

STEALING ADDA

A Novel by
T a m a r a L e i g h

NAVPRESS 

Sample from *Stealing Adda* / ISBN 9781576839256

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ISBN 1-57683-925-7

Cover design by Wes Youssi, The DesignWorks Group, Inc. www.thedesignworksgroup.com
Cover photo: Istock and Getty Images
Creative Team: Rachelle Gardner, Lissa Halls Johnson, Darla Hightower, Arvid Wallen,
Pat Reinheimer

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920 (www.alivecommunications.com).

Leigh, Tamara.

Stealing Adda : a novel / by Tamara Leigh.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-57683-925-7

1. Love stories--Authorship--Fiction. 2. Women novelists--Fiction. 3.

Divorced women--Fiction. 4. Writer's block--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3612.E3575S74 2005

813'.6--dc22

2005024653

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 / 10 09 08 07 06

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DEDICATION

There must be one for “Dorothy doll.”

Thus, I dedicate *Stealing Adda* to Dorothy Elizabeth Schmanski,
beloved mother-in-law who, despite all manner of adversity,
never let her eyes waver from Jesus,
never let her hand slip from his grip,
and never let her feet stray from his path.

I aspire to a faith so deeply rooted as to be visible to the human eye.

July 11, 2005

And to Wilson Hoffman, Jr.,
a true southern gentleman who first welcomed
and embraced the “transplants” by
lovingly sharing himself and his family.
Those who called him father, grandfather,
and friend are blessed indeed.

April 21, 2005

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



As always, the tale I had to tell could not have found its way from imagination to manuscript without the support of my loving husband, David, and our wonderful sons, Skyler and Maxen. Thank you for believing in me.

Heartfelt thanks to my Tennessee sister, Renee Hoffman, who laughed out loud and insisted that I pursue publication of Adda's tale (wink, wink . . .)

Special thanks to my agent, Chip MacGregor, who aided in my transition from the secular market to the Christian market by opening the door, and his successor, Beth Jusino, who ushered me in.

I am deeply grateful to all those at NavPress who set in motion the leap from manuscript to publication: Rachelle Gardner for her enthusiasm and gracious insight; Lissa Halls Johnson for her patience, keen editing, and prompt, "Tell me your testimony," which enabled me to go deeper; and Darla Hightower for her attention to detail.

I also wish to acknowledge the support and friendship of

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past critique partners: Mona Prevel, Jeanne Nicholson, Shannon Snow, and GayNelle Doll—I miss you all!

Above all, I thank my Heavenly Father for answering prayers in His time, and my Savior, Jesus Christ, for delivering those prayers on my behalf.



I f I smoked—and I’m told I ought to start before I’m too old—I would light one up. But contrary to others of my species, smoking is not among my vices. So I sigh, fit a satisfied smile in place, and watch as the end credits of *Pride and Prejudice* begin to roll. Love this movie. Absolutely love it!

As the bubbly music fades away, I turn the face of my wristwatch toward the television’s glow. And grimace at the time that glares back at me. Not that Jane Austen’s romantic tale wasn’t worth the entire evening, but it had never been my intention to watch it in its entirety, especially with this deadline breathing down my neck. The movie had been but an attempt to correct the tactical error made in allowing my date—AKA Gorgeous—to talk me into inviting him in for a nightcap. Far too much temptation for a single woman who hasn’t been in a relationship for . . . well . . . a while.

I sigh as I conjure a vision of Jake Grainger—every angle sculpted to perfection one rarely sees off the cover of a romance novel. But then, he has graced quite a few. Over a candlelit dinner

at a trendy French restaurant, he boasted he had just finished his 767th cover. And again on the way to my townhouse. And again after I let him talk his way in.

And those covers don't lie. As depicted, Gorgeous is tall, broad-shouldered, and oh-so-muscular. Then there's his face. Beneath a stylish thatch of hair, he has the most incredible cheekbones, appealing mouth, and sculpted jaw.

And don't get me started on his voice, which went straight to my toes each time he leaned near and loosed words on his warm breath. Whew! If not for one little glitch, he would be the perfect male specimen. The glitch? His eyes. Oh, they smolder, all right—big time!—and sparkle in a charmingly, boyish way; however, it turns out the phenomenon occurs only when specific criteria are met. And I'm ashamed to say, it took me a while to catch on, as I was too busy glowing at being the envy of so many women.

So what was the criteria? Plain and simple—Jake. Talk about him or respond to his attempts at seduction, and one could practically drown in his eyes. Talk about one's self, current events, even the mouth-watering food set before us, and the best one could do is wade around in those same eyes. Not that I'm complaining, as only a fool believes the perfect male exists.

Still, what woman, in her heart of hearts, doesn't want to be the one—the one worth battling dragons . . . crossing a desert . . . even dying for? More than just another conquest. Certainly more than just a sounding board.

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But I fantasize, something at which I excel well enough to make a good living. At least, until recently . . .

I flinch, and once more wish I hadn't invited Gorgeous in for that nightcap—not only because of the temptation he presented, but because of the hours that could have been put to better use. I'd tried to discourage him from lingering, first by pouring him my idea of a nightcap. Remembering his disbelief when I handed him a goblet of 100 percent pure guava juice—shaken, not stirred—I smile. Unfortunately, he quickly recovered. Without warning, he swooped down and planted a kiss on my mouth. And after surfacing for air, I'd gone and kissed him back.

Memories of that kiss cause a guilty flush to warm my cheeks. It was nice. Real nice. And I would be lying if I said I hadn't wanted another one . . . or two . . . or three . . .

But I'm a good girl. Of course, my agent says I'm simply deprived.

It hadn't been easy to disengage from Gorgeous, but somehow I managed. So there we stood looking at one another, an expectant silence filling the space between us. Not good.

Knowing it was past time Gorgeous was on his way, I slyly suggested we watch a movie. To my surprise, he liked the idea—at least, until I guided him past the sofa. Almost in a daze, he settled into the chair beside mine.

I never expected him to last through the first half of *Pride and Prejudice*, but it turns out the man has staying power. With the exception of a brief snooze, complete with snoring, he'd hung

on until I inserted the CD that spun out the second half of the tale. Then he suddenly remembered an early-morning photo shoot and headed for the door. Of course, by then I was hooked on the timeless romance between Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy. And it's all Gorgeous's fault.

Well . . . not all. And it's not as if I didn't enjoy being wooed, especially the kissing part.

Hmm. Perhaps I shouldn't have evaded Gorgeous when he tried to kiss me again before leaving—

Not! Prim protests, suddenly appearing on my left shoulder. *Midnight. Just the two of you. WAY too much temptation. Besides, the kid is twenty-eight-years young to your middle-aged thirty-five.*

Cruel. So Cruel.

Of course, what's Prim without Improper, who promptly plops down on my right shoulder. *Just one more kiss. Couldn't have hurt.*

Could have.

Could not.

Could have!

Could not!

I go back and forth between the two until their bickering jerks me back to the purpose of tonight's interlude: writing chapter twelve of *The Gifting*.

"Adda, Adda, Adda," my agent had purred, "you've been holed up too long. Get yourself a man, let him sweep you off your feet, and the *bleepin'* chapter will write itself." Okay, she didn't say

“bleepin’,” but it sounds better than the words that often spew from her mouth.

So I had finally accepted one of several dinner invites from Gorgeous and, overall, enjoyed his attempts to woo me. Now all that remains to be seen is if the chapter will, indeed, write itself. And what better time to test it than past midnight—especially considering my deadline.

I press “power” on the remote, promptly sending my beloved *Pride and Prejudice* into a black hole, and push out of the chair. Smoothing the skirt of the little black dress I wore for my night out, I pad through the living room on bare feet and head up the stairs. At the first landing, I consider going directly to the computer.

Nah.

First comfortable clothes, then writing.

I bound up the stairs to the next landing and enter my bedroom. In the time it takes to cross from one side to the other, the little black dress is history. As I tug the belt of my old terry robe tight, I nod. Better. Of course, I doubt Gorgeous would agree, I concede as I turn in front of the full-length mirror. In fact, I’m certain he wouldn’t. Though the first half of *Pride and Prejudice* hadn’t sent him running for the hills, my thick, old robe surely would have done the trick. Gone is all visible proof of the past six months’ brutal work with my personal trainer, Ludwig. Lumpy, bumpy Adda Sinclair has returned—for the time being.

Not until I cross to the doorway of my bedroom do I realize I’m still wearing my underwire bra. I pluck at the elastic, consider

removing the offending bit of lingerie, but in the end, reason that the chafing will keep me from falling asleep at the keyboard. Not that I could possibly doze off with so much fresh material for Robert and Philippa's long-awaited love scene—an eye-popping kiss, a candlelit dinner, and the ever-inspiring *Pride and Prejudice*.

“Show time,” I declare and start down the stairs. However, at the landing to my office, I pause. “Tea would be nice,” I murmur, “and maybe a few nibbles.”

You're stalling, Prim warns.

Ten . . . fifteen minutes tops, Improper scoffs.

In the end, I side with Improper. After all, when you're talking hours, what's fifteen measly minutes?

With Prim grumbling at my ear, I grasp the railing to descend the last flight of stairs. And not for the first time this evening, my brightly painted nails glare at me. Ugh. Romeo Red polish looked much better in the bottle than out of it. Maybe I should change—

Don't even think about it.

Wouldn't take but fifteen . . . twenty minutes tops.



Robert lowered his head, brushed his mouth across Philippa's, then stepped to her back and began loosening her laces.

Click click click.

Thud.

Click click click click.

Thud.

I just love the sound of words flying from my brain to the keyboard—almost as much as I love perfectly polished nails.

I lift my hands and spread them before my face. Admiring the ovals that tip each digit, I catch my reflection in the newly applied Heavenly Crimson polish. Unfortunately, despite reassurances otherwise, it took over thirty minutes to clean, file, and paint my nails. Worth it, though, as they look beautiful. In fact, excluding my glutes, my nails are my best feature.

Vice? Obsession? Whatever. Every woman ought to be in some sort of committed relationship. So what if mine comes in fifty-two colors with shameless names like Vabulous Vermillion, Torrid Tamale, and Goddess Gold.

With a satisfied sigh, I lower my hands to the keyboard and use the nubbies on the F and J to guide me to home row. Now where was I?

Oh, yeah. Robert is undressing his new wife—*has* been undressing her since I determined my polish was set enough to endure a nail-pounding workout.

And some workout that was. I stare at the single paragraph I managed to download from my vacationing imagination. Sheesh! What is my problem? I've done this a hundred times—and done it well and tastefully according to readers.

Readers . . . *hmmm* . . .

I look to the pile of fan mail perched on the corner of

my desk and recall a time when I dreamed of such evidence of adoration. Now they're a reality. And burdensome. Though it's true my personal assistant—ooh, that still gives me tingles!—handles the bulk of my correspondence, which typically consists of praise followed by a request for bookmarks or bookplates, she sets aside letters of special note. Such as—

I snatch my hand back.

“Oh no, you don't.”

I know exactly where one little letter will lead: straight off the page of my miserable love scene.

I glare at the paragraph—if it can even be called that. It is, after all, just one long sentence.

Don't think about it, I tell myself. Just write. Get something on the page. Anything!

“ . . . began to loosen her laces.” I read back the last words and momentarily pity my medieval lady who will never hear the sensual strains of a zipper tracking down her back.

“Her loss,” I murmur, and try to remember the last time I heard a zipper track down my back. Loooong time ago. Still, I press on.

Click. Thud. Click click click. Thud.

A few moments later, he parted her bodice to reveal the creamy flesh of her back. “Philippa,” he breathed, then lowered his head and pressed his lips to the base of her neck.

She gasped and murmured his name with such longing he . . .

“He . . .” I prompt. “He . . .” What? What does he do? I close

my eyes and concentrate . . . concentrate hard . . . real hard. . . .

Blasted bra! Through the material of my robe, I pluck at it. Of course, it snaps right back into place. I grind my teeth, open my eyes, and refamiliarize myself with the words on the screen. “Right. He . . . ”

Come on, Adda, what does your hero do?

He . . . he . . .

“Aarrgh!”

I grab the remote control of my leather office chair and press “power.”

“Okay,” I murmur as the seat begins to hum and vibrate, “now we’re getting somewhere.” I lean back, push the “full body” button, and feel the vibratory wave move from the seat, up my back, and down again. “Oh, yeah.”

My eyelids drift down.

Love this chair!

Bought it when I signed my first six-figure deal four years ago, parting with a few of those figures at the insistence of the salesman that the chair would do wonders for writer’s block.

I’d smiled, smug in the knowledge I didn’t suffer from writer’s block, certain such an affliction was merely an excuse of the lazy.

Plunk your rear in the chair and it will come, is my motto. Discipline, discipline, discipline! With that reminder, I take a deep breath, lean toward the screen, and command my slug of a brain to produce.

. . . *with such desperation he . . .*

Click click click click click click.

Yes! With bated anticipation, I read the word.

. . . *snored.*

I flop back in the chair, drum my fingers on the chair arms, and glare at the ceiling. It glares back—no answers, no inspiration.

“Great,” I grumble as I swivel around and catch sight of the tray perched expectantly on the credenza. It beckons to me, tempting me to take a well-deserved break.

“If you insist,” I murmur and lift the silver pot. But it’s black liquid that streams into my porcelain cup. Black, not brown.

I set the pot down, lift the cup, and peer into its depths. Once again, I forgot to remove the tea bags, turning a lovely comfort drink into bitter disappointment. And of course, no steam is in evidence.

The clock above my office door proclaims that two-and-a-half hours have passed since the closing credits of *Pride and Prejudice*. I lower the cup and eye a gold-rimmed bowl. Ben and Jerry have melted into a puddle of mauve foam. Poor guys. However, in the midst of my mourning, Lady Godiva peeks at me from behind the teapot.

I smile at the one true friend who hasn’t abandoned me. A moment later, I take a bite of her and sigh as dark chocolate coats my tongue. Telling myself I’ll work her off later—and to heck with Ludwig’s lectures on taking care of my body so it will take care of

me!—I finish off the piece. And two more.

It's a go, I tell myself as I swivel back around. Determinedly, I punch the backspace key and watch as d, e, r, o, n, and s disappear.

All righty, then, talk to me, Robert. What are you going to do next? Come on, write this scene for me. You can do it.

“ . . . he . . . ”

What?

“ . . . he . . . he . . . ”

What? What?

“Men!” I jab the monitor button. As the screen dissolves to black, the fan mail once more grabs my attention.

Maybe that *is* what I need. Some reader slobbering praise and pleading for my next book. After all, what better inspiration? I pull one letter from the middle of the pile and scan to the area highlighted by my personal assistant.

Ms. Sinclair,

No “Dear Ms. Sinclair”? It does not portend well.

I have just finished reading “Thorn of the Rose” and would love to know your research source for the plague.

There the highlighting ends, but I read on, fully aware I should run from this one.

Though I do not claim to be a historian, it is my understanding that once the disease reached the stage it did with Lady Margaret, the victim could not be saved. And yet your heroine recovered on the merit of little more than the hero's declaration of love. A bit contrived, don't you agree?

I do not! It's called fiction for a reason! And yes, the chance of recovery was nearly nil, but it happened. And I *am* in the business of happy endings.

I do hope you will personally answer my letter and address my concerns about this rather sub-standard offering.

Sub-standard!

Your devoted fan, Brandy Reynolds.

Ah. Brandy Reynolds. I snort. "You again, hmm?" As the letters of this "devoted fan" usually run a minimum of two pages, during the course of which she attacks everything from characterization to pace to point of view, it didn't occur to me that this stabbing letter might be from her. She must have been pressed for time.

I flip the letter and eye the envelope stapled to the back. It's postmarked "Phoenix, AZ." As for a return address, it's absent as usual. Of course, she isn't looking for a reply. Just wanted to get in a dig. I turn the letter over and read it again. No punctuation or grammatical mistakes—excepting artistic license exercised by beginning a sentence with "And" for impact. As for the signature, the initial letters are written with the usual flourish—big "B," bigger "R."

I grind my teeth. Though I have no concrete proof, I'd stake my fifty-two colors of nail polish on the "B" in Brandy standing for Birgitta and the "R" in Reynolds standing for Roth. As in Birgitta Roth, nemesis extraordinaire.

Hoping she left a trail, which she often does, I jump out of my chair, step to the bookshelf, and grab the most recent edition

of *Women's Fiction Writers Quarterly*. In the section that details upcoming conferences for aspiring and published writers, I find it—the Phoenix Women's Fiction Writers' Conference held two weeks past.

“Aha!” “Brandy’s” last letter was postmarked Houston, before that Chicago, before that Orlando, etcetera, etcetera. Always a different city where a romance writers' conference is being held and Birgitta is present, which explains how the envelopes of my “devoted fan” are always postmarked outside of New York, where Birgitta Roth resides a mere four blocks from me!

Searching for further proof, I scan the conference particulars, and sure enough, Birgitta Roth is listed as the keynote speaker. Topic: Breaking Out of Mid-list.

As if she has the slightest idea! Shaking my head, I take another look at the postmark. It corresponds with the last day of the conference.

Yep, it's Birgitta, or Stick Woman, as I call her. I'm certain of it. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she's responsible for all the dirty fan mail I receive. Not that I get much. After all, one does not make best-seller lists with legions of disgruntled readers in tow. Which is exactly the reason Stick Woman hates me. The closest she has come are the bottom slots of extended best-seller lists.

Wondering how anyone can sink so low, I toss the quarterly on the shelf.

“Birgitta Roth,” I mutter. “That . . . that . . . that . . .”

Truly, I don't have anything against the woman. Did I get

mad when she bribed her way into the award for Best Up-and-Coming Women's Fiction Writer eight years ago? No. I got even by writing a better book the next go around, which was nominated for Best Historical Romance. Okay, I didn't take home the award, but her second book wasn't even nominated.

Did I get mad when her third book made the Book Club Selection and mine didn't? No. That's a matter of politics, after all, and my agent at the time—a mealy-mouthed woman—had no clout whatsoever. Too, as a New York news anchor, *Stick Woman* received plenty of free press.

Did I get mad when she was awarded five stars for her fourth book, and I was given a dismal four? No. Everyone knows it's the reader's opinion that matters. Four print runs of my book, and it's still out there racking up respectable royalties. Six months after *Stick Woman*'s release, the covers of her surplus books were stripped and returned to her publisher for credit.

Did I get mad when my career faltered five years ago after my publisher declined my option book, and Birgitta signed another two-book deal? No. I fired my worthless agent, hired Noelle Parker, and worked up a new proposal that started a bidding war. Sweet!

Did I get mad when my ex-husband, Richard DeMarco—AKA Dick, which he *hates* to be called—had an affair with *Stick Woman* three years ago? No.

Well, come to think of it, I did get mad.

Dick, always rooting around for a foothold in sports broadcasting, hounded me until I finally tossed aside pride and

introduced him to my arch enemy. And *that* was the beginning of the end. Stick Woman and Dick had an affair, and all I got was a lousy serving of divorce papers.

Well . . . not all.

I smile in remembrance . . .

Although I caused a scene during a writers' conference when Stick Woman showed around photos of her and Dick, the hunk of hair I wrenched from her bony head right there in the hotel lobby was worth it. Six months for it to grow back . . . six months of sporting a wig like a scarlet letter.

Oh, I could go on and on about why Birgitta Roth has no reason to detest me, and I have every reason to loathe her every blackhead-filled pore, but then I'd sound as petty as her.

Well, maybe one more thing . . .

Did I get mad at a workshop last year when I overheard her comment to a fellow writer that Adda Sinclair ought to update her publicity photo to reflect her advanced age and thirty-pound weight gain?

Advanced age!

She's five years older than me! As for the thirty pounds, it was fifteen. And that, plus an additional ten, is now history—thanks to Ludwig, my personal trainer, and the whip he threatens to crack every time I even think about cheating on a sit-up. And I do mean whip, as in *snap . . . craaack!* The man trained lions for a traveling circus before realizing he could charge upward of two hundred dollars an hour wielding a whip over rich people with nothing better

to do than throw money at him. Not that I'm rich, mind you.

Well . . . maybe just a little.

And that's another reason Stick Woman detests me. She's at five figures, and if I can just finish this last book for Farnsworth Publishing, I'm headed for seven. Or so my agent assures me.

So get to work, Prim pops up on my shoulder.

Better yet, Improper chimes in, *post dear Birgitta an e-mail. Address the poor thing's concerns.*

I blink.

That's a thought.

A good one.

Though I've never let Stick Woman know I'm onto her, perhaps it's time.

Think again, Prim urges. *Don't sink to her level.*

It would be sinking to her level. And there is a certain amount of satisfaction in being better than her.

Okay . . . okay . . .

A yawn in the works, I start to cover my mouth, then remember I'm alone and dispense with the manners. Though fatigue is starting to drag at me, I return my focus to the love scene and tell myself I can get past Robert's inability to consummate his marriage to Philippa.

Of course, after being terrorized by Birgitta, it *would* be inspirational to read a letter gushing with praise. I eye the pile and catch sight of pink parchment between sheets of white and cream.

Back to work, Prim chants, tempting me to flick her from my shoulder.

Just one, Improper purrs.

Once more siding with Prim, I shake my head and come back around my desk. As I drop to the seat, Brandy Reynolds' letter sticks its tongue out at me where it lies in the path between keyboard and monitor. I stare at it.

Don't you dare, Prim scolds.

"Hush!" I hiss.

Well, don't say you weren't warned.

I struggle a bit longer, then turn on my monitor, log onto my server, point, click, and pull up Birgitta's e-mail address.

Ms. Brandy Reynolds, Thank you for your letter regarding "Thorn of the Rose." I am so pleased you enjoyed it. As, by your own admission, you are not a historian, may I suggest "Ravages of the Plague in Fourteenth-Century Europe" by Sir C. R. Walsingham? Please understand, Ms. Reynolds, that I write romantic fiction, the culmination of which is a happy ending. If you are searching for something less romantic and, therefore, tedious—

Not to mention sub-standard!

—I highly recommend mid-list author, Birgitta Roth. I am sure you will quickly become her devoted fan. Happy reading! Sincerely,
Adda Sinclair **NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR**

Couldn't resist the *New York Times* parting shot. Smiling, I click "send," and off it goes. No regrets. No turning back.

Very nice, Improper murmurs.

As I slide my pointer to the “X” that will disconnect me, I notice the Barnes & Noble advertisement for free shipping. I bite my lip, tell myself I don’t need any more research books, and click on the advertisement.

Some time later, bleary-eyed and yawning, I disconnect.

Nice going, Prim quips.

I stare at my paragraph and blink a couple of times to bring it to focus.

“ . . . he . . . ”

A fearful glance at the clock confirms it. I laid to waste nearly five hours.

Tears sting and a sob rolls up my throat as I press my forehead to the desk. I have no choice but to admit the unadmittable.

I have a problem.

A serious problem.

Hoping there’s a nearby chapter of Writer’s Block Anonymous, I reach for the phone.

“Why in God’s name are you calling me at five in the morning?” my agent grumbles.

I take a deep breath. “I need help, Noelle. My hero can’t consummate the marriage.”

“Has he tried Viagra?”

“Noelle!”

She sighs, and I hear the snap of a lamp switch. “Adda, I’ve already advised you on this.”

“And I took your advice. I got myself a date and let him

sweep me off my feet.”

“Really?” There’s surprised admiration in her tone. “Then what are you calling me for?”

“I —”

“You did bring him home, didn’t you?” she barks, admiration giving way to suspicion.

She’s not going to like it, but my conscience refuses to allow her to think I’m easy. “Yes, and we spent an enjoyable evening viewing *Pride and Prejudice*.”

A long silence, and I wince in anticipation of her squeal of horror.

“Adda Sinclair!”

Do I know her? Or do I know her?

“Are you telling me you subjected your inspiration to that sappy movie? All umpteen hours of it?”

“Hey!” I protest. “*Pride and*—”

“What happened, Adda?”

I brace myself for another squeal. “We watched the movie and he went home.”

Her teeth grind across the phone line. “Then noth . . . ing hap . . . pened?” she punctuates each syllable.

Remembering Gorgeous’s kiss, the urgency of which took my breath away, I almost sigh. “We . . . uh . . .” I clear my throat. “We kissed.”

Once more, silence descends, the only sound that of her breathing. Finally, she says, “Okay.”

Deep breath.

“Okay.”

Deep breath.

“*Bleep!*” she explodes. “Did you let one of those Bible-thumpers in your front door again?”

I sink lower in my chair. Bible-thumpers—a weakness of mine. The young Southern Baptist missionaries who show up on my doorstep once or twice a year are so sincere and caring that I can’t close the door in their faces. More, I have only to spend a few minutes with them to realize they have something I don’t. Something I find myself wanting, though I can’t say what, exactly, it is. All I know is that when they speak of God and Jesus, their eyes sparkle and their smiles grow wide. When they set their bodies to what they believe, their hands fly with such excitement a certain amount of distance is required to ensure I don’t get slapped upside the head. And when they ask if I’d like to accept Jesus into my life and I decline, they’re nonjudgmental. There’s just this . . . peace about them.

“Adda?”

So where does that peace come from? Though I know they’d like me to believe Jesus—

“Did you let one in?” Noelle shrills.

I certainly heard that. Wincing, I say, “No,” and before she can heave a sigh of relief, add, “I let in two.” After all, they travel in packs. New York City is *not* Mayberry, U.S.A.

“How many times do I have to tell you—” Noelle begins her rant.

Which is why I decide against mentioning the little black book . . . er, Bible . . . or something like it . . . that I accepted from one of the nice young men I invited into my kitchen.

Rant. Rant. Rant.

If she were to know I've actually been flipping through those almost translucent pages, I might never hear the end of it. Of course, it doesn't sound like I'm about to hear the end of this. Time for a potty break . . .

I set the handset on my desk, and when I return a minute later, her miniaturized voice is still working over her absent audience.

"All that preaching about love and forgiveness and doing unto others," she says as I return the handset to my ear. "What, I ask you, is this world coming to?"

Before I can cover the mouthpiece, a snort explodes from my mouth.

"What?" Noelle demands.

I clear my throat, shake my head. "Nothing. Just . . . something caught in my throat."

"Um hmm," she grumbles, then sighs. "Listen, Adda, you've got to get serious here. Your deadline—"

"I know all about my deadline," I snap, surprising both of us as I drop the "passive" in "passive-aggressive."

"Oooo . . . kay," she intones.

Though I try to breathe through the emotions that are piling one atop the other, my throat tightens, nose tingles, and eyes water. Oh no . . .

“Adda?”

“I’m done for,” I burble, voice breaking. “Finished. Dried up. Nothing left. Nada. I . . . I have . . .” Realizing I’m about to hyperventilate, I take another long, cleansing breath as Ludwig urges me to do in stressful situations.

“What is it?” Noelle prompts.

I snap my teeth. “I . . . have . . . writer’s . . . block!”

A long pause follows, and I wonder if she’s fainted dead away. For years we’ve shared the belief that no such disease exists. And now I’ve gone over to the other side.

How humiliating.

“What am I going to do?” I moan.

More silence, and I just know she’s kicking herself for giving me her home number. But then, with her hefty 15-percent cut, she has a vested interest in this, too.

“Find yourself another date,” she says.

Though tempted to slam the phone down, I grip it tighter and bark, “No!”

“Fine!” she barks back only to give an exasperated sigh. “Look, get some sleep and meet me at The Ivories at one. We’ll talk over lunch.”

Calm, Adda. Calm. I swallow hard, nod.

“Are you there, Adda?”

Oh, yeah, she can’t see me. “I’ll meet you,” I say.

“Good. ‘Night.” She slams down the phone.

Night? Don’t I wish. I look to the blinds through which

sunlight is beginning to filter. It's morning in Manhattan.

Sickened by all the wasted hours, I return the phone to its base and glance hopefully at the computer.

Oh, what's the use? With every intention of sleeping away what I dare not call depression, I trudge upstairs and flop down on the bed. But sleep eludes. Anxiety pressing in on all sides, I find myself considering the little black book and the young man who gave it to me. Josh was his name. . . .

So go get it, Prim suggests, maybe it'll help.

Yeah, as in putting you to sleep, Improper derides.

Sounds like a win-win situation to me. Thus, I bang around the townhouse until I finally locate the book in the kitchen. I pause at the sight of it. It's so cute, especially compared to the inches-and-inches-thick phone book beside which it lies. Very cute.

"It's the second part of the Bible," Josh said, explaining the book's rather abbreviated size. Of course, the incredibly small type and über-thin pages have a lot to do with it, too.

Settling on a bar stool at the eat-in counter, I turn the little black book right side up and frown over its condition. Not that it's beat up. It's just that, like so many books, it doesn't appear to have been treated with the respect books are due. The binding is creased in a dozen places, the cover is worn, the page edges are somewhat warped, and the gold-stamped title is fading. I focus on the latter, and with my finger trace the letters that spell out: *New Testament*.

"Jesus' life and death," Josh had said with a reverence that deepened his charming southern drawl.

The next line reads: with *Psalms and Proverbs*.

“Old Testament Poetry that teaches life principles,” Josh had explained.

I lower my gaze to the *NIV* stamped at the bottom.

That he had not explained, and if I were completely ignorant of the Bible, I’d guess it to be the author’s name. I shrug. Probably some kind of Bible code.

I take a deep breath. “Okay, save me or put me to sleep.”

As with each time I open to the “Presented to” page, I can’t help but feel guilty over how I ended up with Josh Holman’s little black book, which his best friend, Dustin—the same young man who accompanied him to my home—gave him two years ago, according to the inscription.

Though I was only being kind in expressing interest in their pamphlets that talked about Jesus and what it means to be a Christian, Josh’s enthusiasm had been so contagious I found myself asking questions. Next thing I knew, *he* was asking questions, foremost among them—would I like to be saved?

Saved? I’d backpedaled as fast as I could, edging him and his friend toward the door and telling them I’d have to look into it some more before making a decision like that. At the door, Josh had turned back and asked if I owned a Bible. I told him I didn’t but that as soon as I found time to pick one up, I would—a lie, but anything to make the Bible-thumpers go away. Josh had stood there a long moment, chewing the corner of his lip. Then he exchanged glances with his friend, pulled the little black book from his shirt

pocket, and handed it to me.

“You can have mine,” he said with a smile on his lips and a light in his eyes.

It was reflex that made me accept it and astonishment that held my tongue from protest. There I stood, wide-eyed, as he told me that though it wasn't the Bible in its entirety, the life of Jesus and Psalms and Proverbs was the best place to start. Not until he had shaken my rather limp hand and stepped outside did I find my voice. Catching the sleeve of his friend as he started to follow, I asked him to return the book to Josh, but the young man just leaned near and said, “Josh is aching to lead someone to Christ. Read it, and maybe you'll be his first.”

So now I'm stuck with the book, a very personalized book, it turns out—complete with highlighting, margin notes, favorite Bible sayings handwritten on the pages at the back of the book, and a list of people he has forgiven. Among them, his father . . .

Feeling like the voyeur I do each time I enter Josh's private world, I turn to the back where he listed issues he must have dealt with—anger, fear, lust, and so on. Beneath each are references to different chapters, along with numbers and colons which, I'm pleased to say, I've decoded. Thus, let's see what God has to say about dealing with writer's block.

Not surprisingly, it isn't among Josh's issues. But there must be something related to it. As googling isn't an option, I run a finger down the pages in search of a compatible issue.

“Ah,” I say, “desperation.” Though Josh has listed half a

dozen sayings, I choose the first—Psalm 138:7. “Though I walk in the midst of trouble,” I read aloud, “you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me.”

Hmm . . . sounds like a pretty serious situation this guy is in. Not that the passage isn’t comforting. It’s just that a life-and-death situation hardly equates with writer’s block. Or does it?

Regardless, it was obviously written for someone who already possesses faith—and I don’t.

This time my finger lands on “discouragement,” which is more in keeping with what’s happening in my life. I return to Psalms, and the highlighted words of 77:1 immediately draw my gaze. “I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.”

Sounds like the author is advising prayer—of which I know very little.

Back to Josh’s issues. “Failure?” Though I’m not at that point—yet—my curiosity over how the young man dealt with it makes me go searching for 1 Chronicles 28:20. Keeping an eye on the headings, I fan through the book, but there’s no Chronicles. And the index confirms it. Guessing it must be part of the Old Testament, I wonder—not for the first time—if I should get hold of a complete Bible.

Nah.

“Suffering?” I stare at the blue-inked word. *That* I am. “Psalm 69:1-3,” I repeat several times before locating the passage. “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the

miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.”

Well isn't that depressing—makes my own suffering seem rather petty. Still, I wonder what nugget of wisdom might be found in all that misery. So I read on, wading through enemies who seek to destroy this guy named David and force him to restore something he didn't steal. Then there's weeping, scorn, mockery, disgrace, shame, and downright groveling for help from God who doesn't seem to be answering his phone. But for all that, David continues to trust in him and praise him. And the next Psalm is more of the same stuff, and the Psalm after that . . .

Very depressing.

Temples throbbing, I drop my forehead to the open book and am surprised at how heavy my eyelids feel. Well, at least the little black book was good for something.