
Soul Singers Series
Sing a Song of Love
LoRee Peery

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Dedication

Stephanie Grace Whitson Higgins, my Christian sister, prayer warrior, likeminded to the soul, fellow author, and mother of four singers. Thank you for the gift of your friendship and standing by me. Thank you for the assurance that I have someone here to ground me and pray with. I love you.

And of course, to heart and soul singers everywhere.

Sing a Song

Sing a song of praise
A song to my Rock

Sing a song of love
A song to my Fortress

Sing a song of thanks
A song to my Savior

Sing a song of witness
A song to my Deliverer

Sing a song of honor
A song to my Anointed

Sing a new song of praise
A song to the great I AM.

Southside Fellowship Music Ministry

Calling gifted voices and sincere hearts to form a Praise Ensemble.

Pastor Sterling wishes to assemble a group of fourteen, or the Lord's provided number. Auditioners can be current members of the adult choir. New singers welcome.

Southside Chorale is a temporary group name. The ensemble will sing at various times during the year. Christmas Eve service, Fall Welcome Back, maybe three other times a year, such as during a communion service.

A short testimony is required ahead of try-outs. Please upload your salvation story and schedule a time on Saturday to sing with Worship Pastor Crew Sterling.

Southside Soul Singers

Flannery Eden and Zara Gentry, first sopranos
Adair Bonebrake and Talia Valiant, soprano two
Risa Cummings and Layla Hollis, first alto
Marnie Evans, alto two
Myles Woodruff, Irish tenor
Youth Pastor, Cooper Valiant, first tenor
Linc Waddell, second tenor
Multi-range Elgin Hunnicutt
Wyatt Roman and Drake Powell, baritones
Creed Calhoun, bass
Accompanist, Angelica Sterling

Chapter 1

For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ~1 John 3:11

As was her practice, Risa Cummings was the first out of the choir room.

The mezzanine hallway loomed long.

"Risa, hey. Hold up."

She froze. The familiar voice grated. She ignored it and scurried away, swinging her coat over her head and arms into the sleeves. She fled down the hall on her way to the stairs.

Why, of all people, did Myles Woodruff have to sing in Southside Soul Singers?

She paused at the top of the stairs for a passing rush of children on their way to a Wednesday night classroom.

The timing was long enough for Myles to catch up with her. He tapped her shoulder. "This has to stop."

She dared a glance at the rust-colored sweater he wore, noted the coat slung over his shoulder. Swallowed against her reaction to him. Though his hair was silver now, and he had crow's feet around his eyes to match hers, the attraction prevailed.

"We have to stop ignoring one another," he went

on. “Pretending we don’t know each other. The rest of the ensemble has to notice and will wonder why we treat each other differently.”

She raised her gaze to his mouth and immediately swiveled back to the stairs. She paused with one booted foot in the air. “This isn’t the place, Myles.”

“Then let’s go somewhere else.”

His warm voice at her shoulder sent a familiar thrill down her spine.

She ignored the sensation and all but growled. “I don’t think so.”

He shouldered behind her and flattened against the wall for a girl who approached the stairs behind him. Risa hoped the end of the rail poked him in the side. He cupped her elbow.

“Hey, you two, have a great night.”

Risa shot a stiff smile toward Zara Gentry, her prayer partner, and Drake Powell, who happened to be this month’s prayer partner to Myles. They must have realized she and Myles weren’t moving, so they stepped around her and Myles, rejoined their hands, and descended side by side.

This close, she inhaled his aroma. Spicy, musky, expensive. He must use the same soap. She looked down and squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn’t twenty-five any longer. How dare he make her heart thump so loudly in her ears?

She sensed movement as another couple passed them. Sneaked a peak at him standing above her.

Myles frowned, opened his mouth but didn’t speak, rolled his shoulders forward and back, and

nudged her with his elbow. “Head down, please. We’re blocking stair traffic.”

Risa stuffed her gloves in her pockets, but still managed to swirl the ring on her right hand, before she descended. Her mind circled the way she worked that garnet ring. She’d discovered after tryouts for the ensemble in August that Myles had been out of town that day. Worship Pastor Crew was familiar with his Irish tenor voice because he soloed on Sundays. Thus, Myles didn’t need to audition. Maybe not even a testimony because he was known.

Had she been aware he’d sing with Soul Singers Ensemble, would she have tried out herself?

Yes. She loved to sing for the Lord.

They needed to step aside at the bottom of the stairs for a line of children to pass.

Praise God only a security guy nodded as she all but ran through the open foyer. Risa pushed through the first door. *I refuse to make myself vulnerable again.* The thought gritted through her mind ahead of the second door that led to the parking lot.

Bible study activities, doing various services at the church, and events with work friends now kept her occupied. She retrieved her gloves and yanked them on, amazed they didn’t drop due to her trembling.

“Risa. Please wait.” His footsteps crunched on the gravel over a corner of broken concrete.

“I waited long enough.” That sarcastic bitterness was a side of herself that she hated. Especially since she believed she’d overcome the fault.

She’d yearned for the man. Waited and hoped for

Myles to come back into her life for ten long years. But God had enabled her to go on and live without him. Why, oh why were they in the same church all these years later?

Sick to her stomach, she halted beneath a glowing yellow light.

Myles caught up. He bent his head to meet her gaze, but she refused to search his eye.

I am your strength.

The Lord's voice brought Psalm 91:1-2 to the forefront. *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust*."

Fortified with strength, she straightened and looked Myles in the face.

"There you are." He half-smiled, sighed, and scrubbed a hand over his face. She didn't remember him doing that when he was younger. "Can we please go somewhere and talk?"

Risa glanced behind him, back at the church entrance.

Zara and Drake sauntered through the doors with arms around one another. They obviously warmed one another against the bite of the November wind. They also ignored the older pair who stood beside a drying bush with purple berries, and went another direction.

She heaved a sigh and scolded herself for acting childish rather than set a good example. "I suppose we have to. Since we're the oldest in ensemble and quote, 'ought to exude mature Christianity.' I suppose we

should be civil to one another."

How could that old before-Christ person raise its head and pursue her again? The very thought of Myles brought back her broken dreams and broken heart. How could such emotions return after decades, so raw, and spew out of her mouth?

Only in the Lord had she shot it down before. With Him, she could do it again.

And why, oh why, did her heart gallop and her head buzz while he stood so close? She shivered.

"You're cold." Myles extended his hand as though to touch her, but withdrew it just as fast. "I think that bakery in Meridian Plaza is still open. Shall we meet there and get hot drinks?"

She gave in to good sense. They did need to be civil. Something had to change for the sake of her heart. She nodded and walked toward her vehicle.

Memories assailed her on the short drive. They'd been young. Twenty-two and twenty-four. Plenty of men in the church had married at that age and were still with their first loves and had married children of their own now.

Such a life hadn't been meant for her.

Myles was once her whole world. They met when she'd worked as a bank teller and he was a bank official. He still dressed sharp as a banker with button down shirts and jackets. A suit on the Sundays he sang solos. He favored browns, shunned bright colors, and preferred khaki-colored trousers over jeans.

She disliked herself for longing after Myles from afar.

Did he still take women on flamboyant dates and have an active social life?

Out of curiosity, she'd searched for him on media platforms where his status read as single. She'd peeked at his pictures. Rather than the flashy women and expensive restaurants he once touted, he posted church updates, and shared news of a private school that his company associated with. She stopped looking for him around the same time she realized that she didn't have a clear picture of what he did for a living.

She bowed her head on her hands atop the steering wheel. "I want to praise You, Lord. You love me with a perfect love. Thank You. Thank You for the gift of love. You are a good, good Father. Thank You for calling me daughter. Protect my heart with a towering fortress wall, and lead my conversation to honor You as I meet with Myles." Her thoughts immediately turned to song.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
Sweetest Name I know,
Fills my every longing,
Keeps me singing as I go.

Singing always helped put her heart right. Though she hadn't sung the words out loud, she voiced her prayer. "Okay, Lord. I turn Myles over to You. Only You know why my first love is back in my life now. You know how powerful my feelings were for him. You healed my broken heart when we were young. I want to trust You, Lord."

CHAPTER 2

Myles parked in front of the bakery and thumbed off a text to Drake Powell, his November Soul Singers prayer partner.

> *Hey, bud, meeting up with someone from the past. Could you please pray for me? I have a lot of fixing to do. She has a load of forgiving to do. Have a good date with Zara. I still plan to see you Saturday for coffee.*

Drake responded with a thumb's up emoji.

The Spirit had given Myles the idea for ensemble prayer partners and he ran it by Pastor Drew, who thought it a good idea. So far, their connection had worked out great.

He opened his SUV door as Risa drove behind him and pulled into a slot three cars away. *Lord, give me the words. I know I hurt her. I'm counting on You to make it right. You know how much she's been on my mind. How many times I've prayed for her*.

He waited for her. Still as pretty as a picture with her sapphire blue eyes and straight black hair with

bangs that framed her face. He watched her when the choir sang. The lights often glistened off her studded black glasses. She'd been on the thin side when they were together. The slight weight gain had softened her.

But the expression on her face as she acknowledged him was far from soft.

"Let me get the door." The scent of fresh bread caused his mouth to water since he hadn't eaten before rehearsal.

"Thanks."

Risa ordered first.

The plank floor was tracked with multiple footprints from the moisture earlier in the day, reminding him how he looked forward to early snow that brightened and cleaned the earth. He ordered while Risa accepted the oversized latte she'd ordered.

Without a word, he followed her to a table. The mismatched wooden chairs were part of the coffee shop's charm.

Risa set down her drink, swung off her coat, and placed it on the back of a chair.

He wanted to pull out her chair but instinct told him she'd not appreciate the gesture.

Myles dropped into a chair and studied the cream heart as it dissolved into the hot chocolate in his mug. Nerves jangled. "We could talk about so many things, and I want to. I've tried to summon the courage for two months, since the beginning of Soul Singers. But I need to say first that I'm sorry for the past, and I want to start over."

She ran a finger across the rim of her cup and

finally looked at him. “Thank you, I guess. This isn’t easy. But we’re supposed to be all grown up and mature, right? Talk about godly things?” Her lovely mouth quirked.

So she didn’t want to talk about the past. “On the drive from church, I kept recalling the words of Crew’s prayer tonight.”

“I know. For such a young worship director, Pastor Crew Sterling is maturing fast.” Risa smiled at her own comment. She raised her drink and blew over the rim, and then licked foam from her upper lip.

“Crew reminded us that God’s love is wider, longer, deeper, and higher than any problem or need we will ever have.” He braved a hot taste.

“Talking about ensemble is good. I was surprised to discover you there since I didn’t see you at try-outs.”

“I was out of town. And when I saw you were part of the group I was thrilled. I’m convinced that we need to clear the air between us in order to serve the Lord better. I’m not the same man I was when we worked together.” *When we filled our world with one another.*

“I’m far from the same young woman I was, though for some reason, I’m willing to clear the air between us in order to go forward.”

Did she want to go forward? He sure did. But he still sometimes took back the regret he thought God had covered. “Our Lord wouldn’t be working in our lives if either of us hadn’t changed.”

She shoved aside her mug. “I am willing to treat you as any other singer. But do we really have anything to say to each other?”

They did. He sought her forgiveness. Once he grew up and stopped using women, he'd convinced himself that he made one huge life-changing mistake by tossing away her love. He was now determined that he wouldn't repeat that mistake again.

The Lord be praised, she was back in his life.

Chapter 3

Risa kept her gaze on the cooling contents of her mug. What was God doing? It was impossible for her to ignore Myles when they rehearsed once a week for Soul Singers. Until she saw him at Southside Fellowship, she'd never dreamt he was a Christian, though she had prayed for him and knew he'd been raised in the church.

Why hadn't she calmed down and asked about his story? Had he lived with regret over the way he'd dropped her? And how had the Lord come into his life? Did that kind of thinking mean she was softening toward him?

And then, she'd probably always remember how shaken she'd been to see him at ensemble rehearsal. He wasn't in choir with her. Since the choir had access to order of worship, she chose not to go on the Sundays Myles was scheduled to sing a solo during the offering. She'd stream the service from the safety of her home. The beauty of his voice on high tenor notes brought shivers or tears, sometimes both.

She preferred to cry at home. Those times she'd remembered how deeply she'd loved him. How he'd been her whole reason to get up in the morning. And her anticipation of work at the bank.

Then the tears dried up at the dimming vision of him in the parking lot of long ago. The way that blonde had him pinned next to his car door. The way he'd laughed. As though her attention was all that mattered on that sunny, hot September day. The way he then ignored Risa and never called her again. The way he forgot they'd discussed a future together.

It was hard not to be aware of him during Soul Singers rehearsals. There were only sixteen in the choir room. If she didn't concentrate on the words she sang, he filled her senses.

Wait, what had he said? She looked up as though from a trance.

"You were so far away. My cocoa is cooling and you only took one taste of your drink." Myles laid his open hand on the table. "Let me in, Risa. Let me help heal the chasm of the many years between us."

She'd trusted him once. She'd remained single and had vowed not to open up again to the debilitating hurt of a broken engagement. Long ago love for Myles was enough of a life lesson.

Risa had enough joy in her life by bringing babies into the world. She didn't need anything or anyone else.

"I did you wrong," Myles said. "I've always regretted it. The best time of my previous life was when we worked together. Loving you, I threw away what we had. Please forgive me." He wiggled his fingers, again inviting her to clasp his hand.

"Do you really think it's that easy?"

"I hated myself for letting you go."

"You're saying your actions weren't worth it?"

"When that woman came to work at the bank, she also became obsessed with me. That day you saw us, she followed me home after work. She was very persuasive, and I caved to the stroking of my ego. I was beyond stupid."

"How can that even happen?" Gruffness colored her voice. Haze shadowed her thoughts. "We were talking of marriage, of becoming husband and wife."

"It happened. I was a fool and young enough that I couldn't resist her. The whole thing hasn't mattered in a long time."

Risa frowned at the invitation of his hand and stirred her latte. Then she sipped the now cold brew. "Can we pretend we're meeting for the first time? Sitting under the biblical teaching we have at church. I'd love to know how God caught your attention. I'm assuming you have a personal relationship with Jesus or you wouldn't be singing with the ensemble. I do as well. That means we are different people than when we worked together in our twenties."

"I'll tell you my testimony when we have more time." He took a deep breath, exhaled. "I understand you are a nurse?"

"Yes, OR delivery."

"You see the miracle of new birth on the job then."

She couldn't help but smile, dared a glance at his hazel eyes, noted how brown they looked in the low light. "Yes. I work three twelve-hour days."

"What days?"

"I can choose due to seniority. Monday, Tuesday,

Friday."

"Good to know. I blew away ten years of my life after the bank position." He paused.

She'd missed him for ten years. "I quit soon after. Did you marry Lucinda?"

"No way." He made a derisive sound in his throat. "I actually forgot her name until you just said it."

"How could you have messed up our engagement, our life together, by falling for a woman on the prowl?"

"I wasn't thinking with my mind. I was flattered. I thought you and I had hit some kind of rut. Truth is, I wasn't ready. I never admitted that I thought I had a lot of living to do before marriage." He blew a gust of air. "I was an idiot."

"Did you ever get married?"

"No. No one compared to you."

How could she answer that? "It took me what felt like forever to get over you. Any time I wasn't studying or doing clinicals or later working, I wondered where you were and what you were doing. Then life was so full that I forgot my hurt over you. I took joy in bringing babies into the world. It is an amazing experience, and it never gets old."

Myles gave her a searching look.

"What?" Risa couldn't help asking. His expression was…she didn't know what he was thinking.

He blinked and gave a half smile. "You glow when you talk about your work."

Risa clamped down on the tiny beacon of warmth in her heart. *Time to change the subject.* "And you? What

have you been doing these past thirty years?"

"As I said, I wasted my life. End of story." He scowled and finally drew back his hand. A jaw muscle twitched.

"My coworker, Judith, invited me to Southside Fellowship five years ago. I was plugged in, ladies study on Monday nights, the choir, helping wherever I could. The first time I saw you again was when you sang at a friend's celebration of life. I couldn't believe my eyes and ears." She braved a study of his chiseled features. The silver hair suited him as much as the dress clothes he wore on Sundays.

"I hit bottom."

Had he heard her?

"I tried another banking job. Went in to food service. Sometimes I went to church, but I didn't feel a connection." He slid his mug and napkin to the edge of the table.

She waited him out.

"I'll say this quick, though it took a while at the time. God called me to dig out my Bible and try again. I met senior Pastor Kendall Winston that first visit. He and June Rose invited me to lunch, and we hit it off. I talked with him several times after that. Fell on my knees at some point. Jesus forgave me, and I try to remember that I did nothing to deserve the life I have."

"I'd be so lost without the Lord."

"Right. Once I realized I couldn't do life on my own, I started to pray. A lot. I listen to podcasts and sermons. I'm always struck by the fact that Christ Jesus spilled His blood and paid my sin debt in full. How