

SEEKING HIS LOVE

By Carrie Turansky

“Blessed are they who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart.”
Psalm 119:2

Chapter One

Rachel Clark stepped into the dark auditorium of the old Fairhaven School, and a shiver of anticipation raced up her back. Cool air ushered a dusty smell toward her, teasing her nose. With only the dim glow of the Exit signs to show her the path, she walked down the sloping aisle toward the stage.

The house lights came up. She blinked at the sudden brightness and took in the scene. Rows of padded folding seats in three sections filled the cavernous hall. Two carpeted aisles led to a large stage with a plush burgundy curtain.

Warmth and wonder tingled through her. “This is perfect.” She turned and searched for Hannah Bodine.

The silver-haired curator of the local historical museum poked her head out from the sound booth at the back. Dressed in a flowing tropical-print blouse and coral Capri pants, she stepped into the aisle. “Do you like it?”

“Yes, it’s exactly what we’re looking for.” Rachel hurried forward and mounted the steps. Waltzing to the middle of the stage, she scanned the auditorium. “Do you know how many seats there are?”

“Let’s see.” Hannah strolled forward, counting the rows of burgundy chairs. “Looks like almost four hundred.”

Rachel smiled and nodded. “That’s a hundred more than we have now.” With a larger house they could increase their ticket sales and income, something she and her small staff desperately needed if they were going to hold on to their jobs.

“I think this would be a good home for your group,” Hannah added. “Why don’t I take you to meet Cameron McKenna, and you can make arrangements to speak to everyone at the co-op meeting tonight.”

“That would be great.” Rachel ran her hand along the velvet curtain as she crossed the stage, memories of past performances making her smile. She descended the wooden steps and met her friend down in front.

“Thanks, Hannah. This is really an answer to prayer. I was beginning to think we were going to be a homeless theater company.” Rachel crossed her arms and rubbed away a chill at that thought.

“It works out well for all of us. The school district is raising our rent.” Hannah sighed and shook her head as she led the way up the aisle. “You’d think they’d be happy to receive any income from this old building. It sat empty for two years before we got together to rent it. We’ve made a lot of improvements, but if we want to hold on to it, we have to rent the remaining space.”

Rachel nodded. It sounded like the Fairhaven Artists’ Co-op needed her as much as she needed them. She blew out a deep breath and tried to relax her tense shoulders. This would work. It had to.

Finding the position as director of Northcoast Christian Youth Theater had been a miracle. She didn't want to think about disbanding and looking for another job. Returning to teaching wasn't an option, not after everything that had happened. She pushed those painful memories away and followed Hannah into the main hallway.

"That's Cam's frame shop." Hannah motioned toward the open door across the hall. "He handles all the finances for the co-op. He can give you the particulars about renting with us."

Rachel stepped forward, eager to meet him and discuss the details.

Hannah held out her hand to slow her down. "Cam might be a bit resistant to the idea. He's a little . . ." She bit her lip. "Well, I suppose I should let you make up your own mind. Just be patient with him, dear."

Rachel smiled and nodded, certain she'd have no trouble winning him over. Persuasion was her middle name. Her exasperated mother used to say she could sell a dozen umbrellas to a desert nomad with no trouble at all.

She entered the shop where framed prints, photos, and original artwork lined the walls. Rows of mat and frame samples hung in a neat display on the back wall.

A tall man with broad shoulders and blond curly hair leaned over a workbench at the rear of the shop. He held a pair of needle-nose pliers in his hand. The muscles on his forearm rippled as he twisted a sturdy wire to create a hanger across the back of a large frame lying facedown on the workbench. He looked up, and his piercing blue gaze connected with hers.

A shiver of awareness traveled through her. She straightened and returned his steady gaze. He looked about thirty-five, with a strong chin and Roman nose. No doubt he'd be handsome if he didn't wear such a scowl.

"Good morning, Cam." Hannah crossed to the workbench and Rachel followed.

"Morning." He nodded to Hannah.

"This is Rachel Clark. She's interested in renting space with us."

His scowl softened, and he lifted his golden brows. "What kind of artwork do you do?"

"I'm the director of a theater group. We're interested in renting the auditorium, two classrooms, and an office."

"That's a lot of space." He laid aside the pliers. "Is this a new group, or are you already established?"

"We're about four years old." Uneasiness prickled through her. She'd only been working as the director since the beginning of March, a little over two months. But she had six years of teaching high school drama and three summers with NCYT as the assistant director. So she wasn't stretching the truth too far when she included herself in that four year history.

He looked her over more carefully. "Where are you meeting now?"

"We use Grace Community Church in North Bellingham, but they're opening a preschool, so we need to be out by the end of May."

Recognition flickered in his eyes. "Is Sheldon James the pastor there?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"We're old friends."

"He and the church have been very supportive."

"Sheldon is a good man." He wiped his hand on a cloth. "So what kind of shows do you do?"

"They're all musicals. Our last two were Annie and Oklahoma. This summer we're doing Anne of Green Gables."

He continued to appraise her with his sharp gaze. “What do you call yourselves?” She hesitated a split second, sending off a silent prayer. “Northcoast Christian Youth Theater.”

His eyes widened, and a stormy expression broke over his face. “Youth? As in children?”

“Yes. Our students are ten to eighteen. We hold after school drama classes September to May, and morning drama camps in the summer, along with afternoon and evening rehearsals for our musicals.”

He gave a swift shake of his head. “That would never work here.”

A shot of panic skittered along her nerves. “But you have the space. And from what Hannah said, you need to rent it.”

He sent Hannah a disapproving glance, then turned back to Rachel. “We’re serious artists. Our shops are filled with expensive pieces. We can’t have kids running all over the building.”

Heat flashed into Rachel’s face. “I can assure you my students are well-supervised.”

“Sorry. I can’t take that risk.”

Rachel pulled in a calming breath. “I’m sure when you learn more about our program, you’ll see how valuable we are to the community.”

“It may be a good program, but it would be a bad idea to bring it here.”

Hannah laid her hand on the workbench. “Cam, my granddaughter attends the summer camp and has been in two shows. I’ve seen the performances. They’re a wonderful group of kids.”

Rachel sent Hannah a grateful smile, then turned to Cam. “Renting to us would bring in more customers.”

He huffed. “The kids are going to buy artwork?”

“No, but their parents bring them to classes and rehearsals, and that would be the perfect opportunity for them to visit the shops and galleries. Plus you’d be connecting with all the friends and family who attend our performances. Over half our shows sold out last year. We’ve built a great reputation.” Her enthusiasm mounted as she continued. “Maybe we could hold a special opening night reception and invite everyone to come early and tour the building.”

“I still don’t see how you can mix a children’s theater group with professional artists.”

“Then let me come to the meeting tonight and make my presentation. I’m sure you’ll want to move ahead when you see how this can benefit everyone.” She held her breath. *Lord, please, please let him agree.*

Crossing his arms, he studied her for a few more nerve-racking seconds.

She maintained eye contact, though she could feel her left eyelid begin to twitch.

Finally, he blew out a deep breath. “All right. You can come. But I’m not promising anything.”

Triumph pulsed through her, and she could barely keep from pumping her fist in the air and shouting, “Yes!”

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Cam paced across the shop to the window. Leaning on the counter covering the radiator, he watched Rachel Clark stride toward the parking lot, her dark brown hair swishing against her shoulders. She had spunk and determination. He could see it in the tilt of her chin, and hear it in her voice. And those big brown eyes of hers could melt any guy’s heart.

But he couldn't let that get to him. No way would he let a pack of wild kids take over the building and jeopardize his business. Hopefully the rest of his friends in the co-op would agree. But he suspected Rachel would spin her story in a way that made him look like a hardhearted jerk if he said no to her. Well, that couldn't be helped. He had to do what was best for the co-op, even if he ended up looking like the bad guy.

Kids were okay. He could tolerate them, but he tried to avoid them most of the time.

It had taken four years to distance himself from the painful experiences that had altered his life. He didn't want to rub those wounds raw again. For his own sanity, he couldn't.

Focusing out the window once more, he watched Rachel climb into a white Toyota that looked like it had seen too many miles down the freeway. She glanced back at the building, and even at a distance he could see the longing on her face.

He clamped his jaw against his softening resolve and stepped back from the window. He wasn't going to destroy his dreams just for a pair of pretty brown eyes.

He'd be voting against Rachel Clark tonight, and if he had his way, so would everyone else.