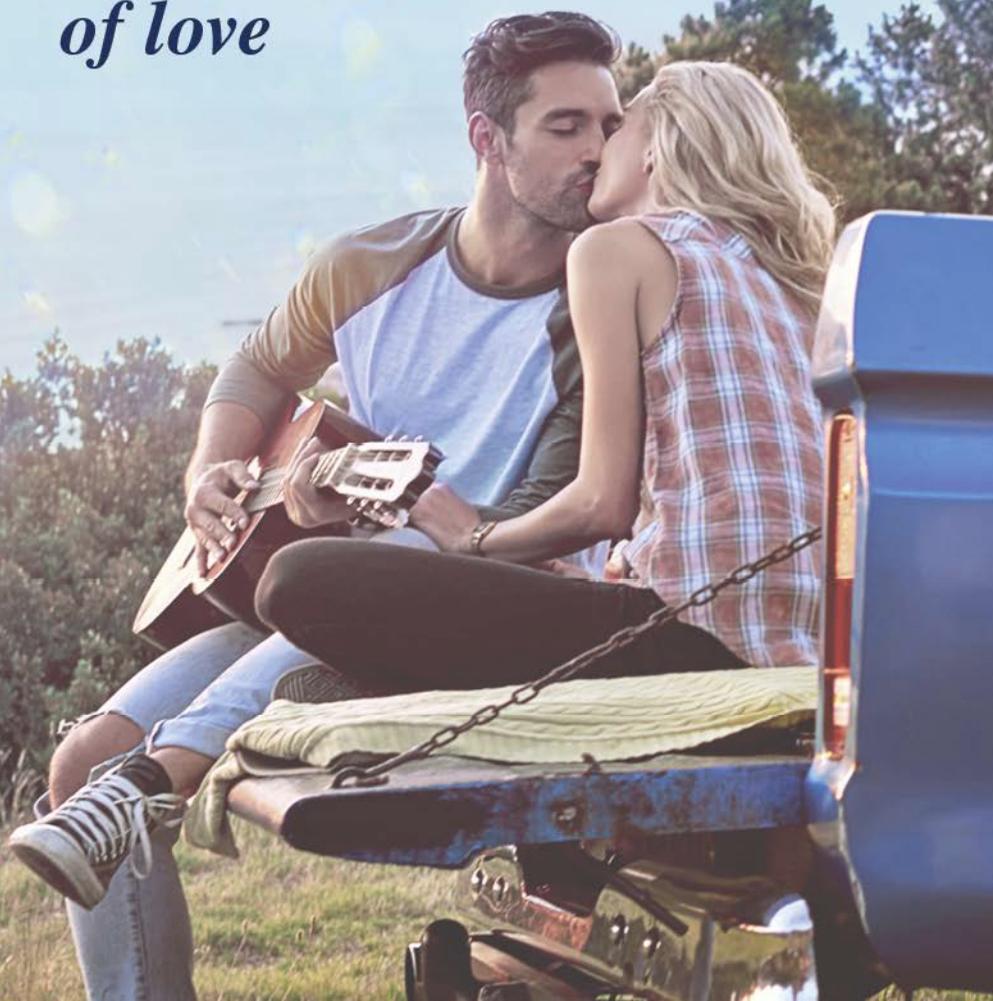


CHRIS REGEZ

The

Songwriter

*Following the sound
of love*



Chapter 5 – Men’s night (Day 3 – Wednesday)

Joe typed Steve's address in the car's navigation device. He drove south on Interstate 24 until he reached the exit «Antioch». The side street led past pastures and meadows before industrial buildings, supermarkets and residential buildings appeared. The navigation device told him to turn right into a side street after he had passed the Shell gas station. The houses exuded a touch of American small-town idyll.

The two-story house was located at the end of a side street and at the foot of a hill. A garage had been added laterally. On the property were several large oaks that provided plenty of shade on sunny days. Joe parked the Mustang in the driveway right next to Steve's black Jeep. He walked up the steps to the front entrance and knocked on the door.

A few seconds later, the lawyer greeted him with a strong handshake: «Welcome to my humble home. I am very happy you made it from the city to my place.»

«Easy thing! I had no problem finding your place with my GPS».

Joe was quite impressed: The entrance area

looked inviting and led directly to the living room with a huge white leather sofa and a club table. Next to it was a round dining table with six black leather chairs. A bar separated the kitchen which included a cooking island. A staircase led to the upper floor. Big windows allowed for plenty of sunlight. The modern furniture matched the oak parquet flooring and the white walls perfectly. In the back, a door led to the veranda, from where the swimming pool was visible.

«Well, without exaggerating – this house fulfills all my wishes. I can do without luxury. You must be thirsty – and I really look forward to listening to your songs. Come on, let's go down to the basement, have a beer and make ourselves comfortable.»

Joe couldn't believe his eyes. The home recording studio practically occupied the entire basement. Two sofas, a club table, a fridge, a few microphone stands, a guitar amp, electric and acoustic guitars, a bass, a drum set as well as a Mac with all the trimmings for recording were there.

Joe couldn't help but show his admiration: «Wow, you've really created a paradise for musicians!» Steve went over to the fridge without any comment and grabbed two cans of Coors Light be-

fore they raised them for a toast. Then Steve proceeded to show his equipment to his guest. After some small talk he looked at Joe and said: «Now I'd like to hear some samples of your original songs.»

Joe opened his guitar case and took out his electro-acoustic guitar – a Takamine Santa Fe. Although he had already played his songs for countless people, his heart suddenly started beating unpleasantly fast.

He chose «Start A Fire» as the first song to play for Steve. The lawyer – now casually dressed in jeans and a T-shirt – was sitting on the leather sofa, munching popcorn and drinking beer. He listened attentively. Once the song was over, he rewarded Joe with a round of applause and asked:

«Did you write this one?»

Joe nodded.

«Is there a demo CD?»

«Yes, there is. Several years ago, I recorded a CD with my former band. The song I just played for you – «Start A Fire» – happens to be the title song of that CD.»

Joe felt a bit more relaxed and pulled out a CD from his guitar case. He placed it on the salon table. Steve took a closer look at the cover and

suggested playing the CD later. Right now, he wanted to listen to more live versions. He asked Joe to play «Easy Choices», «No More Hard Times» and «Stay Gone or Stay Here» – songs mentioned on the CD cover. Joe played the songs – now in a more relaxed demeanor – and reaped appreciative glances and more applause. He explained how he had come up with the ideas for his songs. Steve listened intently and added, «Cool stuff. These songs have potential.»

They cracked open a second can of beer and drank to Joe's songs. Then Steve picked up one of his guitars: a black Taylor cutaway electro acoustic guitar.

They started jamming: Country, Bluegrass and Rockabilly. Songs from different periods. «Love Me Tender» by Elvis, «Blue Suede Shoes» by Carl Perkins, «Friends in Low Places» by Garth Brooks, «The Cowboy Rides Away» by George Strait, «Workin' Man Blues» by Merle Haggard and so on.

Following their jam session, Steve asked: «Am I the only person you know in Nashville?»

«Not quite,» replied Joe with a smile and told him of his encounters with Allison, whom he soon wanted to surprise by paying a visit. Steve listened closely and said with a hearty laugh: «Well,

if you ask me, I'd say you've been shot by Cupid's arrow all right! I wish you the best of luck in trying to win her heart.»

«Do you know Allison Monroe?» Joe asked.

«Not personally, but I've heard her name and seen photos of her. She is one of those up-and-coming young singers and looks extremely hot, I say. Anybody would kill for a flirt with her! I can understand why you can hardly wait to see her. But tell me, what else do you like about her apart from her good looks?»

«Well, no need for me to think for long to come up with an answer. I admire her for being a modern-day woman with a positive attitude and a healthy dose of self-confidence. I also like her sense of humor and the way she manages her life. She's got style. We immediately hit it off with each other and share common interests. In addition to our shared passion, music, we are interested in dozens of other topics that we can talk about. Unfortunately, time passed by too quickly every time we saw each other.»

«Well, that sounds quite promising» said Steve with a wink.

Joe took one more sip of beer and asked out of curiosity: «Are you familiar with her songs?»

«Sorry, but I don't remember them. There are

tons of songs in Nashville as there are thousands of talented singers. It's practically impossible to keep track. And it's even more difficult to make the breakthrough. Talent alone usually doesn't suffice to make it to the top. It also takes a good portion of luck, perseverance and the right connections! Sometimes, you've just got to be in the right place at the right time! I've met many female singers who are dangerously good-looking and could sing significantly better than Taylor Swift or Carrie Underwood. And yet, they were never spotted. They're probably still dreaming of a big career. Pity for them, but their dreams will never come true.»

Between singing songs and the next round of cool beer Joe learned about the details of the lawyer's life.

Steve had been single for years. He loved women – but he didn't care much about commitments. Steve liked change. Depending on his mood, he would meet with one of his acquaintances.

His law firm was doing great. Steve worked practically day and night – just like a workaholic.

In his spare time, he liked to jam with friends in his own studio, which he had built for a lot of money.

As both were getting quite hungry, they decided

to light the outdoor gas grill. The steaks, corn-cobs and baked potatoes were delicious. The steaks were served with Jack Daniel's original steak sauce with its incomparable taste of Hickory-Brown-Sugar.

While enjoying their meal, they listened to Joe's CD from his former days in San Diego.

Steve proposed to re-record Joe's songs. «Your tunes are convincing. They've got that certain <je ne sais quoi>. But you won't achieve anything in Nashville with the recordings on your old CD. What you need is a completely new demo CD that was produced from scratch and tailored to the needs of the music industry. This is the only way you'll have any success at all with the music publishers. And with a little luck you might even get a contract as a songwriter and live off the royalties in the future. But don't get your hopes up too high. The path to success is not an easy one and could take much longer than you imagine.»

Then, with a wink he added: «Thanks to my contacts, I can give you the name of a producer who will make first-class demos of your songs. And at the best possible conditions.»

Joe nodded and said, «Thank you for your opinion and advice. That sounds like a good plan and

I'm open to it. But please explain how you got into the music business!»

«Before I even started my first day of school, my grandfather had showed me a few chords on the guitar, and at the age of 14 I played in a school band,» Steve said wistfully. «And what about you?»

«My uncle was the singer of a pretty successful country band in Southern California. We visited many of his concerts. I found that pretty cool. When he told me that the singers always get the most attractive girls, I knew I wanted to be a singer as well,» remembered Joe with a big grin on his face.

After a few more beers, a fine Flor de Copan Short Robusto, Ben & Jerry's banana split ice cream and a cup of coffee, Joe was in no shape to drive back to the motel. He had drunk too much – and the cigar had made him feel dizzy. Steve offered him his guest room and Joe gladly accepted.

Chapter 15 – Bad timing (Day 11 – Thursday)

The Barista Parlor in East Nashville is a cool coffee shop. It's a popular place to meet friends or hang out there alone, surf on the internet with an iPad and drink coffee. Many guests get inspired by the atmosphere and write down ideas for new songs.

Allison had suggested this place for their meeting. Was this going to be a date? Joe wasn't sure. He was nervous. Extremely nervous. He couldn't stop thinking of Allison since he had arrived in Nashville. He had dreamt of such a moment like a teenager. Even for adults, life isn't easy when it comes to dating and love.

While ordering a cappuccino at the bar, he thought over his situation with Allison: «Damn, my chances aren't looking good. Mark Thompson stands most likely in my way. Looks like they're seeing each other.»

He sat down at one of the free tables to the back of the restaurant. He had arrived a bit too early but it didn't matter. He browsed through a magazine titled 'Nashville Scene', but he couldn't concentrate. Allison entered the Barista Parlor five minutes later. She wore a black Oakley baseball

cap, sunglasses, boots, blue jeans, a silver belt and a white top. Joe got up, walked up to her and hugged her. A kiss on the left cheek, a kiss on the right. He ordered a cappuccino for her as well. He then sat down next to her at the table. She thanked him with a great smile: «You can't imagine how you surprised me yesterday. I never expected something like that would happen. Of all places, you here in Nashville! How long have you been in town? Are you here on your own? Where's Sandy?»

Joe answered one question at a time and explained why he had left San Diego. Allison listened in disbelief. Her eyes got bigger and bigger. She could hardly believe what she was hearing: «And you've really settled down in Nashville? No kidding? You're here without Sandy and you really want to pursue a career as a songwriter with your own songs? What a surprise! Welcome to Music City! I'm glad you're here and I hope all your dreams will come true. Good luck with it!»

«Thanks, I'll certainly need it. But there's another story I'd like to tell you.»

He could hardly wait to tell the «Breaking News»: «Do you believe in coincidences?»

«No, I don't. Why are you asking?»

He looked her in the eye: «Did you sing three

songs for a demo CD in Roger Morris' home recording studio during the last few days?»

Allison returned his gaze and laughed: «No, don't tell me those were your songs.»

Joe grinned and answered: «Yes, they were. When Roger played the finalized demos to me, I recognized your voice immediately. I had no idea, because he didn't say who he had booked for the session. You did an awesome job. The songs sound perfect. An incredible coincidence – this has to be a sign from heaven, don't you think?»

Allison could hardly believe it either: «Yeah, that's like a story from a Hollywood movie! You know, I already had this strange feeling while we were recording in the studio.»

«Oh, really? How come?», Joe wanted to know. «The lyrics are special, the melodies brilliant. Just different. I like 'Butterfly Kisses' the best. Somehow, I felt that ... hmmm, how can I say ... a special person wrote these songs. My feminine intuition rarely deceives me. But I would never have suspected you being the writer of these songs». «Oh, that's too bad,» regretted Joe. «Did you receive a copy of the demo CD?»

Allison's face became serious: «No. I didn't. I seldom take a copy with me. I forget most of the

demo songs I sing very quickly. Most of them usually don't have the potential to get recorded by a country music star let alone be released as a single. Only a very small number are later included in the playlists of radio stations. But I really would like to have a CD of «my» three songs.»

Joe reached into his pocket and handed her a copy.

«Thank you so much! Oh, it even contains more than just my three songs! I'm looking forward to listening to the entire CD. Who sang the other songs?»

«A guy named Dean Potter. He is due to sign a contract with Astro Records soon. Do you know him?»

«Let me think for a moment,» Allison replied. After a brief pause she continued: «Somehow, the name seems familiar to me. But I've never met him in person.»

Joe wanted to know what Allison thought of the three demo songs she had sung: «Do you think I stand a chance with these?»

«Oh, I can't answer that question. Unfortunately, my opinion isn't important. You've just got to go for it and see how far you can make it with your songs. Now that you're here, there's no way back for you anyway. But you've got to understand

that Nashville is a damn tough patch. Only the very fewest make it to the top. Look around you. All the waiters and bartenders try to keep their heads above water with side jobs because they can't make a living from writing songs or working as musicians. Everyone dreams of being discovered one day. I really hope I didn't destroy your dreams by expressing my honest statements!»

Joe looked her in the eye and said, «Thank you for being honest with me. Quite a few people have already warned me how things work around here. I'm certainly not going to pack my bags and fly back to San Diego right away. The <fun> has only just begun!»

«I just want to protect you from having unrealistic dreams and being disappointed afterwards,» Allison said, almost apologetically. «But what are your concrete plans with the demo CD?»

«I really appreciate your input, because you've been in music business for a long time and know how it works. I'm aware it's not going to be an easy ride. Most wannabees give up after a short time, when the breakthrough they hoped for doesn't happen and success isn't within reach. But I want to make a new start here and now. When you're caught in a negative spiral you need to make a change. Only then will things get bet-

ter again. I've decided to try my luck as a songwriter here in Nashville. I couldn't see a future in San Diego anymore. I'll do anything it takes to my make my dreams come true right here.»

After a little pause and a look in Allison's eyes, he continued: «I've got the addresses of the music publishers and I'll knock on each door and hand them my CD in person until they take their time to listen to my songs.»

Allison was impressed: «Wow, you've got a plan and a clear goal in mind. That sounds promising!»

While he ordered a second-round of cappuccinos, she pondered what his presence might mean for her. She had made it clear to Mark that there was no place for a man in her life. But could she resist Joe? She remembered the hot flirts they had back in San Diego even though she knew, Joe was with Sandy at that time. But Sandy is obviously no longer an issue. Allison's numerous negative experiences with men, especially with musicians, served as an argument against a relationship with Joe.

When Joe came back with the cappuccinos, he told her how long he had been looking forward to this moment: «You know, I've thought of you many times. Of our conversations after your con-

certs ... Of our flirtation after your last gig in San Diego ... Back then, it would have been unthinkable for me to spend more time with you or write songs, although I have always dreamt of it. But now everything is different: Sandy and I are no longer together. I'm free and can do anything I want. I hope that we can write some songs soon and spend some time together. I'd love to invite you to dinner. When did you ...»?

Just as he wanted to end the question, Mandy, the thrillingly hot one-night stand girl from the night before burst into their tête-à-tête as if out of nowhere: «Hey Joe, thanks for the nice evening! When can we repeat this? Here's my number. Just call me.» She left just as quickly as she had entered the building.

Allison was as speechless as Joe. Her gaze did not reveal anything good. Joe cursed silently: «Damn! Very bad timing.» But he stayed calm and just said, «I just met her at a party.» But he suspected that Allison was not buying his story. His guess was right. And how!

«Joe, I've got to go now because I've got a ton to do. Maybe we'll see each other at some party.»
And: «Good luck with the demo CD.»

Joe stayed seated for a few minutes. He looked crestfallen. Just a few minutes ago, he could've

embraced the whole world. And now Allison was gone without him getting one step closer to her. On the contrary: Now he was much further away from her than the mere distance between San Diego and Nashville. A distance that felt like a ride from Earth to the moon. Joe felt miserable during the rest of the day. His debut in Nashville had begun so well, was nearly perfect: He had found an apartment, bought a car, met this great lawyer and even recorded a demo CD.

But now he was wreaking havoc with Allison. If this isn't stuff for a new song, then what else would it be? What little comfort! He heard himself saying, «I think I'll have to forget her. Right now. And to be honest with myself, it's almost impossible for me to stand on the sunny side of life from one minute to the other.»

Joe decided to watch a movie to distract himself. The choice at Regal Cinemas Hollywood located in the One Hundred Oaks shopping mall is huge. Contemporary films were running in 27 different cinemas. He opted for «The Equalizer», an action thriller starring Denzel Washington.

Chapter 22 – Old connections (Day 17 – Wednesday)

Don Ramsey was sitting in his office on Sixteenth Avenue, trying to figure out the best way to produce «Moon Over Your Shoulders». The demo already sounded very promising. But he was sure that the song would sound even better in its final studio version if it were produced more modern. The catchy chorus would be stronger and sound even more interesting thanks to the backing voices he intended to use. He leaned back in his giant leather chair and imagined what the finished version would sound like. He wrote down the names of the studio musicians and the backing singers he planned to book for Jessica's recording session at Castle Recording Studio. He didn't want waste any further time, because it would take a few weeks until the CD was completely produced, mixed and manufactured. Just as he was about to pick up the phone to book the studio, Susan Cramer announced an unexpected visitor. It was Mark Thompson, a longtime friend of Don's. Some of his songs had already made it onto albums Don Ramsey had produced. Mark didn't show up empty-handed: «Sorry for my impromptu visit, but I've got to play

a brand-new song for you. I heard you're almost desperately looking for a hit for Jessica Sanders! I'm sure I have exactly what you're looking for.»

Don offered him a cup of coffee and said, «Sorry, but you're much too late! We've already found the song we need a long time ago, my friend. But show me what you've got just the same.»

He plugged the USB stick into his notebook and listened to «Even After You're Gone», Mark Thompson's song. After playing the song, he got up and cursed: «I can't believe this! Your song has everything it needs to become a hit! But listen to «Moon Over Your Shoulders». This song was at the top of the list until you came in.»

Mark was speechless, because he immediately recognized Allison's unique voice. But his expression gave nothing away and he remained silent.

Yet inside, he was steaming with anger. Thinking to himself, «This must be a song written by that California guy who's trying to seduce Allison. I have to make sure my song gets on this CD.»

Don Ramsey looked at Mark with a questioning glance: «This song has huge hit potential, right? Just like yours. Damn, now I'm really torn between the two songs, but we can only record one of them. Let me sleep on it for one night.»

Mark wasn't ready to give up so fast: «You've always had great success with my songs, haven't you? This 'Moon-Song' doesn't sound bad, I have to admit, but mine is much better 'suited' for Jessica Sanders. Don, think again. You owe me a big favor. It was only thanks to my connections that you were able to sign one of the most successful up-and-coming bands two years ago. And you've made a lot of money with that group! Thanks for the coffee.» Mark left the office as quickly as he had showed up.

Don Ramsey couldn't make up his mind. Which song to choose? «Even After You're Gone» by Mark Thompson or «Moon Over Your Shoulders» by Joe Baker?

He closed the door and listened to the two songs over and over again. He weighed the pros and the cons. But he still couldn't make up his mind, not yet. He finally decided to sleep on it before making the final decision. Both songs had that «something special» to make a difference.

But as far as the CD was concerned, he only needed one additional song. All other songs had already been recorded. Which one should he choose? Which one of the two had the potential to become the much needed hit for Jessica Sanders?

Chapter 36 – Stormy days

(Day 31 – Wednesday, October 1, 2014)

The morning started with breaking news that was published on all social media sites and broadcasted on TV and the radio. The headline read: «Management changing at Astro Records – new CEO is taking over.»

Joe received a text message from Steve. He knew within seconds what that meant: The entire top management had to leave. CEO, producer, marketing and talent scout would be fired.

Joe called his publisher right away. This news was also a hot topic over there. Sam Stone, the CEO, had already gotten wind of the gossip spreading around the industry: «Dean Potter’s CD production, as well as those of some other bands and singers, were immediately blocked and will probably not be pursued. A management change of this size – arranged by the parent company in New York City – does not bode well. But let’s not go nuts. So far, nothing had been confirmed.»

Joe started the engine of his pickup truck and drove to town. He wanted to meet with Steve and discuss the breaking news. Their main topic of discussion at lunch was of course, Astro Records’ change of management. Steve sug-

gested that Joe remain calm. After lunch, over coffee, Joe received a text message from Sam Stone, the boss of Rocky Road Songs, where he had just signed a contract as a songwriter: «Joe, the CD production of Dean Potter will be stalled indefinitely. The names of the new members of the Executive Board have just been published on the website.»

Joe checked the website of Astro Records with his smartphone for more news. After cursing loudly, he looked at Steve with a scowl. He said angrily: «Damn. The situation is even getting worse. Do you know who the members of the new management are?»

«No idea.» For once, Steve had no idea.

«Mark Thompson, Allison's passionate admirer, will be newly responsible for scouting and talent development,» Joe replied. And he added: «The media release says they hired him thanks to his numerous connections in Nashville and his great experience. I don't like this at all.»

Steve tried to reassure his friend: «I know this is bad news. But postponed is not abandoned. I know someone who works at Astro Records. Let me find out what she knows. Maybe they'll have reorganized everything within the week, and they'll finish the Potter CD.»

Joe wasn't so easily reassured by his friend's statements.

«By the way, how are things going on with Allison?», Steve wanted to know and purposefully redirected the conversation to a different topic.

When thinking about Allison, Joe's world looked much better again in no time: «Thank you for asking. She's playing every night in St. Louis, Missouri until Saturday. I already miss her terribly. At least she'll be recording three of my songs and then release them on her debut CD.»

Steve continued to ask: «When will the CD be released?»

«According to the record company, the CD should be produced as soon as possible, so they can release it before Christmas time.»

Chapter 44 – Third day in the studio (Day 59 – Wednesday)

The third recording day was over. Shortly after 6 p.m. Allison and Joe left the studio. They had recorded the remaining songs too. Don Ramsey, the sound engineer and the musicians had done a tremendous job. Allison was more than happy. She had taken the next day off to relax before the great challenge on Friday when she would sing her definitive vocals and her pilot vocals would be deleted from the tracks. On Friday, there would only be her, Don Ramsey and the sound engineer in the studio – and no musicians. They had done their valuable work and would be recording with other artists in different studios somewhere in Nashville.

To celebrate the day, Allison, Joe and Don had dinner at «Puckett's Grocery & Restaurant» on Church Street. The restaurant offered a range of mouth-watering dishes: «Strawberry Fields Salad», «Cherry Smoked Baby Back Ribs», «Southern Chicken», «Deep Fried Brownie Sundae» or «Shrimp & Grits».

Over dinner, they looked back at the three days in the studio: «I'm pretty sure, we'll release a great album with these songs. We've got the sound

pretty much the way I imagined», said Don as they celebrated.

And turning to Joe, he said: «We're also celebrating your success! After being in the city for only a short time, your name will appear on two new CDs already. What a fast career start! You should be proud of that. I hope you'll write countless more songs of this quality. We have many other artists who, like Allison and Dean, need extraordinary material to achieve their goals and pay their bills.»

Joe was flattered: «Thanks for the compliment. I'm more than excited that everything went so smoothly. I know that's usually not the case. As for Dean Potter, that was just plain luck. Had you not purchased the rights from Astro Records... well, you know what I mean.»

Allison took the floor: «Joe, I can't wait for you to record a new demo CD of your latest material. You've written a bunch of new songs since you arrived in Nashville.»

Don supported her: «Exactly, when can I listen to your new work? I'm constantly looking for above-the-average songs.» They laughed and raised their glasses: «To Joe's new songs!»

A short time later, Don Ramsey looked at his watch and signaled it was time to leave: «Listen,

you two lovers, I have to go home now and relax. Some rest wouldn't hurt you either, Allison. We'll continue our work on Friday and Saturday when we record your definitive voice. Until then you should slow down!»

Incriminating photographic material

After three intense days, Allison was happy to finally lay down on her sofa shortly after 9 p.m. Joe hugged her and said: «I'm incredibly proud of you. The recordings sound awesome – even in their raw version.»

Allison wasn't so sure: «What will the fans, the media and the radio stations say? Will the radios play the songs, and will the fans buy the CD and want to hear my songs on the radio? What if the CD is a complete flop?»

Joe calmed her down: «Don't worry about it now. I've got an excellent feeling about your work and Don Ramsey knows exactly what needs to be done to make the CD a success. You just need more confidence. Don't get obsessed about it.»

Suddenly, Allison's smartphone vibrated. A new text message came in. She took her phone out of her handbag and read it. Suddenly, she stood there as if she had just been petrified. Joe noticed her gaze and immediately suspected some-

thing bad. Even before he could find out what was wrong, she glared at him with ice-cold eyes and yelled at him without warning: «You damn liar and womanizer. You lied to me, betrayed me and deceived me. Leave my house immediately. I never want to see you again!»

Joe winced at her voice and countered with played coolness: «Hey baby, keep calm. What's this all about? What's the problem?»

«You know very well what this is all about! Last night you didn't meet with Steve, you met that tramp from the coffee shop and fooled around with her. I've just received a pretty clear picture of the two of you together. I should have listened to my inner voice back then in the coffee shop when I had the feeling something was going on between the two of you.»

«Who sent you the picture?»

«That's none of your business – and now get the hell out of here.»

Joe tried to remain calm but lost his composure. Louder than usual he answered: «Whoever is sending you pictures like this is trying to put a wedge between us. Nothing happened, I swear! I have nothing to hide and have always been faithful to you. Do you really believe this crap? Don't you even want to hear my side of the story?»

Allison wouldn't listen to him: «Forget it! I don't want to hear your excuses. This picture says more than a thousand words. How could you do this to me ...? I'll call Don Ramsey tomorrow and tell him that he's got to remove your three songs from my CD. I don't want to see you ever again.» Joe reluctantly got up, as if in a trance. He tried to approach Allison, but she raised her hand and unmistakably indicated the door. He had no choice but to leave her house.

On his way back to his apartment, Joe couldn't keep his mind off what had just happened. Who on earth could have taken that picture and sent it to Allison? He mentally went over the recent evening and tried to recall who had been in the bar but couldn't recognize any familiar faces. Although it doesn't change the situation, there is nothing to blame himself for. And yet, someone in the bar must have spied and photographed him together with Mandy.

Still, Joe was angry with himself: «How could this happen? Just as I wasn't paying attention for one moment – wham! Damn. I've got to find a way to save my relationship with Allison. And all this commotion just because of this scene with Mandy? If only I knew who took this picture to set me up.»

Who took the picture?

Joe couldn't sleep at all that night. He felt miserable and missed Allison so much it just ached. But deep down he knew that his behavior was to blame for this situation.

Usually, he'd seek solace by writing a new song. But not this time. He just lied down with his back on the floor and stared at the ceiling. Everything had felt so perfect, as if nothing could come between them.

He lied on the hard, cold ground for hours and racked his brain. How, what, where, why? He wasn't about to give up. He wanted to do everything in his power to win back Allison. No matter what the cost. And he had to find out who had sent her the photo. He already had his suspicions. Shortly after 5 a.m., he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 49 – Message from Allison (Day 73 – Thursday)

Joe woke up shortly after 6 a.m. A new melody was cheerfully going through his head. He walked over to the kitchen, turned on the coffee machine and grabbed his guitar. Still slightly sleepy, he hummed the melody and searched for the matching chords, without playing loudly. He wrote down a few text ideas that popped into his mind.

In the meantime, the coffee machine was ready. Lost in his thoughts, he stood there and looked around his apartment. Suddenly he perceived his smartphone on the living room table. He asked himself: «Wasn't there a message I ignored last night?».

With the cup in his hand he headed for the sofa and picked up the device: The display showed three incoming messages – all of them from Allison». He asked himself: Damn, why did I ignore the smartphone last night?» As he read the first message, he stopped breathing: «Joe, where are you, can we see each other?». The second message: «Joe, why didn't you stay to celebrate with us?» And the third: «It's already late, can I come to your place?»

Joe desperately needed a second cup of coffee after reading Allison's messages – a double Espresso – no milk, but with plenty of sugar. He sat down at the kitchen table and wondered what to do next. His hands were sweaty. Thoughts raced through his head. After five unsuccessful minutes of coming up with a plan, he typed: «Good morning Allison. Sorry, I wasn't available anymore last night. Will we see each other today?»

He liked his last sentence, which inspired him for a new song title: «See You Again». As if by magic – and without thinking too hard – he wrote down the first verse and the chorus in less than 15 minutes. While thinking hard about Allison, he played a few chords on the guitar. After one hour he had finished his brand new song.

Shortly before noon, he received a text message from Allison: A quick glance was enough to make his heart beat faster: «How about 1 p.m. at Biscuit Love?»

The reunion

Joe headed for the city in his pickup truck shortly after 12:30 p.m. He inserted Dean's new CD in his car radio. It was a promo CD – just for the media, the record company and the songwriters.

He enjoyed the rich and full sound. He had to be careful not to drive too fast. He sang along out loud. Needless to say, he knew the lyrics of his songs by heart. Joe found a free spot in the parking lot next to the café. On his way to Biscuit Love, he marveled at the modern architecture of the Gulch district and the new apartment buildings.

He ordered a cappuccino at the counter before choosing a quiet table in the back of the restaurant. Then he waited excitedly for Allison to arrive.

She entered the restaurant just a few minutes later. She walked straight up to him. As soon as he saw her, he got up. They hugged each other. How she had missed being close to him.

After what felt like an eternity, they sat down at the table and stared at each other in silence. Then he ordered a cappuccino for her as well. After coming back, she grabbed his hand and said: «Please tell me exactly what happened in the bar that night when this fateful picture was taken.»

Joe told all the details and concluded: «You have to believe me when I say there was absolutely nothing to be jealous of. I was always just thinking of you. Mandy didn't cross my mind for a second!»

«Oh my God. I had no idea that Mark Thompson was the reason for this mess and he even tried to separate us. I am so sorry for overreacting like this. I was totally shocked and disappointed when I saw the picture of you – together with this woman. Thank God, you didn't give up.»

Joe lowered his head and replied: «You have no idea how miserable I felt when you ended our relationship. I felt so helpless, because I couldn't imagine who took the picture, how it made its way to you and who could possibly do something like that to me. My whole world collapsed right in front of me. But I wasn't ready to give up, because you mean the world to me. I only had that one night with Mandy – and that happened before we started our relationship.»

«And after that there was never anything between the two of you again?»

«No, never again. I swear!»

Allison wanted to hear more: «How did you find out that Mark was behind it?»

«After you received the picture, I contacted Mandy again. It was clear to me that this whole misery had something to do with her. She immediately admitted that Mark had asked her to flirt with me. She owed him a favor.»

«That's sick!» Allison shook her head in disbelief.

Joe continued: «The guy was so badly in love with you that his jealousy almost tore us apart for good. His plan nearly worked, despite the fact that he had an affair going on with Barbara Jenkins, his boss.»

Allison replied with a huge dose of anger in her voice: «I never thought he would be capable of anything like that».

All this was too much for Allison to take in. Suddenly, tears ran down her reddened cheeks. Joe gave her a handkerchief to comfort her, and after what felt like an eternity he asked carefully: «And what about us now?»

Allison looked out of the window with an almost lifeless stare.

Then she suggested: «Let's go to your place. I'd like to show you something.»

Reconciliation

They drove over to Joe's apartment and sat down on the sofa. By then, Allison had calmed down again and asked: «May I use your guitar?» «Sure, go ahead.»

Allison placed a song sheet on the living room table. «You were not the only one with sleepless nights – I also cried – over and over again. The fact that you didn't even say 'Hello' at the CD re-

lease party and left right after the photo session left me very sad.»

«You can't imagine, how much I would've loved to stay and celebrate with you! But I didn't know how to behave», admitted Joe sadly.

«What a shame! That moment will never repeat itself again. But our story inspired me to write a new song. It should remind us of our love forever. It's called «No More Sad Times.»»

Joe leaned back on the sofa, closed his eyes and listened to her attentively. Her voice sounded even more fascinating than usual and embodied the blues with such talent that it perfectly matched the sad lyrics. After the first chorus, Joe opened his eyes again and watched her every move.

After Allison had finished her song, she put the guitar away and placed herself right in front of Joe. She gently stroked his hair and he leaned his head against her belly. Then he slowly pulled out her black blouse from her jeans and opened the buttons, one by one. Allison slowly took off her blouse and let it drop to the floor without saying a word. Silently, he took off his shirt too. He savored that moment when his eyes followed his right hand stroking her perfect torso and moving downwards to open the button of her jeans. Then

he got up, pulled off his jeans and slid his hand behind her back carefully undoing her bra.

Allison pushed Joe back onto the sofa and got on top of him. She took over and kissed him gently. She stroked his shoulders and her touches sent a violent shiver throughout his body. She could feel his arousal and let Joe take over. Her body followed his rhythm. Allison could hardly contain her desire and let Joe draw her closer. She breathed heavily with pleasure. They began to move in unison more violently, whirling in ecstasy.

Each one of them forgot what had happened during the past few days and let themselves be driven by their insatiable desire. Their reconciliation felt perfect, as if nothing had ever happened between them.

Thirty minutes later, Allison's smartphone rang. She could hardly tear herself from Joe. Nevertheless, she checked the number and answered the call. It was the PR manager of her record company: «Hi Allison, I hope you've got some time today at 5 p.m. for a few spontaneous telephone interviews with radio stations from Boise, Idaho, from Tulsa, Oklahoma, from Austin, Texas, from Charleston, South Carolina and from San Diego, California. Your schedule permitting, I will con-

firm the requests so you can give the interviews. It would be helpful if you could be in the office by 4 p.m., so we could go through the questions they already sent me and work out your answers together. Does this suit your time schedule, or should we postpone it until tomorrow?»

Allison was speechless for a few seconds, but then agreed: «Wow, I can hardly believe it, because the single only just made it to the radio stations today.» The PR manager laughed: «In our business you can always count on surprises. I'm sure there will be many more interview requests to follow.»

Allison had a hard time getting away from Joe as they kept kissing. When she finally got up, she took a shower, got dressed and drove back to the city for the interviews.

Later in the evening, once she had given the interviews, Allison returned to Joe's apartment. «How did it go?», he wanted to know.

«Everything went well, as I had hoped for. The journalists asked me questions such as when I write songs, how long I've already been in the music business, where my next concerts will take place and when will I be coming to their city for shows. They also wanted to know how we produced my new CD.»

Joe smiled: «I'm so proud of you. We should celebrate this moment. Can I offer you some Merlot from California?»

«Love to!»

He opened a bottle of wine and ordered a Pizza Hawaii at the DeSano Pizza Bakery. Then they discussed her next concert dates and looked at the files of the musicians who had applied for a job in her new band.

So far, she had always toured alone, but she could no longer tour by herself. As an artist under contract with a major record company, she needed a live band to efficiently promote her debut CD and launch her career. Although she would currently only be the opening act for well-known artists.

After dinner, they made themselves comfortable on the sofa and enjoyed the evening kissing and cuddling. Then Joe slid «Love Is Everything», a newer CD by George Strait, into the CD player. He dimmed the light and created a romantic atmosphere by lighting some candles.

For the next few hours, they forgot the entire world around them. No song ideas, no touring dates and no record sales. Just the two of them. They continued where they had left off in the afternoon.

Gradually they took off one piece of clothing after the other and enjoyed the closeness, the kisses and the tenderness. They made love to each other on the sofa, on the wooden floor and in the kitchen. They finally fell asleep in the middle of the night.

Exhausted, but happy.

Chapter 57 – Suspicion

(Day 85 – Monday, November 24, 2014)

Officer Al Hutchinson called Joe Monday morning at 9 a.m.: «Mr. Baker, would it be possible for you to drop by at the police station around 11 a.m.? We've found something interesting we would like to discuss with you.»

Joe called Steve who offered to accompany him saying: «It can't harm to have the support of a lawyer.»

The meeting took place in a sparsely furnished interrogation room at the Nashville Police Department. Four chairs, a table, an old, withered plant and air conditioning was all that was available in this room. No window to the outside. Only a window facing the hallway with vertical blinds protecting from intrusive eyes.

As always, the two police officers were very friendly and got straight to the point: «We examined the vehicle and found out, the brakes had been rigged. We also checked Sandy's smartphone. She made no phone call while driving nor did she receive or write any text messages shortly before the accident.»

Steve leaned forward and wanted to know: «So that means she wasn't distracted. But do you

have a suspicion of who may have tampered with the vehicle?»

Officer Ed Stratton dug into his files and responded: «Well, Mr. Baker, you were with Mrs. Monroe that night and have an airtight alibi, so you're not a suspect, though you were hardly pleased with Sandy Stewart's plans. But what we want to know is do you have any enemies in Nashville?»

Steve reacted before Joe could answer: «Mr. Baker just recently moved to Nashville. As you may know, he penned the current hit of country newcomer Dean Potter. Not everyone likes that, and it may have prompted some envious people to spring into action. But if you're talking about enemies, there's only one name that comes to my mind: Mark Thompson. He was an avid admirer of Allison Monroe. He couldn't cope with the fact that he wasn't able to win her heart. He even tried to separate Joe Baker and Allison Monroe and destroy their relationship. Maybe you should verify his alibi.»

Steve explained the details of how Mark had tried to make Joe look bad in front of Allison.

Officer Al Hutchinson eagerly took notes. Then he looked at Joe: «Can you confirm these statements?» Joe thought briefly: «Come to think of the last few weeks, it would make sense though

I'd be quite surprised. Here, by the way, is a list of the apartments Sandy wanted to look at that day. Maybe this will help you further.»

On their way out, Ed Stratton said in a serious voice: «I've been on duty for over 15 years and have experienced many incredible cases. Nothing can be ruled out. Everything is possible. We'll follow up on the info you gave us and get back to you. By the way, how is your son doing?»

«During my visit at the hospital, the pediatrician gave me courage. The medical team hasn't found anything serious yet. They will carry through a thorough examination over the next few days and keep Blake in the children's hospital for further observation.»

Steve placed his hand on Joe's shoulders and suggested they go grab a bite. They drove over to «Rolf and Daughters», a restaurant with northern Italian cuisine. They each ordered a plate of pasta with chicken.

Joe could hardly take more than three bites. The whole situation was just too painful. Although he no longer had feelings for Sandy, her sudden death was very difficult for him to cope with.

He couldn't deny, they had had a long history together. Now his son would remind him of her for the rest of his life.

Joe and Steve proceeded to prepare Sandy's funeral that afternoon. Since she no longer had any relatives and wanted to live in Nashville with Blake, it made sense to bury her in the Music City instead of San Diego.

At the same time, Allison was able to find some needed distraction by going back to work. She rehearsed her songs with her new band given the first concerts were soon to take place. More interviews were scheduled later in the evening. Some interviews were conducted live over the phone or via Skype and every now and then she met with journalists in the offices of the record company.

Based on Joe's information, the Nashville Police Department was working hard on the case. The investigators had interviewed the brokers who had shown Sandy the apartments. All three remembered the young woman from California and her toddler. But none of them had noticed anything suspicious. Sandy Stewart had seemed happy, not threatened.

The last visit had taken place on Friday, just before 7 p.m. in a relatively new 3.5-bedroom apartment in the northeastern part of the city, about five miles from the scene of the accident. Policemen were investigating the area close to

the three apartments Sandy had visited. They interviewed the employees of gas stations, supermarkets and fast food restaurants. Had anyone seen a young woman and her baby? The investigations took hours, but no one could help resolve the case. The police distributed a witness complaint sheet with a picture of Sandy and the baby. It was the photo Joe had taken of them that fateful day.

Based on Joe and Steve's statements, Stratton and Hutchinson were specifically looking for Mark Thompson. But their search remained unsuccessful. They hadn't found him home. In fact, Mark Thompson was nowhere to be found.

On their way back to the Police Department, the two police officers discussed the facts. Officer Stratton said: «I think, Joe Baker may be right. He should have been the victim. Our specialists found no signs of skid marks at the scene of the accident». Hutchinson agreed: «In addition, a mother usually drives sensibly with her baby in the car. According to Joe Baker, Sandy Stewart was a safe driver. I suppose she plunged into the river without being able to brake. We should continue our investigation from the point where she got the pickup truck. At Joe Baker's apartment.»