

TEA FOR TWO
By Carrie Turansky

“Love keeps no record of wrongs. . .it always protects,
always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”
I Corinthians 13:5 – 7 NIV

Chapter One

The bell over the front door of Sweet Something Tea Shop jingled. The mailman stepped inside and pushed the heavy oak and glass door closed behind him, making the bell jingle a second time. A brisk March breeze swept through the shop, ruffling the white lace curtains at the front windows.

Allison Bennett waked into gift shop area. “Afternoon, Howard.”

He nodded and handed her the small stack of mail. “Here you go.”

She smiled and thanked him. “Can I get you a hot cup of coffee or tea?”

“Thanks, but this weather has me behind schedule.” He adjusted the plaid, wool scarf around neck. “I gotta’ get moving. You have a good day.”

“Okay.” She waved and watched him duck out the door, trudged past deep piles of slushy snow, and step into Princeton Interiors next door.

Leaning closer to the front door’s cool glass, she glanced at the gray, brooding sky overhead and then down the empty sidewalk toward Princeton University. This morning she’d read an article in the Princeton Packet calling this the worst winter in thirty years. No one had to tell her twice. She knew it was true. Foot traffic along Princeton’s historic Nassau Street had almost disappeared, taking most of her customers with it.

A dizzy, sick feeling washed over her as she thought of all she’d invested in her business over the last year and a half. If the weather didn’t warm up soon, she’d be forced to close Sweet Something permanently.

She sighed and closed her eyes. *Please, Lord, help us get through these next few weeks. Send us an early spring.* She looked out the window again, imagining all the shoppers and business people who would stroll down the street and in the door for lunch or afternoon tea once the temperature rose and the sun came out. They'd come again. She had to believe it. Not just for herself, but for her sister's sake.

"Was that the mailman?" Tessa Malone, Allison's older sister, wiped her hands on her crisp white apron and glanced toward the front door. Short dark hair framed her pleasant face with a wispy fringe. Her cheeks glowed from working in the warm kitchen. Beaded earrings dangled from her ears. She crossed from the antique desk that served as a hostess podium and stepped down into the gift shop area to meet Allison.

"Yes." Allison shifted her gaze to the mail in her hand. "Hopefully he didn't bring us any more bills."

Tessa sent her a serious look. "Better check and see."

Allison leafed through the pile, flipping past a colorful grocery circular from McCaffery's Market and a coupon for a free session at Princeton Biofeedback Center. On the bottom of the pile, a plain white envelope with a neatly typed address caught her attention.

"I hope it's not one of those fundraising letters from the hospital." Tessa lifted her dark brows. "Don't even think about giving them any money right now."

Allison let Tessa's words pass without comment. She knew her sister's tendency to mother her came from their twelve-year age difference and close sister-bond. They shared management of the tea shop, and though most of the financial investment came from Allison, Tessa faithfully oversaw the baking and food preparation.

Allison slid her finger under the edge of the envelope and tore it open. Peeking in, she caught a glimpse of a cashier's check. "Oh my goodness. Look!" She pulled out the check with a trembling hand.

Tessa leaned closer and scanned the check's inscription. Her dark eyes bulged, and she snatched the check from Allison. "Three thousand five hundred dollars! Look at the memo line, *For Allison and Sweet Something*." She stared at Allison's. "It's just like the other one."

Allison nodded, recalling the first cashier's check for \$5000 she had received shortly before she opened the tea shop on Valentine's Day a little over a year ago. "I can't believe this. Who would send me this much money?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone heard we're having financial problems."

"I haven't told anyone. Have you?"

Tessa shook her head. "I'm sure Matt wouldn't say anything. He's a stickler about ethical things like that."

Allison nodded. She trusted her brother-in-law completely. He was an experienced CPA and handled all the finances for Sweet Something. "I know we really need this, but it's a little spooky. How would someone know how much we need to cover the rest of this week's payroll and the increase in our rent?"

"They must have a direct line to You Know Who upstairs." Tessa lifted her gaze toward the ceiling.

Allison knew she wasn't talking about the architect who rented the office above the tea shop. Goosebumps raced down her arms. "Right. But I'd still like to know who He used to send it."

Tessa's eyes lit up and she grinned. "I bet it's Peter."

Allison pulled back and wrinkled her nose. "No, it's couldn't be."

“Why not? He has the money, and you know he’s interested in you. He’s here practically every day.”

Allison couldn’t imagine Peter Hillinger, the owner of Princeton Interiors, giving money to anyone anonymously. It wasn’t his style. He wore perfectly tailored clothes from the best stores in Princeton and drove a new black BMW. He never missed an opportunity to mention his successful business, even though he’d inherited it from his father less than two years ago.

“It would be easy for him to see how slow things have been.”

“I just don’t think Peter would do something like this.”

“Well, he certainly could if he wanted to.” Tessa pursed her lips and seemed offended that Allison didn’t agree with her.

Allison glanced at the check again, remembering Peter’s thoughtful comments about the tea shop, his interest in her artwork, and his new habit of attending church with her. He seemed sincere. Maybe she was being too judgmental. Whoever had sent the check was very generous and most likely listening to the Lord. How else could he know their need?

“I suppose it could be Peter.” Allison chewed her lower lip as she turned over the idea in her mind. “But, I got the first check over a year ago at church through Pastor Tom, and Peter didn’t start coming to church with us until we invited him last fall.”

“Okay, so Peter might not have given you the first check, but this one has to be from him. Who else could it be?”

“I don’t know.”

Tessa grinned. “I think you should say yes next time he asks for a date.”

Allison’s stomach tightened. She turned away and tucked the check back in the envelope. “He hasn’t asked me out since I turned him down for Valentine’s Day.”

“I’m sure all he needs is a little encouragement.”

“But it doesn’t seem fair to encourage him. We’re just friends. That’s all I—”

“Friendship is a great place to start. Spend more time with him. Give it a chance.”

Tessa touched Allison’s cheek, a look of concern in her eyes. “There’s someone special out there for you. I know it. But you have to be willing to let go of the past, open up your heart, and try again.”

Tears misted Allison’s eyes. Of course her sister was right. She needed to bury those painful memories once and for all. Six years was long enough to wait for someone who was never coming back.

Insert Line Break

The tantalizing scent of freshly baked blackberry pie drifted toward Tyler Lawrence as he stepped into the warmth of Sweet Something Tea Shop. Rubbing his hands together to warm them, he glanced around the cozy shop.

Antique sideboards and small tables displayed interesting collections of china teapots, cups, and saucers. Whimsical birdhouses and small table lamps with painted shades sat on the shelves between the front windows. Little packages of specialty teas in cellophane bags tied with pink ribbons sat in neat rows ready for purchase. He hadn’t expected Sweet Something to have a gift shop as well as a tearoom. But, knowing Allie’s love for art and her romantic, creative style, it made sense.

The shop’s feminine ambiance announced its owner as clearly as if her name had been painted on the welcome sign. He glanced into the quiet tearoom and saw only two tables occupied.

Allie stepped down into the gift shop past a large armoire filled with round hatboxes, dried flowers, and antique crystal dishes. Her gaze connected with his, and recognition flashed in her eyes.

Tyler smiled. “Hi, Allie.” She looked just as beautiful as she had the day he’d left Princeton six years ago. She’d cut her rich caramel colored hair in a new style that brushed her shoulders. A few soft lines at the corners of her eyes testified to the passing years, but those were the only hints of change he noticed.

She stared at him, questions shimmering in her dark-blue eyes.

“I heard about your shop. I thought I’d stop in and say hello.”

She darted a glance over her shoulder, and then back at him. “I’ll get you a menu.” She turned and walked toward the tearoom leaving a faint flowery fragrance in her wake. She wore a mocha colored blouse with soft flowing ruffles at her neck and wrists, and a long, slim black skirt. He spotted brown leather boots through the slit in her skirt as she stepped up into the tearoom.

He followed, sending off a prayer for grace. He didn’t deserve it, but over the past two years, he’d learned God’s grace and forgiveness could cover a multitude of sins. He needed both from Allie.

In all those years he’d seen her only once—a little over year ago on Christmas Eve at church. The scene flashed through his mind as he crossed the tearoom. He’d returned to Princeton to spend the holidays with his mother for the first time in five years. After the service, he’d unexpectedly bumped into Allie and fumbled a lame apology, saying something about being sorry he hadn’t kept in touch. Of course that was true, but it didn’t even begin to address the real issues between them. It certainly didn’t ease his guilt or erase the pain in her eyes.

Allie led him to a small table for two in the corner.

He sat down and smiled up at her.

She averted her eyes and handed him a menu printed on light-pink paper. “We have several choices for lunch, or our tea and dessert menu is on the back. Can I get you something to drink?”

Her cool formality cut him to the heart. “Can you sit down for a few minutes?”

“No, I’m busy,” she said, without missing a beat.

“It doesn’t look like you have too many customers right now. Couldn’t you take a break? I’d like to hear more about Sweet Something. How long have you been open?” Of course he knew the answer to that question, but he hoped it would draw her into a conversation.

Her gaze dropped to the menu in his hand. “All right, but let me take your order first.”

“I’d like tea and something sweet. What do you recommend?”

She hesitated a moment. “The apple cinnamon scones are popular, or if you’d like something more substantial, you could try the blackberry cobbler or lemon lush. They’re in the glass case over there if you’d like to take a look.” Allie seemed to relax a little as she described the dessert choices.

“What’s your favorite?” he asked, keeping his tone light.

“They’re all good. Tessa does our baking.”

“Your sister works here with you?”

“Yes.” Allie smoothed an unseen wrinkle on her skirt.

“That’s great. How’s she doing?” He hoped this question might transition the conversation to a more personal level.

“Her husband’s business failed a couple years ago. They lost their house and most of their savings.” She spoke in an even tone, but her eyes revealed her concern.

“I’m sorry. That sounds like a tough situation.”

“Matt and Tessa are trying to get back on their feet. That’s why we opened Sweet Something.” Allie’s face flushed and she bit her lip.

Tyler realized he’d better shift the direction of the conversation. “I like the way you’ve decorated the shop.” He hesitated, glancing around the almost empty room again. “How’s business?”

“We’re doing all right.”

“Really?”

Her bravado melted. She lowered her gaze, frowning slightly. “Actually, the weather’s hurt us. There’s not much parking on the street, and the closest public lot is four blocks away. Most people don’t want to hike that far on slushy sidewalks when it’s freezing.” A look of tired resignation filled her face.

“Maybe I can help.”

She cocked her head, looking doubtful. “What do you mean?”

“Please, sit down. Let’s talk.”

She stood a moment more then finally took the seat on the opposite side of the table.

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I have a new job with an ad agency here in Princeton. Maybe I could do a little promotional work for you. You know, raise your visibility and get some more customers coming in the door.”

Her face flushed. “We’ve already used all our advertising budget for this year.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t charge you. I’d do it on my own time.”

She sat back, shaking her head slightly. “I couldn’t let you do that.”

“Come on, Allie.” He leaned toward her, his excitement growing. “I could create a logo, a new sign, and menu. I could check out your local advertising options and see

what's available. It won't cost you a penny, I promise." Confidence flowed through him. With his help, her business could flourish no matter what the weatherman sent her way.

Suspicion clouded her eyes. "Why would you do that for me?"

A painful realization twisted through him. She didn't trust him or his motives. Why should she? She only knew him as the man he'd been six years ago when he'd left town with no explanation and broken every promise he'd made to her.

"I just want to help you." He pulled in a ragged breath, struggling to remember the apology he had so carefully crafted back at his office. But it evaporated like a frosty breath on a winter day.

She stared at him, her expression unreadable, as though she'd constructed a wall around herself.

"Look, I know I messed up before, and you have no reason to trust me. But honestly, all I want to do is make up for what happened. We had something special, Allie. I'm sorry I let you go."

Her deep-blue eyes flashed a warning, and her mouth firmed into a straight line. She rose from her chair and turned away.

Tyler stood. "Allie, wait. That's not what I wanted to say."

She spun around, and her piercing gaze nailed him to the spot. "I don't want your help with my business, and I'm not interested in discussing the past."

Regret swamped him. If only he could go back and change his foolish choices. But that was impossible. He'd already reaped a harvest of pain from those mistakes, but it looked like harvest season wasn't over yet.

He turned to go, but something made him look over his shoulder. Allie stood in the same spot, watching him, a sorrowful expression filling her face. That gave him the courage to turn around and walk back toward her. "If you change your mind, I'd still like to

help you get the word out about Sweet Something.” He took his business card from his pocket and held it out to her.

A spark of some indefinable emotion flickered in her eyes. She reached out and accepted his card.