

The Crooner

Rida Allen



Bandmates



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Dedication

To my parents, Judy and Ted, and my brother, Bill, for listening as I babbled non-stop about this new series. Thanks for the sounding board and the suggestions.

For my cousin, Wendy Crook, who lost her battle with cancer in the Fall of 2007. Our Pictionary team record will remain undefeated forever.

Special Thanks

To my husband, Rob, for his technical expertise on the subject of music and bands. And for his character development help.

To Misty Simon, for her technical expertise on the same subjects. And for agreeing to participate in this series with me.

Chapter One



Breeanne Tillen touched her friend's arm to get her attention. "I'm going to see what's happening upstairs, okay?"

Velma nodded, then turned her attention back to the table in front of her, picking up yet another sample of "green" roof tiles.

Attending the yearly home show—this year centering on "green" or environmentally friendly products—had been Bree's idea. She knew her best friend, Velma Rhodes, loved anything "green" and since she was in the middle of renovating her old Victorian home, she had jumped at the offer to join Bree. Bree, on the other hand, was basically attending the show to get out of her own house. Sometimes even she thought she was a little too hermit-like. And she'd always had an interest in houses, and remodeling, so the show had peaked her interest enough to rouse her from the safety of her home.

This year's home show was being held in a hotel, and the displays were split between the conference room she was in now, and a slightly smaller conference room upstairs. Following the signs, she climbed the short stairs to the next level, then sought out

more home show signs. As she walked down the carpeted hallway, she heard music...and then singing. The sounds were muffled, but something in them called to her. Since she was on her own time, not answering to a business or even to her friend Velma at the moment, she followed the warm, jazzy tones.

Around a corner and at the end of a hall, right near the elevators, she finally found the source of the music. There was some kind of lounge, most likely setup for hotel patrons, with dim lighting and low-backed sofas. From the hallway she could see scattered matching chairs and a few coffee tables, but otherwise, the majority of the room was occupied by the stage. Drawing closer, feeling almost like a voyeur, she hung back in the entryway.

Even without being able to see the person crooning on the stage—his back was to her at the moment, as he tickled the ivories and sang into a microphone sprouting from the grand piano—she knew why she'd been drawn here.

There were people in the lounge, despite the late afternoon hour, but it wasn't what she would call crowded. Although she knew that if she moved from her present position she might be recognized, she took confident steps forward. Circling the back of the lounge, still somewhat in the shadows, she walked across the back of the room until she could get a better look at the singer's face. He was not alone on the stage—there was an acoustic guitar player and a saxophone player—but he played as if he were. Eyes closed, head cocked forward just far enough to put his mouth close to the microphone, hands caressing the piano keys in front of him. His mink brown hair, too long in the front, shone under the spotlight. And despite his success in the music business, he was dressed casually, in jeans and a button-down, long-sleeve shirt.

She knew—*she knew*—the longer she moved around in the lounge, the more likely she would be spotted. But it was all right, she would deal with the consequences. Another step, and then another, until she moved under the rim of a recessed overhead light. There, she knew her long, dark blonde hair would catch the almost amber light, shooting sparks of gold and bronze over her bare shoulders. Glad she had decided to dress up a bit for the home show, she stood in her own spotlight, waiting for the singer to open his eyes, to look up, to be caught in his own web of song.

The people sitting near her looked up, maybe they even studied her momentarily, but she was a nobody, and they returned their attention to the man on the stage. He was the celebrity, and the one they, too, had probably been drawn to as they walked along the hotel corridors. There was no way he had been scheduled to perform here, though it was possible he and his bandmates were staying in one of the deluxe rooms upstairs. But this was very like him, to find a quiet place to “jam,” merely for the joy of the music.

As the last notes of the song swirled around the room, embracing her, warming her, she waited. He would open his chocolate brown eyes, he would smile as if he were coming out of a trance, then he would look out into the audience to share his joy with whomever was there.

He did exactly that, and she could see even from her position the softness in his gaze. It was a look she knew well, and one she could never forget.

And she knew quite well the look that crossed his features as he spotted her; it was a mixture of happiness and wariness, one feeling warring mightily with the other. The moment one emotion won out, she let her shoulders relax, and a smile bloom across her own face. Waiting as he spoke quietly with the young man and even younger woman on the stage, she admired his lean build, the sharp angles on his face, and the muscles that moved him smoothly from his position on the stage toward her. With grace and humility, he stopped to speak to some of the audience members who lavished praise on him, giving them his time and his attention without making them feel as if they were intruding. It was one of the things she admired about him. One of the many things.

When he reached her, she held out her hands for his, allowing him to choose his own level of greeting. She should have known better, because he stepped between her arms and pulled her into a gentle hug. Without hesitation, she hugged him back, enjoying the solid warmth of his body next to hers.

“Breeanne, what a surprise!”

She’d forgotten the slow, sexy, southern twang he always spoke with. Turning so she was snugged against his side, his

arm snaked around her ample waist, she leaned into him for a moment. “For me, too. I was downstairs attending an exhibit in the conference room, and as I was going to look at the displays on this floor, I heard music. You know I’m never one to turn away from good music.”

He smiled, taking the compliment in stride. “I remember that about you.”

“Color me, well, shocked, to see you here.”

Nik Vincent grinned, his own shock still thrumming through him. “I can say the same thing. I look up, and there you are!”

Breeanne squeezed him around the waist once, before stepping away to face him again. “What are you doing here?”

“We have a performance tonight in a club nearby.” He shrugged. “I know the guy who runs this lounge and he invited us to use the space whenever we needed, so we decided to warm up a bit here, first.”

“I wish I had known you were playing in town. I would have gotten tickets for the show.”

When he’d read his schedule for this month, he had considered calling her, but something in him held back. There had never been bad blood between the two of them, despite the fact that he’d broken up with her longtime friend, Lana Natank, over two years ago. Even so, he hadn’t been sure how to address her, phoning out of the blue after six months of silence. The last time they’d spoken, it had been over the telephone, when she’d called to congratulate him on receiving an award. The warmth and happiness in her voice—for him—had bowled him over, reminding him what a sweet woman she was. It was something he wasn’t sure he wanted to remember about her.

“I’m sorry, I should have called to tell you.” Stepping closer to nudge her with his elbow, he said, “But I’m sure I can get you some tickets, or maybe even backstage passes. I know some people.”

She laughed, her hand landing on his forearm. “Normally, on a Friday night, I’d have to turn you down. But my friend Velma and I were only planning to wander the home show today, then go out to dinner later. So, even though I sound lame, and too excited,

I'd have to say, 'Yes, please.'"

Warmth spread up his arm, bathing his entire body in her touch. "So how many seats can I have set aside for you?"

"Just two, if it's not too much trouble."

"It's no trouble at all, Bree. I'll be happy to have you there. Maybe afterwards, we could have a drink. I'm sure the guys would love to see you again, too," he said, referring to his bandmates, including everyone in the "guys" title. As she was nodding, he blurted out, "And how is Lana?"

The smile on her face fled, and her eyes slid away from him. "I guess she's fine. I haven't spoken to her in...awhile."

He'd never had the nerve to ask Bree about Lana before, and in general, he didn't really spend a lot of time thinking about Lana since their breakup. If he hadn't been sure before their split, shortly afterward he realized there hadn't been enough of a connection between the two of them. She should have lingered in his thoughts, at least for a while, but she hadn't. Instead, it was Breeanne who repeatedly popped into his head. The three of them had been like the Three Musketeers, back when he and Lana had been dating. Lana had explained that she and Breeanne were close, and she worried about Breeanne being at home so much. Initially he'd been put off, thinking that he and Lana were dating, and they should have time alone together. But after a couple of outings with the three of them, he'd found himself having much more fun than he'd expected. So most of his dates with Lana had turned into group dates, the three of them spending hours together, laughing and having a good time.

Then, for some reason, after almost eight months, Breeanne had started opting out of joining them. And a month later, he'd realized he and Lana weren't meant to be. It had been a difficult break-up for Lana—she'd thought they would be "together forever!"—but he'd stood firm. There was no spark, no hum, no chemistry. At least not between him and Lana.

"Oh, I didn't know."

She shrugged, then seemed to let it go. "I can't wait to tell Velma we're going to see you in concert tonight. She's going to freak out; she loves your music."

"Well, I'm glad someone does," he said wryly. "If you were

really a fan, you'd have known we had a hometown gig, and you'd have been the first one in line for tickets." Her creamy complexion pinkened, and he wondered what she was thinking. "I'm just kidding you, Breeanne. But I am glad we ran into each other. It's nice to see a friendly face every now and then."

"I guess I should let you get back to your practicing," she said, reluctance showing in her face.

"Why don't you stay for a bit?" he suggested, immediately wishing he hadn't. It wasn't that he didn't want her there, but she was sure to be a distraction to him in the small lounge. At least later tonight he'd be in bigger place, and the lights would keep him blinded from seeing her in her seat. Of course, he'd seek her out anyway, but he wouldn't be able to see her so clearly.

She backed up, her hand finally falling away from his arm, leaving a burning feeling behind. "I really need to get back to the house products show. And find Velma."

Nodding, relief making his stomach unclench, he leaned forward to press a kiss to her cheek. "I'll leave the tickets at the box office, under your name. After the show, hang out until everyone leaves, and we'll come find you." After confirming, she sent him a dazzling smile, then turned to leave. He watched her go, not for the first time noting her pleasing curves, today tucked into a pair of flowing black pants, and a violet top that was laced up the front. Her breasts, which he'd always admired in silence, were high and round, peeking up over the edge of her top in all their glory. Despite being a big woman, she'd never hid her body, or her abundant curves, showing them with pride and confidence. It was a confidence he didn't even see in women half her size, and it was one of the things that drew him to her. Lana had had body image issues, and had constantly asked him how she looked. In all the times they'd been out as a threesome, he'd never heard Bree ask Lana—or him—if she looked okay. She'd just been out there, in slinky, clinging, body hugging clothes, without any hesitation.

Seeing her again had cemented his earlier concerns. He was highly attracted to her; something he would never have pursued considering her close friendship with Lana. But it seemed that she and Lana were on the outs, so maybe the tide was changing for him.

Velma bounced up and down as they waited in line at the box office. “I can’t believe this! I can’t believe this! We’re going to see Lexical Diffusion in concert! Live, right here, in front of my face!” Whipping one hand up, palm toward her, right up to her nose, she let out another high-pitched shriek.

Bree laughed, grabbing her friend by the arm and dragging her forward as the line moved. “And don’t forget we’re going to have drinks afterwards.”

Another shriek and more jumping. “I wish I had dressed better today,” Velma said after calming down. “I figured we’d be going to dinner at some generic chain restaurant, or something, so jeans would be okay.”

“We have an hour before the show starts,” Bree reminded her. “We can go to one of the boutiques at the hotel and get you something else to wear, if you want.”

Screwing up her face, tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth, Velma seemed to be considering the option. “I don’t have a ton of extra money these days, but how often do you get to meet and *go out with* rock stars? Let’s do it!”

Once they’d picked up their tickets, the two women headed back to the shops on the main level of the hotel. Several boutiques crowded a small area, and they rushed the first one, plowing through clothing racks to find something affordable.

At the third shop, the saleswoman pointed them toward the back of the store, to a small rack of sale items. Luckily for Velma—who was a below-average size 10—there were a couple of nice sets of pants to try on, as well as one skirt, and several blouses. They grabbed up everything that was Velma’s size, and made their way into the small dressing room.

The skirt was too short on Velma’s 5’10” frame, and they were concerned the pants might end up the same way. However, a slim-fitting pair of gray herringbone trousers fit her perfectly. They were able to match it up with a tunic-length, sleeveless black sweater with a mock turtleneck, and a gold chain belt that fit her waist. After they purchased the clothes, and the saleswoman had stuffed Velma’s jeans and shirt into a boutique bag, they hurried to one of the hotel’s bathrooms so Velma could fix her hair and

makeup to match her dressier clothing.

Standing in front of the vanity mirrors in the hotel's lobby bathroom, Bree fixed her own makeup, watching her friend out of the corner of her eye. The two of them could not be more different in looks. Velma was tall, with an averagely shaped body—narrow at the hips and thighs, with a proportionate bust line—sporting short brown hair and wide-set brown eyes. Her nose fit nicely in her face, and her lips were full, but not too full.

Bree, on the other hand, was average only in height, topping about 5'6" without heels. Beyond that, she was above average in size everywhere else—except maybe her feet. She had a round, sort of heart-shaped face, with chubby cheeks under her blue eyes. Her nose was probably too big for her face, though she rarely took the time to study it anymore. Her lips, on the other hand, were full and wide, and she felt they took up too much of her face; she couldn't seem to look in the mirror without seeing her lips slashing across her face. Broad shoulders carried an equally broad chest, with big breasts, a big ribcage, and a slight narrowing at her waist. Then her hips blossomed out again, sliding into thick thighs, and rounded calves.

Her corset-styled top made her waist look smaller and her breasts look even bigger. But that was exactly the look she'd been going for this morning, along with showing her smooth shoulders through cutouts in the blouse between the strap over her shoulder and the three-quarter sleeves starting on her upper arms. And her wide-legged pants made her look taller than she was. Why she'd bothered to dress up for the home show had been beyond her, but she'd followed her instincts and chosen one of her favorite outfits that morning. Now she was glad she had, because finding clothes at the last minute in a hotel boutique like Velma had would be out of the question for Bree, considering her size.

Imagine, spotting Nik out of the blue. She hadn't seen or heard from him since he'd won that award last year. And *she'd* been the one to call him. If she hadn't, it's doubtful they would have spoken for several more years, if at all. Which would have been unfortunate, because while he'd been dating Lana, they had become good friends. At least, she would have liked to think so.

Unfortunately, after eight months of hanging out with Lana

and her boyfriend, Bree had found herself drawn to Nik in a way that she shouldn't have been. Especially considering he was her best friend's boyfriend. It was at that point she'd decided to let the couple be a real couple, instead of two-thirds of a threesome. Shortly thereafter, when Nik had broken up with Lana, Bree and her best friend had gotten into a huge argument.

"It's your fault!"

Bree jerked back, the accusation in her friend's eyes cutting her to her very core. Lana had burst into her apartment unannounced, and had begun screaming without provocation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Nikolas. He broke up with me. And it's all because of you!"
Lana spat.

Jaw hitting the floor, Bree stared at her.

"You and your tight clothes, and your constant flirting. Of course he was going to get confused! If you'd left him alone—left us alone—everything would have been fine! But nooo, you had to keep hanging around, distracting him from me."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Bree held up one hand, still trying to accept the fact that Nik had broken up with Lana. "What happened? I didn't know you two were having problems."

"You were our problem, Breeanne. You couldn't let us be a couple. And when I tried to include you occasionally, you did nothing but hang all over Nikolas, and seduce him away from me." Lana complained.

"You're kidding, right? You dragged me along every time you two went out. I didn't ask to be invited!" Then the full force of what Lana said hit her, and she recoiled. "You think I seduced Nik? Are you nuts? I would never do that! He's your boyfriend."

"Was my boyfriend, because of you. You're a tramp, Breeanne! You know how men are, and you threw your giant boobs in his face all the time. I can't blame him for looking." Wagging her finger in Bree's face, Lana advanced on her. "I know you and Nikolas were sneaking around, while all the time pretending to be friends in front of my face. I tried to forgive him, because it's not his fault. He's human, after all, and temptation can be so overwhelming. But you, you were supposed to be my best friend! You were supposed to respect the boundaries of my relationship with Nikolas. But nooo,

you went behind my back and stole him away from me.”

“Lana, you’re talking crazy. I never went out with Nik unless it was with you. I never saw him alone, I never tempted him, or asked him to cheat. I didn’t seduce him...in fact, I stopped going out with the two of you so you could nurture your relationship just between the two of you. I didn’t want to be a distraction, a third wheel, so I walked away. Even though that meant less time I could spend with my best friend, even though it mean losing a new and possibly good friend in Nik. I did it because I love you, and you’re more important to me than any man.” But Bree could see her words weren’t sinking in. Lana didn’t seem to be listening, she only seemed more enraged that Bree tried to defend herself.

“Nikolas was the one, but you couldn’t handle that. You wanted Nikolas because I had him. You always want what I have, including my slammin’ body. But since you couldn’t be beautiful like me, you decided to be a bitch and steal my man away—”

“How dare you!” Bree cut her off, rage making her vision go red. “I don’t want to be anything like you. I only ever wanted to be myself, and that’s what I am, one hundred percent of the time. I didn’t give Nik any encouragement, I didn’t seduce him, I barely even spoke to him without you in the room. If you’re so insecure as to have to accuse me because of the shortcomings in your relationship, then that tells me you’re not the person I thought you were. You’re not the Lana I’ve known and been friends with for six years. It’s clear I can’t make you see the truth, and I can’t be a part of your life with you acting like this.” Tears of frustration and despair streamed down her cheeks. She and Lana had been great friends, and this chasm was a huge one. It was something that would hurt her forever. Not only that Lana didn’t trust her, or chose not to trust her, but that anyone could think so little of her. “I don’t know what really happened with you and Nik, but I’m sorry for whatever it is. I can only hope that one day you’ll realize I never betrayed you, and I only wanted you to be happy.”

Despite Bree’s attempts to get Lana out of her apartment, she continued to rant and rave, screaming and crying and repeating the vicious accusations about Bree seducing Nik away. Finally, having run out of steam and out of patience, Bree grabbed Lana by her twig-like arm and hauled her to the front door. The last she

saw of her best friend was Lana's beet red face as Bree slammed the door between the two of them.

During the two years since Lana and Nik had and split up—and after “the fight”—Bree had spoken to Lana just once, in passing, at a restaurant. And only then because they’d literally run into each other, and they’d been polite in the company of others.

Over the past two years, Bree had thought of Nik often, wondering how he was doing, and whether he had moved on into a new relationship. For a while, she’d followed his career avidly, holding her breath every time he came back into or near Philly, but he’d never called. He’d never attempted to get in touch with her, and she’d finally had to admit that he couldn’t be as taken with her as she had been with him. So she had tried to move on. But she’d never been good at relationships, with anyone, and she’d grown more reclusive than ever. Only her friend Velma had stood by her, going out with her when asked, and hanging out at one of their homes when neither felt like venturing out. They were like sisters, close enough to be there for one another, but understanding enough when one or the other needed their own space.

“I think I’ve done all I can do here,” Velma announced, snapping Bree out of her reverie. “At least I don’t look like a schlump anymore.”

Bree smiled at her friend as she tucked her makeup back into her purse. “You never do, Velma. But you’re right, you do look very nice in that outfit. And your hair looks great.”

“Thanks. You look terrific, too. But then you always do.” With a wink, Velma packed up her own supplies, and the two of them left the bathroom, arm in arm.

They made a quick detour to drop Velma’s old clothes off in her car, then they hurried back to the club to find their seats.

“We must be in the front roow!” Velma squawked as they followed an employee down the aisle. “Guess it pays to know the talent.”

Bree laughed, but sobered when she realized Velma wasn’t lying. They *were* in the front row. Center.

“Who do you think he kicked out to give us these seats?” Velma whispered a few minutes later as they were making themselves comfortable. “Because you *know* he didn’t just have these seats

sitting here open at the last minute.”

Starting to feel uncomfortable, Bree looked around them, wondering if someone else had gotten booted. And why Nik would do that for them. She and Velma would have been happy with any old seats, anywhere in the auditorium. But no one around them glared at them, and no one made any snippy remarks, so she relaxed.

Then the lights above her dimmed, and the ones over the stage lit up. Several musicians, including the band members from the lounge, were already on the stage, but Nik was not. A minute later, as if on some unknown cue, the band began playing, and Nik strolled onto the stage.

You’d think a small club would be made up of more laid back people, being that it wasn’t a giant stadium. Evidently, this wasn’t the case, because the audience got to their feet, screaming and hollering for the star of the show. Velma and Bree weren’t far behind.

When Nik began singing, Bree melted, her insides turning to mush, her heart constricting with desire. Other parts of her body heated, tingled, and generally alerted her to her current state. There was no getting around it, she was hot for the crooner.

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