



E.A.
WEST

*Christmas
Harmony*

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E.A. West

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Dedication

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." ~ Jeremiah 29:11

Praise

"Books such as *Healing in Haven Falls* are a rare jewel to treasure." ~ Suzie Housley, Romance Junkies

The Key to Charlotte

"This is an incredibly sweet romance, profound and absolutely unforgettable—a bite-sized read that packs a super-sized emotional wallop." ~ Delia Latham, inspirational romance author

"I highly recommend *The Key to Charlotte* to anyone who needs to be reminded of the love available to us through both other humans and God." ~ Crystal, CK2S Kwips and Critiques

Breath of Christmas

"There is something so beautiful about the way EA West creates her stories. They tug on the heart, they depict realistic characters, and I love the unique circumstances and fresh plots she develops." ~ Marianne Evans, inspirational romance author

Bogota Blessings

"This novel contains a nice melding of cultures by combining both the mainstream American citizen and a Columbian. Overall, a well-done romance and an inspiring read!" ~ Shaunna Gonzales, InD'tale Magazine

1

Tawny Beschen buried her face in her hands and tried to hold the tears at bay. She had come here to take a break from life while she recovered from the stressful semester, not cry and embarrass herself and her father. The weight of a hand rested on her back, and she looked up into her father's gentle eyes.

Jack Beschen smiled from his place behind the steering wheel and gave her back a quick rub. "You'll be all right. Let's get inside so I can rehearse and you can relax."

"Relaxing sounds good." Tawny opened her car door and stepped out into the brisk, mid-December morning. She focused on releasing the tension. The relaxation techniques a counselor had taught her years ago never worked as well as her own ways of coping with stress.

Dad retrieved his guitar case from the trunk, and they headed into the recording studio.

The few people they passed greeted her father warmly.

Tawny couldn't focus on small talk or even pretending to be social. Her overstimulated brain found the beige carpet much more interesting, and she couldn't resist. Not when she felt the frustratingly familiar pressure of a meltdown building deep inside. If she let that rise to the surface, she would have to

weather the emotional storm.

Her father guided her into the usual room his band rehearsed in, and she breathed a sigh of relief at the familiarity. She couldn't deal with change right now, since it would undoubtedly push her over the edge. Thankfully, her dad and his bandmates understood autism. They always tried to help her relax if she started stressing too much or the anxiety got too bad.

Tawny looked around the room, noting the absence of people and the presence of the equipment. "What did they do, set up for practice and leave?"

Jack chuckled and set his guitar case on the floor. "No, they're probably running a little late. We've been leaving the room set up lately so we can get into the music faster."

She walked over to a microphone. As she ran her fingers along the stand, the quiet of the room seeped into her, calming her thoughts. The band's heavy metal style had always soothed her frayed nerves. Her father understood because he found his music relaxing as well.

As Jack plugged his guitar into the amplifier, a handful of other people stepped into the room, talking and laughing.

From the voices, Max Osborn, Dale Hibbert, Alan Sanders, and Mike Hill were all there. That left Jimmy George as the only man missing, but the guitarist was almost always late. It was another part of the rehearsal routine.

"Hey, Tawny," Alan said, "you mind if I take the mic now?"

She lifted her fingers from the smooth metal of the stand and stepped back. "Oh, sorry."

“No worries. Long semester?”

“I think I’m brain dead,” she said, shoving her hands in the front pocket of her hooded sweatshirt.

Alan chuckled and adjusted the microphone. “You must be glad you’re on winter break, then.”

“Yeah.” She wandered away as the men prepared to start their rehearsal. Minutes after she stretched out on the floor and stared up at the ceiling with its recessed lights, someone else entered the room.

A stranger around her age. He was cute with his dark brown hair and a day’s growth of beard shadowing his jaw.

The sudden change in routine broke through her relaxed state. A rush of anxiety immobilized her. She curled into a ball on the carpet and pressed her sleeve-covered fist to her mouth to muffle the crying.

“Hey, Tawny, are you all right?” Her father’s quiet voice meant she hadn’t done a great job of hiding her tears. “You want to tell me about it?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. After a few breaths, she rolled halfway over and looked directly into her father’s face. “That’s not Jimmy.”

Dad’s features filled with sympathy, and he smoothed her hair back. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I thought you knew.”

Dread washed over her. “He’s not dead, is he?”

“No! He’s still going strong.” Dad rubbed her shoulder. “He decided it was time to move on to other things, so we found ourselves a new guitarist a few months ago.”

“I...I think you told me about that when I was working on that paper that drove me nuts. Some guy with a Bible name or something.”

“That’s right. His name is Malachi Vandermeer.

Would you like to meet him?"

Tawny nodded.

Dale was talking to the new guy on the far side of the room.

Insecurity slammed into her. Would he want to meet her?

Her dad held his hand out. "It's a little hard to introduce you if you don't come with me."

"He probably thinks I'm an idiot or a psycho."

"No, he doesn't." Dad gave her a brief yet soothing hug. "When I came to see about you, Dale said he'd explain to Malachi."

"I feel like an idiot." Humiliation threatened to make her cry again.

"There's no need for it. A lot of college students get stressed out with their classes, and they don't have the added struggles you do. You rock, girl, for overcoming that and making the dean's list anyway. Now, let's go introduce you to the newbie so you can quit worrying."

She dropped her gaze to the floor, more comfortable looking at the ugly utilitarian carpet than risking seeing what was in anyone's eyes. Dale's familiar skater shoes and an unfamiliar pair of sneakers came into view. They looked as if they'd walked across the country and back. Tawny stole a glance at their owner.

Malachi offered a smile.

Tawny looked back down.

"Malachi, this is my daughter, Tawny. Tawny, meet Malachi Vandermeer, our new guitarist."

"Hi." She managed to make eye contact just long enough to discover he had the most gorgeous brown eyes she'd ever seen.

“Hey, Tawny, it’s nice to meet you.” Malachi’s smooth, rich voice sent tingles racing through her. “Your dad’s been bragging on you since I joined the band. How’d your grades turn out?”

“All A’s.” She glanced at her father as curiosity formed. How many others that she’d never met had heard about her college career?

“Awesome!” Malachi’s exclamation broke into her ponderings. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Tawny’s nerves jumped. “I’m gonna go back to the floor now. Have a good rehearsal.”

Malachi’s voice followed her. “Hey, Tawny, I have a cousin who’s an Aspie, and his daughter is autistic. Just thought you might like to know that I get it.”

She gave a single nod and stretched out on the floor again. Maybe she didn’t have to worry about him thinking she was crazy or stupid after all.

~*~

Malachi took a drink from his water bottle and set it on the floor. His gaze drifted to the young woman lying on the floor by the wall, staring at the ceiling.

Tawny was undeniably cute with her shoulder-length brown hair cut into shaggy layers and big hazel eyes that skimmed over people as though making eye contact was painful.

Her tears when he walked in had torn through him with the force of a mine before Dale explained she’d been really stressed by her classes.

Thanks to his cousins, he knew that in those circumstances, a new person could be enough to start a meltdown.

Alan looked back at him. “You ready to try out

that new song?"

"Which one?"

"The one you and Jack came up with."

Malachi played the first chord and grinned. "Let's do it."

Tawny rolled over to face them.

His heart thumped as her gaze appeared to settle on his guitar. Soon he lost himself in the song, letting the music flow through him as Alan sang.

It was a subtle message, to be sure, but he and Jack had come up with the lyrics after a Bible study meeting had made them both think about the challenges and temptations they faced as professional musicians, particularly on the road.

Malachi was still a fairly young Christian and had only been attending church regularly for less than a year. With that background, the words of the song held a deeper meaning for him as they encouraged looking toward God whenever the world started creeping in and threatening the foundation of faith.

The last notes faded away, and Malachi looked at Tawny.

She blushed and shifted her gaze to her father.

"I like it. You should put it on your next album."

"We plan to," Jack said. "And you can thank Malachi for most of the lyrics and a good portion of the music. We may have worked together on it, but he definitely took the lead."

Her interested expression sent Malachi's heart into overdrive.

"Do you write a lot of songs?" She stood and came over to the group.

"Not really. I usually play what others have written."

"You're wasting your talent." Tawny glanced at her dad. "Why aren't you making him write more music?"

The entire band laughed, and a blush colored Tawny's cheeks.

Jack joined them and laid a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "It's not up to me, Tawny. If it were, I'd have him writing most of our stuff. But if you want to hear more music from Malachi, you'll have to talk to him about it."

"OK." She faced Malachi again, her expression completely serious. "Write more music. You're good at it, and the kids who listen to Death Pardon's music would benefit from your lyrics."

He smiled and rested his hand on his guitar. "Well, I need inspiration to write music. You want to help me find it?"

Jack cleared his throat, and Malachi glanced at him, catching the warning in the older man's eyes. Uncertain at first what he was being warned against, he quickly caught on when what he'd said sank in. He faced Tawny, prepared to apologize for the question that could be taken so wrong, but she nodded, her eyes sparkling.

"I don't know how to help anyone find inspiration, but I'm willing to try."

Malachi found it difficult to breathe.

"Tawny." Jack's tone left no doubt in Malachi's mind that he should have kept his mouth shut and remembered this young woman was the daughter of a man who knew way too much about his past.

She turned toward her father. "What?"

"That's not a good idea."

"Why not? He asked for help. I'm just agreeing to

give it to him.”

Malachi stepped in before Jack could disillusion her. “I meant it in the most innocent way possible, Jack. You know I’m not going to mess with your daughter.”

“Mess with me?” Tawny crossed her arms, and her eyebrows drew together. “Why would he think you would do something like that?”

Dale spoke up from his position behind the drums. “It’s that whole double meaning thing, Tawny. You took Malachi’s asking for help at face value. Your dad caught a different meaning, and Malachi is wise enough to realize he worded his question badly.”

“Oh.” Her arms slowly dropped to her sides as she studied Malachi. “So, do you want help writing music, or were you just saying that for some other reason?”

Aware of his tenuous position, Malachi thought fast. He decided to risk death at the hands of his fellow guitarist. “Well, I wouldn’t mind having you help me write a song or two, but I think the final decision on our collaboration should rest with your father.”

“Why?” Tawny rolled her eyes. “I’m twenty-one years old. I can make my own decisions.”

“It’s a matter of respect. Your dad needs to be sure I respect you. Otherwise, I’ll be looking for a new band to play with.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She looked at her father. “You wouldn’t fire him just because I help him write music without your explicit permission, would you?”

“No, but after this conversation I don’t think I mind you working with him.” Jack steadily met Malachi’s gaze. “I’m pretty sure I have nothing to worry about when it comes to him respecting you and treating you right.”

“You don’t,” Malachi said, relieved he wouldn’t be

experiencing his own funeral after all.

“Good.” Jack drew in a breath and looked at the rest of the band. “What do you say we knock off for lunch?”

~*~

The diner down the street from the record studio was as crowded and noisy as ever. They served the best inexpensive burgers and fries in the city.

Although Tawny normally loved the chaotic atmosphere, today it threatened to overwhelm her. Could she get out of there gracefully, or would someone stop her with questions?

Malachi tossed his paper napkin on his empty plate and stood. “Be back in a few.”

The others nodded to acknowledge the statement, but their discussion of the new album continued.

Malachi went outside.

Curiosity gave her the perfect opportunity to escape.

She tapped her father’s shoulder. “I’m going outside.”

“All right.” He patted her arm, understanding shining in his eyes.

Tawny headed for the exit, grateful for a father who understood her. She had expected a little more suspicion since she was following Malachi, but maybe her dad hadn’t noticed.

Malachi stood at the corner of the red brick building. He pulled a small package from his pocket.

“Running away?” she asked.

“Nope. I’m indulging in a bad habit.”

“What bad habit?”

“Smoking.” He pulled out a cigarette and dug a lighter out of his pocket. “Since you obviously don’t smoke, I highly recommend never starting.”

“Because it’s bad for you?”

“Yes, and it’s expensive.” He blew out a thin stream of smoke. “Plus the constant need to excuse myself and go outside to smoke is no fun.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Because cigarettes are addicting. Does your dad know you’re out here with me?”

“I told him I was going outside.” She decided to let him in on her not-so-secret secret. “Following you gave me a convenient excuse to escape the noise and confusion inside.”

Malachi nodded and smiled. “Ah, gotcha.”

“What does it taste like?”

“What?”

“Cigarette smoke. What does it taste like?”

“That’s a hard one to explain. I take it you’ve never tried smoking.”

“No.”

Some of the people at college had laughed when they found out she hadn’t experimented with tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. Even after a lifetime of knowing she was different, the laughter still hurt.

Malachi didn’t laugh. “Good for you. It’s a nasty habit to get hooked on.”

“But why do people like smoking? Does it taste good?”

“Good question. If it’s been a long time since the last cigarette, it tastes a whole lot better.” His vague, confusing answers weren’t satisfying.

“Can I try it to find out how it tastes?”

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

Tawny rolled her eyes. "That sounds like something my dad would say."

"He's a smart man." Malachi sighed. "If I let you taste my cigarette, do you promise you'll never smoke again? Your dad would kill me if I got you hooked."

"I don't want to take up smoking. I just want to know how it tastes so maybe I can understand why people like doing it so much."

"I think you'll be disappointed." He held out his cigarette. "Don't take too much smoke into your mouth, and don't breathe it in."

The opportunity to finally satisfy her long-standing curiosity outweighed her concern. She put her lips to the cigarette and took an experimental suck. Then she pulled away and blew out the tiny amount of smoke that had entered her mouth. "That's disgusting!" She coughed a little. "Why would anyone want to smoke enough to get addicted?"

"I'm sure each smoker has their own reasons."

"Why do you do it?"

Malachi drew on his cigarette, then spoke. "That goes into personal territory that I don't want to discuss right now. Let's just say I was going through a really stressful time and discovered a nicotine fix helped me relax."

She'd made him uncomfortable. Guilt rippled through her.

He stubbed the cigarette butt out and dropped it into the container nearby.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine. Maybe I'll tell you about it someday, but not right now."

The depth of emotion in his eyes made her uneasy.

She dropped her gaze to his chest. "OK."

"Let's go back inside." He held the door open for her.

Jack turned to Tawny as she settled in her seat and studied her with a suspicious gaze. "You smell like smoke."

"She found me outside and kept me company, Jack," Malachi said.

"That would explain it."

"You're so suspicious," she said with a laugh.

"With good reason. Were you smoking? I can smell it on your breath."

Malachi looked as though he wanted to sink under the table.

"Come on, Dad. You know me better than that. I just wanted to know what it tasted like, and Malachi was nice enough to let me find out. After I promised to never smoke again."

"Oh?" Jack glanced toward Malachi again, looking a little less hostile. "And what was the result?"

"It's the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted, and I can't figure out why anyone would want to smoke."

The band members laughed, and Jack cracked a smile. "You're not alone in not understanding that one."

The tension around the table melted away as the conversation moved on.

Malachi was watching her again. He had watched her throughout the rehearsal as well, although he hadn't smiled quite so much. The warm look in his eyes had been there, though, the same way it was now. Could it be that he liked her even though he'd only met her a few hours ago?

2

The smooth wood of the old acoustic guitar was comforting, but Malachi couldn't find his usual joy in playing it. After a few more random chords, he sighed and laid the instrument on the couch. He reached for the pack of cigarettes lying on the scarred wooden coffee table. He started to pull one out, but a sudden mental image of Tawny stopped him.

"It's the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted."

He could remember a time when he had thought the same thing. Then Abendroth had disappeared in a cloud of smoke and dust. Cigarettes had been the most accessible option to ease his jitters.

Sounds and scents from that nightmarish day crept in, and he hastily lit a cigarette. He focused on the warm smoke filling his mouth and the feel of the cigarette in his fingers. Such small things, but they helped him stay grounded in the present. The remembered shouts, gunfire, and explosions faded as the scent of burning tobacco invaded. "I'm home," he whispered into the silence of his converted garage apartment.

The reminder did little to ease his nervousness, but it helped with the anxiety. He paced around the single room. Thoughts of Tawny flowed, slowing his steps. She was cute and quirky. Something about her sweet innocence drew him like a camel to an oasis, but it also scared him.

How could he ever hope to develop any kind of a