance that this time is going to be different. I don't know anyone that's been to rehab as much as you. Why don't you just admit you're a drunk and get on with it?"

Reggie laughed. "Alcoholism is a fine religion. I practice it myself."

Robby stared at them, his mouth hanging open as he digested the most horrible words he'd ever heard. "Being an alcoholic is nothing to be proud of. And I'm different now!" He threw his hands out at his sides. "Look at me!" Robby's brain went into overdrive as he attempted to think of how he could convince them his words were true. But even as he paddled through his thoughts, he was aware the ship had already sunk.

They'd canned him.

Dave slowly stood and went to stand beside Mike, looking every bit of his forty-five years old. "No hard feelings."

Reggie laughed again as he stood and stumbled feebly to Robby. He pushed him. "Yeah there's hard feelings—personal ones. We are done with you and we're keeping the songs and your name and there ain't a thing you can do about it. The lawyers said so..."

Robby looked from one man to the other, the truth slowly sinking in. His own band was getting rid of him. It didn't seem possible.

Reality hurt, which was why he avoided it for so many years. He couldn't remember a time when his family, his band, and his life hadn't been a big mess. Immediately Robby longed for the comfortable fog he'd shaken off in rehab. Surely there was alcohol somewhere in the house that would...

No. He tried to focus. There were other things he could do to handle this.

He'd call his counselor, his brother, his uncle Nick...his agent. He shuddered. There wasn't a person left who would want to hear it. Why couldn't he grow up and handle things himself? More importantly, he wondered why life couldn't leave him alone already.

Reggie pushed him again. "Aren't you going to