

SEEKING THE TRUTH BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER.
FINDING THE TRUTH MAY TEAR THEM APART.

DANA PRATOLA

VOICE
OF Truth

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Dana Pratola

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Dedication

Thanks to my Family for their unwavering support,
and to the Lord God, Who knows all our secrets and
loves us anyway.

What People are Saying

The Covering

“...The book has it all: angels, demons, motorcycles, tattoos, real life struggles, passion, life, death, love and victory by the grace of God. I’m not sure that I will ever look at another tattooed, motorcycle riding person the same after having read this book. This was the first book that I read by this author. It will not be last. Get it. Read it. Share it. You will not regret it.” ~ Teresa E. Snyder, reviewer

PROLOGUE

Sophia knew something wasn't right the instant she opened her mouth to sing and the first note hit the air. Her voice actually sounded good. It was only one word—part of a word really; more of a syllable—but it was good.

Her brows lifted in mild curiosity, and she cleared her throat before trying it again. When the next note came out as clear and pleasant as the first, her hands tightened around the steering wheel.

She glanced down at the chai latte in the cup holder. No, it wasn't some kind of reaction, and she hadn't scorched her throat—it remained untouched. But something had happened to change her voice so drastically.

Her gaze darted to the rearview mirror, but her reflection seemed the same, nothing out of the ordinary. She looked back to the road just in time to avoid rear-ending an expensive sedan.

Sophia clamped her mouth shut and glared at the radio. The pop singer seemed unaffected by her present condition. Well good for him. She remained silent for several blocks, time enough to reason it had never happened at all. It was, doubtless, just one of those things, where you drive under a power line and it messes with the radio reception. Yes, that was it.

With her bravery renewed, Sophia changed the station. A new release aired, one she didn't know the

words to, so she jabbed buttons until she heard the familiar strains of an old song. She was being silly. She opened her mouth once more.

The notes came out in a clean, effortless flow that scared her. "Am I losing my mind?" she asked the radio.

Maybe it was her hearing. No, she could still hear the swish of wipers across freshly sprinkled glass, the suck of rubber tire treads on wet pavement, and the singer's voice, satin smooth as always. Of course, people didn't always hear themselves the way they really sounded, right? She was probably just as bad as ever, but maybe she had wax buildup in her ears or something.

Then again, she was under more stress than usual, with parent-teacher conferences and Principal O'Malley dogging her about spending too much time playing games with the children and not enough on curriculum. It didn't seem to matter that Sophia's class was ranked at the top of the school in reading and comprehension, and in math, second only to the fifth grade Mighty Math Majors. She didn't feel the sting of that loss; those kids were abnormally attracted to numbers.

She pulled into her space in the school parking lot, turned off the ignition and went over the general things she should know: name, address, phone number, days of the week, mother's maiden name. Everything seemed to check out. People having breakdowns didn't know these things off the tops of their heads, did they? Then again, how could she be sure she wasn't twisting the answers in some way, or—

She forced her mind to a grinding halt before it could carry her over the edge. All of her saliva had

dried up, and her heart was racing at a rate she was certain couldn't be healthy. What she needed was a witness—a second party to deny or confirm that she could sing, or needed psychological treatment.

Sophia flipped open the cup lid, took the cup with both hands and sipped. The liquid was blazing hot, but she sipped steadily.

If she wasn't already over the edge, she was close. How was she going to pull off a calm facade in a classroom full of first-graders, whose job it seemed, was to notice every minute detail?

Just as Sophia got out of the car, the sporadic drizzle became a steady rain. Though she held her briefcase over her head, she was damp by the time she got inside and not in the mood to keep up with the morning gossip in the teachers' lounge, so she went directly to her class. In bad weather the students were brought inside to await the first bell, so she figured she had about ten minutes before she would collect her fifteen children from the gym.

She fumbled for her cell phone and had her brother on the line almost before she realized she'd dialed him. If anyone could talk her down, Anthony could.

"What?" Anthony barked into the phone.

"It's me. Just getting up?"

"Unfortunately. What's wrong?"

Over the phone, Sophia could hear the scrape of match to striker, the sifting of air through the end of a cigarette. She was still praying he would quit. "Nothing."

"You didn't call me first thing in the morning for nothing."

Sophia twisted a lock of black hair around her

finger. "Nothing, exactly."

"So tell me what's not exactly wrong," Anthony said.

Growing up, she had often wished her two brothers didn't know her so well, but found it an enormous comfort right now.

"I can sing," she said finally.

"No, you can't," Anthony stated as a blunt fact.

"I couldn't," she agreed as her hands flailed with excitement in every direction. "But now I can. I don't know how or why, but I can. At least I think I can."

"I'm not following."

"Neither am I."

She started at the beginning, as best she could pinpoint it. When she finished and he said nothing, she went to the portable stereo in the corner of the room, popped out the sing-along CD, and popped in one of the CDs she listened to during free period.

"Hold on, listen." She put the phone where he could hear and waited for the singer to complete one of her trademark vocal summersaults before turning down the stereo and following with one of her own.

"Who was that?" Anthony asked when she picked the phone up again.

"Me."

"No way."

"You see? That's what I thought when I first heard it." He might not believe her yet, but at least he was hearing the same thing. "It sounds like me, but...not. I mean, it sounds like I would sound if I could sing, right?"

"I just woke up, Sophia," he said impatiently. "I'm not in the mood for games."

"It's not, wait. Listen again."

“Sophia—”

It was easy enough to silence him when she sang a song they had made up as kids. It was a gruesome ditty about food poisoning, intended as some kind of childish revenge when Uncle Victor had made them sit at the children’s table at Easter. Since they’d never disclosed the lyrics to another soul, Anthony would have no question it was her voice.

Sophia heard his fridge door open and the seal break on a bottle of water. “That was you,” he said, surprised.

“Yes.”

“You must be leaving something out. Think. Did you hit your head or get accidentally hypnotized or something?”

She had to laugh. “How do you get accidentally hypnotized?”

“How should I know? I don’t hear you coming up with anything better.”

He was right; she had nothing more rational to offer. Noise in the hall caught her ear, and she looked up to see Mrs. Falk marching by with her third graders.

“I have to run. Thanks for listening. Love you.” She hung up and ran to gather her class, feeling a little lighter now that she had spoken to someone. He was probably right. She must be missing something.

~*~

Throughout the day, she rewound and replayed every moment she could remember, working backward from the time she turned on the radio in the car that morning. Before that, there was the coffee shop, dressing for work, the shower...the shower. No,

she'd sounded as bad as usual.

There didn't seem to be much point, but she went back to the night before that. It had been a quiet evening alone at home. Ben had tried to talk her into joining him and another couple for dinner and a movie, but she knew that when they were alone later, he would try to talk her into other things. He was a nice enough guy, but much too preoccupied with pursuing a physical relationship. She didn't want to dwell on him.

Apart from watching an old black and white movie, she could remember nothing to distinguish that night from any other. Nothing remarkable, nothing disturbing or riveting.

"Miss Gallo."

Sophia looked down as small, persistent hands tugged on her sleeve. "What's the matter, Lily?"

The teary eyed child sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I drew a picture for you. Now it's gone. Bentley ate it last night."

Sophia had seen Lily's monster dog on occasion, dragging its owners around the neighborhood, and had no doubt the girl spoke the truth.

She crouched to eye level with Lily and smoothed a hand over her silken hair. "That's all right, you can draw me another one."

"I wanted to give it to you today," she whined, though Sophia imagined she had intended the assertion to sound urgent.

Even after all the schooling and working with children Sophia realized there were some questions that could never be answered. Like why, when asked if they had to use the bathroom, children would refuse, but two minutes later on the way to the bus, would be

bursting at the seams. Moreover, why, when school was almost over, would a little girl all at once remember that a ravenous mutt had eaten her drawing the night before? Kids.

“We’ll be singing the goodbye song in a few minutes,” Sophia told her gently. She took a sheet of white paper from her desk and handed it to Lily. “Go back to your seat and you can draw until then.”

Sophia went back to the boom box, and put in the disc of the friends’ goodbye song they sang every afternoon before leaving for the day. When the children gathered in a circle by the door, she took a deep breath and pushed PLAY.

They were her first audience.

1

Three years later

So much had changed in such a short period of time, Sophia thought, looking down on rain-slicked Fifth Ave. Just a few years ago, April would mean saving pennies and stretching her budget to allow for a spring break vacation. And probably using most of that free time fine tuning her curriculum for when she returned to school.

She dropped her head against the window frame. The children she'd taught were in fourth grade now. In fourth grade there was no more marching around the classroom shaking tambourines fashioned from paper plates and dried navy beans. No more cutting out pictures that started with the letter of the day. All of them had probably forgotten the words to the goodbye song. She wondered if they thought about what had become of Miss Gallo in their minds.

Her winsome smile faded. The amount of airplay her songs received made even her sick, so it wasn't likely any of them had forgotten her name, but would they recognize the real Miss Gallo under the image that had been pasted over her? And was it fair for her to wish them to remember a woman she barely remembered herself?

She couldn't pretend she was the same person. Even trying to distance herself, it was hard to remain untainted by the world she now lived in. Sometimes

just seeing what others were willing to sacrifice for fame and fortune was enough to change someone.

What amazed Sophia was that the less she recognized herself, the more strangers not only identified her on the street, but seemed to feel a connection to her. She had the media to thank for that, reporters who baited lines and dangled bits of her life over the murky waters of gossip for greedy, empty minds to snatch up. And what reporters couldn't find, they manufactured. The stream had to keep moving at all costs, no matter who paid.

Resentment stretched restlessly inside her. The gossip stream had carried her out of a life she'd been contented to live, into a world of tinted windows, endless commitments and security I.D. tags. It was what prevented her from developing close relationships, and in some cases, destroyed relationships she'd already had.

Not that it was all negative. Seeing and meeting so many talented artists at awards' shows never got old. Above that, it created circumstances in which it was possible to influence people, to make a fan's wish come true, or bring life to a starving Ethiopian village. But, she must never forget how easily life could be taken away.

Her movements slow and languid, Sophia went to the cherry wood bar to pour a glass of wine, something she'd only recently begun to do to help her unwind. With the glass in one hand, she undid the clips in her hair with the other, releasing a fall of black silk down her back. She yearned to take off her makeup, but needed to relax for just a moment.

Maybe she could catch a nap before her sound check at the Garden. If not for the television

appearance this morning, she would still be in bed. How people expected her to perform first thing in the morning, when her day didn't usually begin until it was half over, was just... She sighed. She used to be a morning person.

Crossing the room, she caught a glimpse of her own face staring back at her from the front page of Personality magazine on a side table. She always requested these publications be banned from her suite, but it must have been an oversight. Maybe an overzealous waiter who thought it would be a form of adulation...

Taking a closer look, there was no sign of weariness in the photo, no clue that she'd only gotten four-and-a-half hours sleep the night before. The wonders of cosmetics. She gave her image a wry smile and turned away.

People saw what they wanted to see. Not long ago, people described her smile as friendly, her heavy-lidded, long-lashed eyes as dreamy, even contemplative. But squeeze that same face through a camera lens, add a little rumor, and *voila!* A temptress was born. An item she'd made the mistake of reading recently, now described her mouth as seductive, her eyes suggestive.

Sophia sank onto the sumptuous damask couch. It would be ungrateful to say her life was bad. She had numerous properties, piles of money and more advantages than she could count. But she would give no thanks to the media for any of it. God and her fans got all the thanks, in that order. Without God and this peculiar gift He'd given her, it wouldn't be possible to help so many.

Yet there were still nagging questions. How had it

happened? Why? Why at that time? Questions she would never have an answer to.

She washed them down in a swallow of crisp, white wine. It must be the rain making her feel low. Why else would she feel so edgy and dissatisfied? Certainly not that it was her birthday and neither of her parents had called.

She tucked her bare feet under her, tilted her head back against the cushions and stared up at the ceiling. The truth was, it was none of those things. It was Kira Quinn. Even the reason Sophia was thinking about her class today was due to Kira. Because they would be her age soon. And before long would catch up and pass her. Because Kira was dead and buried in a tiny cemetery in San Antonio.

Sophia closed her eyes tight and willed the tears away. Her head felt too heavy to lift from the thick fabric, so she closed her eyes and listened to the silence, and the steady thump, thump of a heart feeling sorry for itself. It was better than replaying the voice of Kira's mother in her head, telling Sophia she wasn't to blame, it was just a terrible tragedy.

Sophia couldn't totally agree. Six months ago today, Kira had been crushed to death at one of her shows; certainly she held some responsibility. And worse, she hadn't even faced Kira's parents personally. Even if they had requested her attendance, the public would have made a sick festival of the funeral, waving pictures and snapping new ones. She had, of course, spoken to them, insisted on paying for the services, etc., but...

The knock on the door made her heart ricochet in her chest and she set the glass on the rosewood table as she leapt up, almost tipping both over.

A luscious redhead spiraled in, a burst of vivacious color in a light blue suit with lime green lapels and cuffs. The matching rain slicker she carried over her arm was cast aside as she leaned in to kiss Sophia's cheek.

"Kitty," Sophia sighed, wearily.

"How many times have I told you not to leave the door unlocked?"

Whenever her publicist was in a room people seldom noticed anything else, but when Sophia turned back to the doorway, there was no way to miss the man who filled it. He was at least six feet, with wide shoulders and a broad chest.

"Didn't I tell you she never locks the door?" Kitty slapped his arm. "She needs another bodyguard. Can't seem to keep one, but that's another story. This is Cade Fioretti. He's for you," she told Sophia.

"Excuse me?" Sophia closed the door.

Kitty giggled and tossed her purse on the couch. "Don't worry, it's nothing kinky, Darling. Cade's the writer I was telling you about."

Sophia released a long, exasperated breath. "We talked about this, Kit."

Kitty swept a handful of auburn locks away from her heart-shaped face. "It can only benefit you."

"I don't want my life story written," Sophia told Cade definitely. His crystal green eyes bored into hers, clashing in a brief battle of wills. She looked away. "I'm too young for a biography anyway. Shouldn't that wait until I'm dead?"

"Really, biography has such a scholastic sound to it. Cade's thinking of something more intimate, but not intrusive," Kitty assured Sophia. "We really should remain open-minded, don't you think?"

"I don't care what you call it," Sophia returned. "I don't want it."

Kitty tugged on the collar of Cade's leather jacket, striped with darker shades of brown where the rain had lashed at it. "Would you like me to take that for you?"

Cade remained silent, his eyes fixed on Sophia.

"Cade?" Kitty prompted.

When he looked away long enough to shrug out of his jacket, Sophia went to the table and picked up her drink. She no longer wanted the wine but handling the glass gave her something to do with her hands. She would rather be watched by thousands of people, than scrutinized by one.

"You look better in person," Cade said.

She wasn't surprised that his voice was deep. "Thank you," she answered, assuming it was a compliment. He was staring again. "I'm sorry, would you like to sit down, Mr.—"

"Cade."

It was only one word, but the force of it brought her up short. She knew it was petty, but because of his arrogance and the way he was watching her expectantly, she deliberately resisted saying his name. "Would you like to sit?"

"I saw you on TV this morning," he said. He circled her once, examining her from all angles like a patron at an art exhibit. The nerve.

"Oh?"

"You don't give much away, do you?"

"I don't know what you mean." Of course, she did and when he quirked one eyebrow she knew he knew she did.

"The interview," he said.