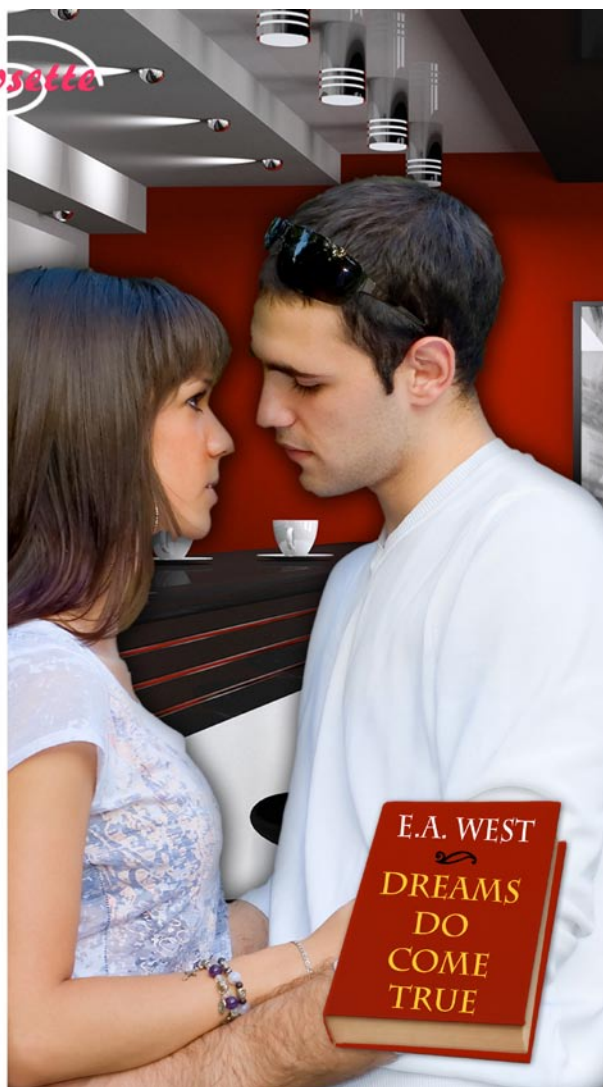


Rosette

White Rose



Gayle glanced at the envelope in Cassie's hand and nodded toward the vacant end of the counter. Cassie went to the last seat in the row and laid the envelope in front of her. She needed Gayle's moral support when she opened this one. The publisher she'd submitted to was the perfect match for her book, and she'd spent nearly a month on the submission package to make sure it was perfect.

Gayle finally finished serving the elderly man and joined Cassie. "Be brave."

Cassie managed a weak smile and prayed for strength as she picked up the envelope. A moment later, she pulled out her submission package and what appeared to be a form letter. She got as far as "We regret..." before she dropped the stack of papers on the counter and lowered her head to her hands with a moan. "Not again!"

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Cassie brushed her long hair from her eyes as she lifted her head and reached for the rejection letter, hoping it contained some clue as to why they didn't want her novel. Her gaze briefly went to the new customer. His gorgeous movie cowboy appearance caught her attention and made her heart do a two-step. Dark-haired and blue-eyed, he stood at least six foot two and had wide shoulders that tapered down to a trim waist. He'd tucked his white shirt into a pair of jeans that fit oh-so-perfectly on his hips. The sleeves were rolled up to reveal tanned, well-toned forearms. He smiled as he spoke to Gayle, and Cassie decided receiving another rejection letter was almost worth it to see this amazing specimen of a man.

# Dreams Do Come True

by

E.A. West

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Dreams Do Come True

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## **Dedication**

To all writers struggling with rejection:  
Never give up hope.



Cassie Teague arrived home after a long day of answering phones and scheduling patients at the dentist's office and found three things waiting in her mailbox. She tossed the phone bill in the basket on the small table in the hall, the ad for used cars went into the trash, and the familiar manila envelope addressed in her own handwriting went back out the front door with her. Checking the postmark as she walked to the small café on the corner, she discovered the envelope had come from a submission she'd sent six months earlier. She couldn't help wondering why it took three days for mail to go fifteen miles from Cincinnati to Brighton. The thickness of the envelope didn't tell her anything; it could be her synopsis, first chapter, and a rejection letter, or it could be her submission and a letter requesting her full novel manuscript.

As she stepped into the café, she noted her best friend behind the counter filling an old man's coffee cup. Gayle glanced at the envelope in Cassie's hand and nodded toward the vacant end of the counter. Cassie went to the last seat in the row and laid the envelope in front of her. She needed Gayle's moral support when she opened this one. The publisher she'd submitted to was the perfect match for her book, and she'd spent nearly a month on the submission package to make sure it was perfect.

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She heaved a heavy sigh and returned her gaze to the paper in her hand. There were more important things to do than gawk at a guy who was probably married to a woman more beautiful than Cassie could ever hope to be. Probably more successful, too.

She’d just finished examining the useless form rejection when Gayle placed one of the café’s famous giant chocolate chip cookies in front of her.

Cassie set aside the paper and broke off a bite of cookie. “Why do I only get form letters? I mean, would it really be so hard to scribble ‘It’s not you, it’s us’ at the bottom of the letter before mailing it to me?”



Gayle leaned on the counter. "You've told me many times how busy editors are."

"Yeah, but how am I supposed to ever know if it really is them and not my writing if all I ever get are form rejections? For all I know, my writing stinks and my plot makes watching paint dry interesting by comparison." She sighed and ate another bite of the cookie. "Maybe I should just give up on my dream of getting published and resign myself to the fact that no one wants to read what I write."

"You can't do that!" Gayle said louder than Cassie would have liked. "You've dreamed of becoming an author since you learned the word, and you worked your butt off on that novel."

Cassie blinked back tears of frustration. "And where has it gotten me? Thirty-seven rejections from agents and publishers without even a hint of why they don't want my manuscript. Maybe God is trying to tell me I'm not meant to be an author. If that many people in the publishing world don't want to read past the first chapter or so, it's got to mean something."

"It means the publishing world is a finicky place, and you should try again," a masculine voice said. Cassie looked over in surprise as the movie cowboy continued. "Agents and publishers pass on good stories all the time. A lot of editors have readers who screen the submissions and only send on the ones they think the editor will like. It's possible your manuscript hasn't even been seen by the editor you sent it to."

Instead of feeling irritated that he'd broken into her conversation, Cassie found his words even more depressing. "Great, even people who read for a living don't like what I write."

She dropped her head to her hands again and considered burning everything she'd ever written.

Gayle cleared her throat, and Cassie looked up, stunned to find the cowboy sitting on the stool beside

her. He gave her a sympathetic smile.

“Don’t let the job title fool you. Most of the readers are interns trying to gain experience in the publishing world. They’ve been trained on what to look for in a submission, but they generally don’t have the instincts of an editor who’s been buying manuscripts for years.”

Cassie studied him, noting the lack of a ring on his left hand. Maybe something good could come of this day after all. “How do you know all of this?”

He grinned, and she melted. No one had the right to look that sexy without even trying. “I work at Turnip Press.”

The longer this evening went on, the more unbelievable it became. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as she indicated her rejected submission. “That’s where this just came from. I thought it was a perfect match for you guys, but one of your colleagues didn’t agree.”

The cowboy glanced at her submission packet and then shifted his curious gaze to her. “Do you mind if I take a look at your submission?”

Cassie slid the stack of papers toward him, praying he’d give her some kind of useful advice. “Go ahead. Maybe you can tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

He chuckled as he picked up her cover letter. “You may not be doing anything wrong. It could be as simple as your submission hitting the wrong person on a bad day.”

Cassie tried to stay calm while he read, but her nerves decided to practice the jitterbug. She couldn’t keep a little flame of hope from igniting; there was a slim chance he’d like what he saw and request more of the manuscript.

Gayle brought his dinner and placed a cheeseburger and fries in front of Cassie. The cowboy continued reading the first chapter of the inspirational suspense novel and the synopsis while

he ate. Cassie managed to eat only half of her meal; she was too nervous about what this man would say about her work.

Finally, he laid aside the last page of the synopsis and turned to her with an impressed smile. "This is one of the best submissions I've ever seen."

"Really?" She could hardly believe it. This could be her chance. A silent prayer of thanks flew heavenward.

He nodded and glanced at the stack of papers, his expression growing puzzled. "Yeah. I can't figure out why it was rejected. This should have made it to my desk."

Cassie caught her breath. That sounded like he wasn't just somebody's assistant like she'd thought. "What exactly is your job at Turnip Press?"

"Oh, I forgot to introduce myself, didn't I?" he said, looking a little sheepish as he met her gaze again. "You'll have to forgive me. It's been a long day. I'm David Jameson, acquisitions editor."

It took Cassie a moment to find her voice. An editor, and a gorgeous one at that, was impressed with her writing. Maybe she'd keep writing after all. At least long enough to get to know David Jameson a little better, anyway.

She indicated her cover letter with a smile. "As you've already figured out, I'm Cassie Teague."

"Yes, and it says here that you'd be happy to send me the complete manuscript," David said, tapping the last paragraph. "How soon do you think you could get that to me? I'm intrigued by what I've seen, and if the rest of the story is as good as the first chapter, I think we could end up working together."

"She can give it to you in less than twenty minutes," Gayle said from her place behind the counter. "She lives half a block from here and can run home to print out a copy of the manuscript for you."

“Gayle!” Cassie couldn’t believe her friend’s pushiness. Aspiring authors didn’t treat editors like that. Her cheeks burned as she turned to David, hoping Gayle hadn’t just ruined her chance of having her lifelong dream come true. “I can drop it in the mail Monday morning on my way to work.”

He drummed his fingers on the counter with a thoughtful expression. “It would be better if I could get it this weekend. My schedule is packed next week, but I’ll have time over the weekend to read your manuscript.”

“Well, I guess I can run home and print a copy of it for you,” Cassie said slowly. She didn’t want to appear too eager. It wouldn’t do to have him know how desperately she wanted to do a happy dance. “I’d hate to take up any more of your evening than I already have, though.”

“Cassandra Yvonne Teague,” Gayle said firmly, bracing her hands on the counter and leaning toward her, “get your butt home and print out your manuscript! I’ll keep Mr. Jameson supplied with coffee while he waits. On the house, of course.”

The whole situation struck Cassie as surreal, and she laughed as she slid off her stool. “Yes, ma’am.” She turned to David and found him grinning. “I’ll be back as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll be here,” he said as Gayle poured him a cup of coffee.

Cassie headed outside, unable to believe her good luck. She could barely contain her excitement as she jogged down the sidewalk and sent up another prayer of thanks. David Jameson, possibly the hottest man in publishing, wanted to read her entire manuscript over the weekend. If he was that intrigued after just the first chapter, she knew he’d want to publish her book after he saw the plot twist in chapter nine. She could have her first contract in the works by the end of next week!

As Cassie waited for her manuscript to print,

she pondered the possibility of talking David into a celebratory dinner if Turnip Press decided to offer a contract. He seemed like a nice guy, and he obviously had a good sense of humor or Gayle would have driven him off with her pushiness. Cassie felt a strong draw to him and wondered if God had put him in the café for a reason other than just looking at her submission. She'd been praying to meet that "special someone."

She shook her head at the direction her mind had gone. How could she possibly think a guy she'd just met would be interested in a relationship with her? It wouldn't be the first time she'd guessed wrong about God's leading in a relationship, but she was willing to risk David turning her down for a date. Of course, she wouldn't say anything about a date until after she had a signed contract from Turnip Press. No way would she jeopardize her writing career for any man, no matter what he looked like. If God meant for them to be together, it would happen.

When the printer spit out the last page, Cassie quickly checked to be sure all the pages were in order and then slid the thick stack into a manila envelope. She hurried back to the café, wondering if she'd find David gone. It would be just her luck to have her hopes brought high again only to have them die in a fiery crash of rejection. For the thirty-eighth time.

He still sat where she'd left him, drinking coffee while he talked to Gayle. Cassie joined them and laid her manuscript on the counter as she sat down. "Here's the full manuscript as requested."

David smiled as he lifted it. "That was fast."

She shrugged and silently told herself to downplay the effect his blue eyes had on her heart's rhythm. "Like Gayle said, I live half a block from here."

David nodded then placed his hand on the

rejected submission packet. "Do you mind if I take this with me? Maybe I can find out who rejected it. I want to know what they were thinking."

"You might as well take it. I sent it to your office six months ago."

David chuckled as he slid the stack of papers into their envelope and stacked it with the manuscript. He stood up and gave Cassie a questioning look. "Why don't I walk you home?"

Maybe she hadn't guessed wrong about God's leading after all. She slid off her stool, ignoring Gayle's grin. "I'd like that."

David turned to Gayle. "So, how much do I owe you?"

"It's on me," she said with another grin. "Just make sure Cassie mentions me in the acknowledgements when you publish her book."

Cassie considered killing her best friend as David laughed. "I'll do that."

As they left the café and slowly walked toward Cassie's house, she gave David an apologetic look. "You'll have to forgive Gayle. Subtlety and tact are two things she's never had."

David chuckled. "She just wants to see your novel published."

"So do I," Cassie said softly. She heard the longing in her voice, but she couldn't help it. She'd worked long and hard on that novel and wanted to share it with the world.

"I'll let you in on a secret. You've got a great storyline here, and the writing I've seen so far is excellent. Assuming the rest of the manuscript is as good as the first chapter, I have no doubt you'll see this book published someday."

Cassie smiled as his praise sent her mood through the stratosphere. Gorgeous editor plus her literary baby equaled a dream come true. Especially if she received a contract out of it. "You have single-handedly made my day infinitely better."

He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, sending sparks shooting through her veins. "Glad I could help."

David left her at her front door with a promise he'd call after he'd had a chance to evaluate her manuscript. She watched him head back up the sidewalk and hoped she'd survive that long. The suspense of waiting to hear from him might kill her before Sunday afternoon.

Cassie spent the weekend worrying about what David would think of her manuscript. She struggled Sunday morning with whether to tell her friends at church about David and the possibility of her novel getting accepted. After a long talk with God, she decided to wait to say anything until she heard from David. She added a short prayer for the relationship she'd like to share with David even if her manuscript was rejected again. Those blue eyes and his warm smile had been at the front of her mind since he walked her home Friday evening.

She was a nervous wreck by the time she arrived home from work late Monday afternoon. Gayle had called her at work to see if she'd heard from David, but there had been only silence from Turnip Press. Cassie tossed her unopened mail on the table in the hall and headed for the kitchen. The light on her answering machine winked, and she took a deep breath before pressing the button.

"Cassie, this is David Jameson. Everyone loves your story. Meet me at The Triangle at seven, and I'll tell you the plan for your novel."

Cassie let out an excited shriek that startled a bird at the feeder outside the kitchen window. She ran back through the house and down the block to the café. Gayle looked up wide-eyed when she burst through the door.

"They're going to publish it!" Cassie announced before the strip of bells on the door quit jangling behind her. She leaned over to catch her breath.

“Oh, my gosh!” Gayle rushed out from behind the counter and gave Cassie a bear hug that lifted her from the floor. “I knew that guy would get you published!”

Cassie laughed as her feet reconnected with the linoleum, and she noticed the small handful of diners giving them odd looks as Gayle stepped back. “I’m meeting ‘that guy,’ as you so kindly called him, at seven at The Triangle to discuss the publishing plan.”

“He’s taking you to The Triangle? That place gives new meaning to upscale!” Gayle glanced at the large clock on the wall and steered Cassie toward the door. “Go home and make yourself drop-dead gorgeous for him! And call me tonight to tell me how it went.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cassie said with a laugh as her friend shoved her out the door.

\*\*\*\*

David met Cassie just inside the doors of the restaurant, and she could tell her knee-length sleeveless dress impressed him. She’d taken Gayle’s advice and put forth more effort than usual on her hair and makeup by coaxing her chestnut hair into gentle curls around her shoulders and drawing attention to her hazel eyes with carefully applied eyeliner. David’s expression made every extra minute she’d spent getting ready worth it. And seeing him in a well-tailored suit...It took every bit of willpower she possessed to keep from melting into a puddle when he smiled.

Once they’d been seated at a small table with candlelight reflecting off the sparkling crystal and silver place settings, David ordered for them. Cassie felt a little like royalty as the waiter took care of their every need before moving away.

David gave her another smile that sent her pulse racing. “I know you’re dying of curiosity about your book. It’s real simple; everyone loves it, and you



should have a contract with all the standard terms and conditions by the end of the week. Your manuscript has been dubbed my pet project, which means I'll be working with you to prepare it for publication once your contract is signed."

Cassie briefly wondered how an acquisitions editor had ended up being volunteered to work with an author on prepublication preparations, but she didn't mind having an excuse to talk to David often. "Does my manuscript need a lot of work?"

"Not really, but it could be time-consuming." His expression left her with the feeling he was talking about more than just a business relationship. "We might have to put in a few evenings and weekends together."

Cassie smiled and raised her eyebrows, wondering how ethical dating her editor would be. "And maybe a few dinners as well?"

"Oh, without a doubt," David said, then his gaze became thoughtful. "Of course, we might not need to talk about business every time we meet. After all, it's important for an editor and an author to have a good relationship."

"I've heard some editors look for a long-term relationship with certain authors." Cassie waited to see what his response would be. This cat-and-mouse conversation gave her nearly as much of a thrill as the expression in David's eyes as he gazed at her.

He studied her, his head tilted slightly to the left in a most attractive manner. "Well, it's a little early to know if a long relationship will result in this instance, but I'm interested in keeping the option open if you are."

Cassie smiled and reached across the table to touch his hand. "Oh, I am."

"And depending on the closeness and length of the relationship, I may pass your project off on someone else to avoid any appearance of unethical business practices," David said, gently rubbing the

back of her hand with his thumb. "Depending on how you feel about it, I could always talk to another editor tomorrow about taking your novel."

A shiver of pleasure ran through Cassie as she felt even more drawn to him. "I think that might be a good idea. We wouldn't want anything to get in the way of ethics."

The warmth in his gaze as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze let Cassie know she'd have a long relationship with this editor. And not all of it would have to do with her book.

\*\*\*\*

David leaned back in his chair and stared at the manuscript lying on his desk. He had to find an editor for it, but his thoughts were consumed with the author. The image of the tall brunette with such hope for her story shining in her hazel eyes had been at the front of his mind all weekend. So much so, that he'd begun to question whether her manuscript was really that good or if attraction to her was clouding his normally good judgment. Thankfully, his assistant was a kind soul and had willingly given up her Sunday to read the story.

Now, if he could just get her to quit teasing him about questioning the quality of such an obviously excellent submission. He didn't look forward to asking for her help again, but he needed a second opinion.

"Amy!" His fresh-from-college assistant appeared at the open door of his office, and he held up the title page for Cassie's novel. "Who do you think would be the best editor for this?"

Amy stepped closer, her gaze on the page in his hand. A grin formed, and she rolled her eyes. "Jeez, Mr. Jameson, can't you make any decisions about that book without me?"

"Amy, please. Just give me an opinion on an editor."

The teasing expression faded as she studied

him. "I thought you were going to edit this one."

"Plans change." David laid the title page down. "An editor's name."

"Plans change? You told me yesterday to list you as the editor!"

He met her wide-eyed stare and wondered if he'd made a mistake by taking on such a young assistant. But she'd shown such promise and sent several great submissions his way... "Do you want to continue as my assistant or would you prefer being a reader again?"

The young woman had the grace to blush and duck her blonde head. "Sorry, Mr. Jameson. You just surprised me." She reached for the query lying beside the manuscript and scanned it. "Um...what about Moira Cox? She's edited a few suspense novels."

Moira. That was an interesting suggestion. The woman had to be at least fifty and could be tough as a roughneck with stubborn authors. He also knew that brusque exterior masked a sweetheart, and she owed him a favor. He realized Amy was waiting for a response.

"Moira sounds perfect. Why don't you call her and set up a meeting ASAP?"

"Yes, Mr. Jameson."

She returned the query letter and left the office. David gazed at the submission a moment longer then stacked it at the side of his desk. As much as he'd love to keep thinking about Cassie, he had a dozen other manuscripts waiting for his attention.

\*\*\*\*

*Beep!*

"Hi, Cassie, it's David. I've passed your manuscript on to an editor named Moira Cox. She'll get in touch with you as soon as we have a signed contract." There was a slight pause before his silky voice spoke again. "I really enjoyed our dinner the other night. Give me a call, and we'll do it again."

Cassie grabbed the pen and notepad lying on the counter and jotted down his number. That series of numbers did more to set her pulse racing than any of the story ideas she'd jotted down on the same pad in the midst of cooking or washing dishes. Maybe because she didn't ever get the personal phone number of a gorgeous editor, but more likely because she'd spent the last two days wondering if he'd enjoyed Monday night's dinner as much as she had.

A smile formed as she looked at the number again. "Thank You, Father. Please help me to know if David is the one. I've been wrong so many times before, but I pray that's not the case this time."

As tempting as it was to pick up the phone and call David, Cassie didn't want to appear overeager. She'd call him tomorrow. For now, she had to eat and change out of her work uniform. The midweek service at her church started in an hour and a half, and she had a big praise report to give. Everyone in the small congregation knew how long and hard she'd worked on her novel. When they heard it had been accepted by a publisher, she had no doubt they'd rejoice with her.

\*\*\*\*

The door opened, and David's heart pounded a rhythm that would make the flamenco look drowsy. Cassie had dressed simply in a long flowered skirt and a peach top, but she couldn't look more gorgeous had she worn a million-dollar ball gown. Her hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders, and he wanted nothing more than to run his fingers through it to find out if it felt as silky as it looked.

"Hi, David," Cassie said, a shy little smile touching her lips.

He realized he was staring and returned the smile. "Hi, Cassie. You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

A faint blush crept into her cheeks, and he wondered if she never received compliments on her

appearance. How anyone could look at her and not notice her beauty was a mystery. He'd been struck by it the first time he laid eyes on her in that café, and then she'd looked like she'd come straight from work. Pastel scrubs covered in cartoon teeth, toothbrushes, and floss; a few strands of hair escaping her ponytail; and her eyes...he'd seen the sadness in them as she'd discussed giving up her dream of being an author. The way they lit up when he requested the full manuscript let him know he'd have to be careful or he'd develop more of an interest in the author than the manuscript.

He hadn't been careful, and he didn't care. He'd fallen for this woman. Hard. If his boss carried out her threat to fire him for unethical business practices, so be it. He'd done everything he could to avoid doing anything remotely unethical, but apparently removing himself from Cassie's project and not going anywhere near the contract wasn't enough for Ms. Brisi. The part that really bothered him was knowing Ms. Brisi's foul mood endangered Cassie's contract.

Looking at Cassie now, David didn't have the heart to tell her he had no idea when her contract would arrive or if she'd even receive one. He raised his eyebrows, thankful he hadn't talked to his boss until after asking Cassie to go out with him tonight. "Are you ready to go?"

"Let me grab my purse." Cassie retrieved a brown leather bag from a small table near the door and slipped the slender strap over her shoulder.

David waited while she locked the door, then he lightly placed his hand at her back to guide her to his car. The simple gesture made him long to protect her from what could be a devastating decision from his boss. Unfortunately, his hands were tied. Moira had promised to fight for Cassie's novel, but it hadn't looked good when he left work for the day. His only hope was that Cassie didn't hate him when she

found out what he wasn't telling her.

Once Cassie had settled into her seat, David closed her door then went around to slide behind the wheel. He shoved aside all thoughts of publishing and focused on enjoying the evening with a beautiful woman. Monday was soon enough to worry about work.

"Where exactly are we going?" Cassie said, turning slightly to face him. "You just told me it's a surprise."

David chuckled as he drove toward Cincinnati. "I suppose I can go ahead and tell you now. We're going to a concert at my church. A contemporary group called Beau Ideal is performing."

"Beau Ideal...isn't that the group who holds benefit concerts to assist impoverished people around the world?"

"That's right. My church has spent the last two months collecting basic necessities and school supplies to send to Afghanistan. This concert is the highlight of the campaign, kind of a reward for everyone's hard work." David glanced over to find Cassie listening with rapt attention. "The proceeds from the concert are going with everything we've collected to help an Afghan village that's struggling to survive."

"I'm sure the people will be grateful that strangers care so much about them."

"I know they'll be happy to receive the aid, but we're not exactly strangers. We've sent a couple of groups over at the request of an immigrant from that village."

"Did you go?"

David's heart warmed at her interest in a topic so important to him. "No, but I did host Baryalai for a while. He's the one who requested missionaries visit his village. He dreams of going home one day, but there's really nothing there for him. His wife and child succumbed to a water-borne disease, and he

can do more to help his remaining family members and the village as a whole by living and working here.”

“Oh, that poor man! Losing his wife and child and living so far from his loved ones...”

David glanced over to find tears glistening in Cassie’s eyes. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Baryalai’s pretty happy here. Yes, he’d like to go back to Afghanistan someday to see the family and friends he left behind, but he’s built a good life here.”

She smiled, and David’s heart missed a beat. As they continued to talk, he felt himself more drawn to her than before. Not only was she intelligent and beautiful, she was sensitive and compassionate. Yeah, she had some self-esteem issues, at least where her writing was concerned, but he’d dealt with people who had bigger issues. Besides, who was he to judge? He had a few flaws of his own, including cowardice. Even though he had stood up to his boss and risked losing his job, he was still reluctant to tell Cassie anything about the situation.

He sighed, wishing he could leave work at work. Usually he had no problem with it, but he felt responsible for the difficulties Cassie’s project faced. The fact that he was too big a chicken to tell her about it weighed even more heavily upon him.

“What’s wrong?” Cassie’s soft voice interrupted his thoughts.

He mentally kicked himself for allowing her to see anything other than a guy in a good mood. He flashed her a smile he hoped she’d believe. “It’s just been a long week. I’m looking forward to relaxing over the weekend.”

“I hope you plan on relaxing tonight, too.” He glanced over to catch her grin as she continued. “Because I don’t bite. Well, not often anyway, but I’ve had my rabies shot so there’s nothing to worry about.”

David chuckled and forced himself to lighten up.

"I'll remember that."

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Cassie looked around the auditorium, awed at the sheer size of it. Her entire church building could probably fit inside this space and have room left over.

David put a hand on her back as he guided her through the milling crowd, and warmth radiated throughout her entire body from his light touch. Several people called out greetings to David, and Cassie wondered how many of the crowd he knew. She had a feeling not all of them attended his church, but she knew a sizeable number of them probably did.

"I see someone I'd like you to meet," David said, his voice close to her ear.

She followed his gaze and spotted a dark-haired man who looked to be in his thirties approaching with a big smile on his swarthy face. He wore khaki pants and a deep red polo shirt, and Cassie had no doubt this was the Afghan immigrant.

The two men greeted each other warmly, exchanging a brief hug with their pleasantries. David guided Cassie forward, and the other man kept his gaze on David.

"Baryalai Rahimi, may I present Cassie Teague." David gave her a smile. "She was kind enough to accompany me tonight."

Baryalai placed a hand over his heart and inclined his head. "You must be honored."

Cassie noticed he kept his gaze away from her. Before she could figure out a good way to ask why, David spoke again.

"Baryalai is responsible for tonight's concert."

"Ah, I must disagree." The Afghan's smile lit up his face. "I only made a few suggestions to certain people within the church. They are the ones who should receive the credit."

David chuckled. "You're too modest, but I'll let



you get away with it.”

Someone called to Baryalai, and he excused himself. Cassie watched him walk away, realizing he'd never spoken directly to her. She turned to David. “Did I do something to insult your friend?”

David looked startled. “What? Why would you think that?”

“He never looked at me or spoke to me. I don't know what I could have done...”

“Oh, you didn't do anything wrong.” David sought out her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “He was showing you respect. It's one of the customs that's stuck with him even though he's been here for three years.”

Cassie considered his words and smiled. “I guess I should feel special, then. Having him show me respect just because I'm here with you tells me a lot about your friendship.”

“Actually, he probably noticed your beauty. He was right when he said I must be honored that you came with me. I feel very honored to have you by my side.”

Cassie melted under his warm gaze. There was no way he could look at her like that and not be attracted to more than just her appearance. And the way his thumb gently caressed the back of her hand...

*Thank You, Father.*

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Tuesday evening, Cassie waited for David's nightly phone call. After the concert at his church, he'd finally started calling her when he knew she'd be home instead of leaving a message on her answering machine. She couldn't help feeling as though he looked forward to the daily conversations as much as she did. Unlike the times she'd guessed wrong about God's leading in relationships, Cassie felt herself growing closer to David all the time. Usually, her heart started drifting away from a guy

after only a few days.

She smiled as she thought of him now, her heart bursting with anticipation to hear his voice. The longer she waited, the weaker her smile became until it faded all together. An hour and a half after the usual time of his call, she finally admitted to herself that she wouldn't hear from him tonight. All kinds of unpleasant reasons for him not calling drifted through her mind, her imagination running wild with speculation.

Finally, she picked up the receiver to call his cell phone. If she didn't make sure he was okay, she'd never sleep. She took a calming breath as she listened to his phone ring. When his voicemail picked up, she sent a quick silent prayer for his safety heavenward.

"David, it's Cassie." Her mind raced as she tried to word the message so he wouldn't think she was worrying too much. "I'm just calling to say hi, but I guess you're busy. Call me when you have the time. Good night."

She hung up and stared at the phone for a long moment. *That has got to be the dumbest message I've ever left. Why didn't I tell him I called because I'm worried? Father, am I crazy for worrying so much about him? I've only known him a week and a half.*

Cassie considered the question, unable to reach a conclusion. She couldn't love him yet, could she? But if she didn't love him at least a little, why was she worried about not hearing from him as she had every day for nearly a week?

Her thoughts continued to swirl, never leading to any kind of conclusion about her feelings for David. By the time she went to bed, she'd decided to call him again in the morning before work. If he thought she was nuts for worrying that much over not hearing from him for one night, she'd just have to deal with the consequences. Until she knew he was okay, she'd just keep worrying, and she didn't

want to develop an ulcer.

\*\*\*\*

By Friday afternoon, Cassie still hadn't heard from David, and he wouldn't answer her calls. She also hadn't received the contract he'd promised she'd have a week ago. Working up her nerve during a coffee break, she looked up the number for Turnip Press and dialed.

"Thank you for calling Turnip Press," the perky receptionist said. "How may I direct your call?"

"I'd like to speak with David Jameson, please." Cassie crossed her fingers that her call would be put through. "He's in the acquisitions department."

After a slight pause, the perky voice spoke again. "I'm sorry, there is no David Jameson at Turnip Press."

Cassie's heart stopped. "What? But he worked there Monday."

"I'm afraid he doesn't work here now." The voice didn't sound quite so perky this time. "May I connect you with someone else?"

"Um..." Cassie struggled to overcome her shock enough to remember the name of the editor David had passed her project to. "Moirra Cox, please."

The receptionist sounded skeptical this time. "Are you sure you've called the correct number?"

"What do you mean?" She had a bad feeling about the whole situation. "Moirra Cox is the editor assigned to my novel."

"Moirra Cox doesn't work here either. Maybe you have the name wrong?"

"No, it's the right name. I'm sorry to have wasted your time." Cassie hung up and blinked back the tears in her eyes. How could she have been so stupid? David had never shown her any proof that he actually worked for Turnip Press, and she hadn't bothered to call the company to make sure he was telling her the truth. No, she'd handed over her manuscript, and her heart, and now she was paying

the price. She'd been so excited to have an editor finally love her story as much as she did that she'd handed it over to a complete stranger. Her literary baby, gone. Kidnapped by a con artist.

*Oh, God, I am such a fool! I need Your guidance, Father. Help know what to do about my stolen manuscript. Cassie swiped angrily at the tears spilling down her cheeks. And please help me quit looking for Mr. Right. Obviously, You mean for me to spend my life alone. Give me the strength to accept that and move on with whatever You have planned for me.*

Cassie prayed a moment longer then dried her eyes and went back to work. She managed to hide her devastating knowledge and convinced everyone around her she was just as happy as she'd been a week ago. Too bad it was all a lie and added to her pain. Forget a broken heart. Hers had shattered into shards so tiny and numerous there was no hope of ever gluing them back together.

\*\*\*\*

"Oh, Gayle, I'm such a moron!" Cassie dabbed the soaked napkin against her eyes for what felt like the millionth time in the last five days. "Why didn't you tell me when David first walked in here that he'd only break my heart? That's what you always say."

Gayle reached across the counter and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Honey, I had a good feeling about him. Usually I have serious doubts about any guy you get interested in. Looks like that so-called editor played both of us for the fool."

Cassie nodded and wadded the napkin in her hand. "I'm not sure which hurts more: falling for his act so completely or knowing he's fooled his entire church. I got a glowing recommendation on him from his pastor!"

"I know." Gayle came around the counter and wrapped her in a hug. "I feel so bad about not being

able to warn you about David. I honestly thought he was a good guy. There was just something about him that seemed right.”

“That’s what I thought until he vanished.” Cassie ignored the bells jangling on the door. Gayle could see about the new customer in a minute. “Why didn’t he just call me and tell me he never wanted to see me again?”

“Because I’m a terrible liar.”

Cassie whirled around to find David standing a few feet away. He held a manila envelope, and for a brief moment, she thought he was returning her manuscript. Then she realized the envelope was too thin.

Gayle put a protective arm around Cassie’s shoulders. “What do you want?”

“To apologize for being a coward.” David stepped closer, his gaze never leaving Cassie’s face. “I am so sorry for not calling you. I should have returned your calls. I should have been honest with you and told you I got fired. But I didn’t. Because of me, your book won’t be published by Turnip Press. I did everything I could to get them to honor the contract I promised you. So did Moira Cox. Nothing we said made any difference. I got fired, Moira quit, and you don’t have a contract with Turnip Press.”

Cassie glared at him. If he expected her to feel sorry for him, he could just turn around and walk out of the café. “What happened? That contract was a sure thing.”

David ran his hand through his hair. “My boss decided it was unethical for me to offer you the contract. I tried to show her your manuscript, but she wouldn’t even look at it. After our dinner at The Triangle, I took myself completely off your project and handed it over to Moira. I never even saw the contract you were to receive, because I didn’t want to do anything unethical. My boss apparently thought my offering you a contract and taking you out to

dinner would put some kind of black mark on the company's reputation."

"Why didn't you answer my calls?" Cassie fought to keep her anger. It wasn't easy after hearing his story. If he was telling the truth, he'd suffered more than she for the sake of her novel. At least she still had her job.

"Because I'm a chicken." David moved even closer and laid his envelope on the counter. Gayle stepped back as he put his hands on Cassie's shoulders. "I couldn't bear to hear the sadness in your voice when I told you your book wasn't getting published after all. I couldn't bring myself to tell you in person either."

"And you couldn't send a letter?" Cassie gave a bitter laugh. "It's not like it would be the first rejection on my book."

"Believe me, I considered it. But the thought of sending you a rejection letter after promising you a publishing contract made me feel even guiltier."

"So why are you here?" Cassie folded her arms in front of her chest. She refused to let those blue eyes get to her. "Do you expect me to absolve you of everything just to make you feel better?"

"No, but I am hoping you'll forgive me." David lowered his hands and picked up the manila envelope. "I haven't been sitting around doing nothing for the last week. A friend of mine left Turnip Press a few years ago to start his own publishing company. Ferguson Lane recently started an inspirational line, so I sent my friend your manuscript. He loves it. If you don't mind going with a small press, you have a contract waiting for your signature."

Cassie accepted the envelope and pulled out the papers. She didn't know what to think when she saw he'd told the truth about her having a contract.

"I made sure he's giving you the best terms he can," David said. "Like I said, it's a small press so

there's no advance, but they're growing, and they have a good reputation."

Gayle snorted. "Do you honestly think just because you gave her that contract you promised she's going to take you back?"

"No, but I'm hoping she'll take the contract as a sign that I care. A lot." David put his fingers under Cassie's chin and looked into her eyes. "I do care. Forget that I'm a coward and an idiot for a moment and think about the time we spent together and the conversations we had."

Cassie's pulse picked up rhythm at his gentle touch and the familiar warmth in his gaze. As much as she wanted to throw the contract at him and tell him to stay out of her life, she couldn't do it. That still, small voice inside her heart wouldn't let her.

She fought against it and finally gave in. "I forgive you."

A smile spread across David's face, and he pulled her to him. "Thank you. I was so afraid you wouldn't be able to forgive me after I made such a mess of things."

Cassie relished the feel of his arms around her. The faint scent of aftershave surrounded her, and she took a deep breath as her shattered heart began to mend. "You tried to make it right. That's the important thing."

David leaned back to meet her gaze. The uncertainty in his eyes made her want to cry. He'd obviously been beating himself up for the last several days. "Do you want the contract with Ferguson Lane? I can guarantee you'll have a great editor."

"How do you know that?" If he started making promises he couldn't keep...

"When Moira quit Turnip Press, she went to work for Ferguson Lane. They've been trying for months to get her to join them. She finally agreed, but only on the condition she be the editor of your

novel if you accept their offer.”

Cassie studied him, silently praying for wisdom as she considered his words. Finally, she felt peace with her decision. “You know how much I want to see my novel published. Would you be willing to go over the contract with me and help me understand what it is I’m agreeing to?”

The uncertainty left David’s features. Joy and hope took its place. “I’d be happy to go over it with you. And I’ll help you with any future contracts, if you’d like. If you’re still interested in developing a long relationship between author and editor.”

She remembered their conversation at The Triangle, with all of its double meanings, and smiled. “You’ve known from the beginning I’m interested in that.”

David gazed at her for a long moment and then pulled her close to place a gentle kiss on her lips. She melted into him as Gayle cheered them on. Cassie plotted ways to strangle her best friend once they were alone, then she sent a prayer of thanks heavenward. God had finally answered her prayers for Mr. Right and a publishing contract with a resounding yes.



## **About the Author**

E.A. West is a lifelong lover of books and storytelling. In high school, she discovered the wonders of sharing her stories with others through writing. She picked up her pen in a creative writing class and hasn't laid it down yet. Her love of writing encompasses not only the romance genre but also a variety fiction and non-fiction styles.

Born and raised in Indiana, she still resides there today with her family and a small zoo of pets that includes cats, dogs, and African water frogs. When she's not writing or reading, you're likely to find her working on her current crochet project or discussing current events.

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