



The melody of the Christmas carol worked its magic. Tension seeped out of Merritt's shoulders. Swaying with the rhythm, she let the familiar words fill her head. A wrong note miffed her sense of well-being, but she pushed her fingers to continue her keyboard therapy. Another sour sound jangled her nerves. Firming her jaw, she powered through two more measures. A third mistake fractured her calm and bounced her fingers off the black and white keys.

"Merritt. 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day' has no D flat. Just B, E, and A. Pay attention." She zeroed in on the time signature. "See. No D flat. Stop playing it."

Beginning the carol again, she played through the entire song with no mistakes.

"Better. Thank you." Talking out loud to herself, playing Christmas carols out of season ... People might question her sanity if they heard, but Friday afternoon in the church sanctuary was typically slow.

Good. No nosy ears around. Pastor Dunleavy had given the okay to hold her piano lessons and play whenever she wanted or needed to. Lately, she needed to quite frequently.

Finished with carols, she thumbed to an old hymn near the

back of the book, played all four verses, and ended her solo concert with “Amazing Grace.” She stacked the hymnals in place on the piano stool and arched her back. Her fingers tingled with the exercise. A good session. Time to go home.

Home? Her heart pinched. Go back to the house.

She followed the corridor down the wing past the senior pastor’s office just as the door swung open. Pastor Dunleavy held it to let Sam Daniels pass through. Freezing in place, she blinked at the pastor.

“Hello, Merritt. You’re finished with the piano then? Everything good?”

“Yes. Thanks so much.” She glanced at Sam before continuing down the corridor to the parking lot. Forcing her feet to walk and not run like a thief with contraband, she had no control over her kicked-into-high-gear heart rate.



SAM DANIELS TURNED bugging eyes to Pastor Dunleavy. “I thought this was supposed to be confidential. Nobody was supposed to know.” He backed into the study.

“Our sessions are confidential. I don’t talk about my conversations with parishioners.” The pastor closed the door again.

“She just saw me coming out of your office. She knows.”

“She doesn’t know anything. You could have been giving me the riot act over something I said in Sunday’s sermon. You could have been donating a million dollars to the missions fund.” He paused before adding, “Would you like to donate, by the way?”

“Ha ha. I’ll let you know when I get a million bucks. Seriously. She saw me coming out of your study.”

Pastor Dunleavy hiked a hip onto the edge of his desk. “There’s nothing wrong with seeking guidance, Christian counsel, wisdom, whatever you want to call it from your pastor. What’s the deal? You don’t want people to know that maybe

your happy-go-lucky demeanor isn't always so happy-go-lucky?" He shrugged. "Maybe seeing you talking with me would help someone else drop by sometime."

"Yeah, okay. That sounds fine, but what was she doing here? Who is she anyway?" For a split second, her big brown eyes had drunk him up. Then they'd dropped away like she was trying to disappear. She didn't want anyone to know she was here either.

"Merritt Hastings. Since she lost her piano, she uses the one in the sanctuary now."

"How do you lose a piano?"

"Can you say, 'confidentiality'?"

"Right." Sam raked his hand through his hair. "Gotcha. I just thought nobody'd be hanging around the church on a Friday afternoon. The secretary's gone ..."

The pastor raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah. Thanks again for coming in on your day off. I'll try to make it work on another day. If I need to come back."

"I'll see you anytime, Sam, but why is it so important no one knows you're here? What are you afraid of? That your bad boy act will unravel?"

"I'm not a bad boy, Pastor."

"No, but you cultivate a devil-may-care attitude. Doesn't exactly line up with worrying about what others may think."

Sam exaggerated a sigh. "It's tough to be cool."

"I wouldn't know." The pastor glanced toward the door. "The coast is probably clear now. You can leave without anyone seeing you."

"Hey, I'm good. It just threw me a little bit when the door opened, and BOOM, there she was with those big brown eyes."

"Big brown eyes, huh?"

This time Sam opened the door and glanced left and right before stepping into the hallway. "Thanks for today. I'll think about what you said."



MERRITT ROLLED out of the church parking lot and headed for her house. Sam Daniels. At church on a Friday ... she glanced at the time on the dashboard. Almost Friday night. What in the world? Talking to the preacher instead of getting ready to go out?

Sam Daniels, a popular senior when she was a way, way, way under-the-radar freshman back in high school. A talented baseball player who dated the captain of the girls' soccer team, he also reported the daily announcements, always adding his odd little editorials that had everyone laughing at his observations or groaning at his puns. Teachers loved him. Classmates seemed to adore him. Crowned Homecoming King and Student of the Year, he was popular with peers and adults alike.

A green four-square ball bounced to the edge of a yard, and she tapped her brakes. The owner of the ball, a little boy in bright red shorts, grabbed the ball and waved at her. Smiling, she waved back and continued to her house, with more thoughts of Sam buffeting her mind.

One of those shining people who glided through life smiling and joking and leaving good feelings in his wake, Sam had walked her to a student council meeting one afternoon, fueling her daydreams for the rest of spring semester.

She hadn't thought about him in years. Wasn't he supposed to be in New York City? Doing something in ... what? On Wall Street? Yep. That sounded about right. His personality would be perfect in the Big Apple.

The garage door lifted as she idled in the driveway.

Interesting, running into Sam again, but really none of her business.

Getting her life back in order. That was her business.