

together with you

VICTORIA BYLIN



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bylin, Victoria.

Together with you / Victoria Bylin.

pages ; cm

Summary: "Responsible for his young daughter and two teenage sons for the summer, Dr. Ryan Tremaine wants to reconnect with his children, but after hiring Carly Mason as his daughter Penny's nanny, Ryan's attraction to Carly complicates his plan"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1153-9 (softcover)

I. Title.

PS3602.Y56T64 2015

813'.6—dc23

2014041331

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Cover design by Paul Higdon

Author is represented by the Steele-Perkins Literary Agency

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Deborah Raad
and
Southland Christian Church
in honor of
Faith and Friendship*



*Let us then approach God's throne of grace
with confidence, so that we may receive
mercy and find grace to help us in our time
of need.*

—*Hebrews 4:16* NIV



The clerk at McGill's Sporting Goods, a sandy-haired college kid, pushed a button to feed the paper tape through the register, but it jammed for the third time. Scowling, he tossed the crumpled receipt in the trash. "Sorry, sir. I know you're in a hurry."

"Yes, I am." Dr. Ryan Tremaine spoke through gritted teeth, but he didn't blame the clerk for his predicament. He'd been a fool to let his two youngest children, Penny and Eric, out of his sight, but he'd lost patience with Eric for pouting and Penny for pulling the tags off rugby shirts. Expecting to be right behind them, he'd allowed them to go to the food court for ice cream while he paid for the baseball cleats for Kyle, his oldest son.

It was a bad decision, and Ryan knew it. The mall, crowded on this Saturday afternoon in June, was a dangerous place, especially for a little girl with special needs and a thirteen-year-old boy who had what a family therapist called "issues."

Kyle slung the bag holding the shoebox over his shoulder. "This is taking forever. Maybe I should check on Eric and Penny."

Ryan was about to agree when the register spit out the mile-long

receipt. The clerk tore it off and handed it to him with a flourish. “There you go, sir. Sorry for the delay.”

Snatching it, Ryan spun on his heels. With Kyle at his side, they sped out of the store to the main mall. He’d given Eric a twenty-dollar bill and instructions to buy whatever treats he and Penny wanted, then to wait in front of the ice cream place. Striding toward it now, he scanned the counter, empty except for a trio of giggling teenage girls. His gaze zipped to the tables in front of the shop, also empty, then to the sea of half-filled wooden chairs and gray Formica tables.

“Do you see them?” he asked Kyle.

“Not yet.”

Ryan focused on one face at a time. An ophthalmologist by profession, he had better than 20/20 vision, which made his failure to spot Penny and Eric even more alarming. In spite of the icy air conditioning, droplets of perspiration beaded on his neck and dripped down his spine.

Kyle pointed to the far side of the food court. “There’s Eric.”

Ryan spotted his son coming out of a video arcade filled with shadows, flashing lights, and kids who looked as rebellious as Eric in his zombie T-shirt and baggy pants. Eric had no business in that place, especially with Penny. She was five years old and a victim of FASD, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, a condition that affected her in myriad ways, including sensitivity to noise, light, and smells. If Eric had taken her to the arcade, anything could have happened—a meltdown, her running away, maybe hiding. She had done that a couple of times at the house, and Ryan had battled panic until he found her.

Five steps beyond the arcade, Eric ground to a halt. Panic glinted on his face like sunlight on a mirror, ricocheted back to Ryan, and blinded him with a terror so fierce he stopped breathing. There was only one explanation. Penny was missing.

It was Ryan’s fault, not Eric’s. The FASD was his fault, too.

Penny had been conceived in the affair that wrecked his marriage—a byproduct of impulse and enough gin to drown his conscience, at least for a time. When Penny’s mother had died six months ago, he’d taken custody and made a solemn vow to never fail his daughter again. It was a promise he broke daily, it seemed. No matter how hard he tried to connect with her, she still called him Dr. Tremaine instead of Daddy.

His relationship with his sons wasn’t much better, but his ex-wife was away on a mission trip, and he had the boys under his roof for three months. Determined to rebuild their trust, he’d written out what he called the SOS list—things a family did and enjoyed together, things that made them close. Traditionally, SOS stood for Save Our Souls, but Ryan didn’t believe in God. For his purposes, SOS stood for Sink or Swim, which is what he and his kids would do this summer.

With Penny missing, they were sinking hard and fast.

Eric spotted him and broke into a run. Behind him, a uniformed security officer gave chase while speaking into a microphone clipped to his collar. It didn’t make sense, unless the man knew something about Penny.

Terror shredded through Ryan like a riff on an electric guitar, though no one would know it to see his face. Carefully blank and in control, he shoved aside the rising panic in spite of the mental picture of Penny lost in the mall. With her blond ponytail and blue eyes, she was a beautiful little girl. And vulnerable . . . more vulnerable than most children because of the way fetal alcohol affected her brain. Instead of being naturally shy, she would go to anyone, especially a nice man with candy . . . a nice man who would take her for a nice ride in his nice car.

Stay clinical, Ryan told himself. *Get the facts*. But he couldn’t turn off the ugly pictures or the fear, and when he swallowed, acid burned the back of his throat. Forcing down the bile, he called to Eric over the rumble and clatter in the food court, “Where’s your sister?”

Eric's chubby face wrinkled into a knot. "I told her to stay in the arcade."

Kyle caught up to them. "I don't see her anywhere."

"Where is she?" Ryan repeated to Eric.

"I don't know."

Frantic, he scoured the line at the candy store and the island of bubblegum machines. He looked everywhere, but there was no sign of Penny.

"Sir?" The deep voice came from over Ryan's shoulder. Turning, he saw the security officer with his thumbs hooked on a thick black belt.

"Is this your son?" the man asked.

"Yes, it is."

"I'm Officer Lewis, and I'm here about a shoplifting incident." Before Ryan could react, the officer lowered his chin at Eric. "You were at the prize counter, weren't you?"

Eric looked down at his shoes. "Yes, but—"

"The manager saw you take two candy bars. You put them in your pocket and ran for the door."

Ryan's mind spun with frightening implications, but Penny was in the greatest danger. "Officer, wait. My daughter is missing."

The man's attention snapped to Ryan. "How old is she?"

"Five."

Chin down, he spoke into the microphone clipped to his collar. "Code Adam. Repeat. Code Adam. Roger that."

As a choir of voices responded in the affirmative, Ryan flashed to the famous picture of seven-year-old Adam Walsh, wearing a red baseball cap. The child had been abducted at a mall much like this one, murdered, then decapitated. *No. No. No.* Terror screamed through his brain, drowning out logic, hope, everything except the gong-like echo of yet another failure.

Officer Lewis focused on Ryan. "Would you describe your daughter, sir?"

“Blond hair. Blue eyes.” He held out his arm to show her height, saw his shaking hand, and pulled it back. “She’s about forty inches tall.” He knew, because she’d just been to the pediatrician.

“What is she wearing?”

“Denim overalls and a pink T-shirt.” Both wrinkled because the fourth nanny had quit yesterday, leaving him to add *Find a new nanny for Penny* to his SOS list. He’d planned this day so differently . . . just Kyle and himself shopping for baseball cleats and grabbing burgers for lunch. Now, instead of happily crossing *Buy cleats for Kyle* off the SOS list, he silently berated himself for the bad judgment that put his daughter in danger and his younger son in the middle.

Officer Lewis repeated Penny’s description into the radio, then explained a Code Adam to Ryan. The outer doors of the mall were being locked as he spoke, and no one would leave without being observed by a designated mall employee. Penny’s description would go out on the PA system, and managers would walk the aisles of their stores. If Penny wasn’t found in ten minutes, law enforcement would be called, the doors would be opened, and the alert canceled.

Ryan nodded, his face carefully blank, but his heaving lungs revealed his panic. He blinked and imagined Penny in a nondescript sedan, clawing at the windows, calling for help. He blinked again and pictured her frail, broken body in a shallow grave, then in the morgue, covered in a white sheet, lost to him before he could make up for how she was conceived.

Most people blamed the mother for fetal alcohol exposure, but Ryan considered himself as accountable as Jenna. He’d bought the gin and wine they’d consumed. They had made this child together, told lies to each other and to those they loved. What a fool he had been. One impulsive fling and Penny had paid dearly.

So had Jenna.

And Heather, his ex-wife.

And his sons.

That snowball of damaged lives needed to stop. Heather had found God and was at peace, but the rest of his family was a mess. It was up to Ryan alone to rebuild the family he'd destroyed, and that's what he intended to do this summer by using every ounce of his intelligence, will, and heart.

Officer Lewis clicked off the microphone and pulled a notepad and pen from his pocket. "What's your daughter's name?"

"Penny Tremaine." Except she didn't like her new last name and refused to learn it. "Or Penny Caldwell. It's complicated."

Officer Lewis scribbled on the notepad. "We don't broadcast the child's name. It could give a predator an edge. It's for the female officer checking the restrooms." Turning slightly, he spoke again into the radio.

Ryan faced Kyle. "Keep looking for her."

When Kyle took off with a nod, Eric moved to follow him. "I'll help."

"No." Ryan stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "You saw Penny last. How long has she been gone?"

Eric shook off the touch. "I don't know."

"Take a guess."

"I said I don't know!" Eric's face pulled into a doughy knot that made him look younger than he was. "We went to the arcade. She saw the purple horse and wanted to ride it."

"I told you to go for ice cream." Ryan's voice shook as badly as his hands. "Eric, this is serious. Penny's in danger."

Eric tried to look tough, but his gaze shifted to the floor. Shoulders hunched, he looked as lost and vulnerable as Penny.

And it was Ryan's fault. In a fit of impatience, he'd heaped the responsibility for Penny on the immature shoulders of a thirteen-year-old boy. If Penny wasn't found, Eric would suffer from guilt he didn't deserve, guilt that belonged only to Ryan.

The security officer ended the call and reported back. "Someone's checking the ladies' room now."

“Good,” Ryan said crisply, as if sounding in control would make it so.

“While we’re waiting, I need some basic information. Your name, sir?”

Like a prisoner of war giving his name, rank, and serial number, Ryan rattled off his name, address, and three phone numbers—cell, home, and office. Surrounded by noise and strangers, fearful of pedophiles, trapped and smothered with remorse, he heard the most condemning words of his life blast from the mall PA.

“Code Adam. Repeat, Code Adam. The missing child is a five-year-old female with blond hair and blue eyes. . . .”



The instant Carly Jo Mason heard Code Adam on the Animal Factory PA, she locked the cash register and prepared to walk the aisles of the stuffed animal boutique where she worked as assistant manager. Furry creatures lined the shelves, along with outfits that turned them into everything from ballerinas to soldiers, anything a child could imagine. Carly loved it—except when a Code Adam blasted over the mall’s public address system. Children went missing everywhere, but it happened a lot more in Los Angeles than it did in her hometown of Boomer, Kentucky.

How she, a girl from Boomer, ended up in Los Angeles was a painful story, one she didn’t like to tell. Maybe someday she’d put the trouble in Lexington behind her, but it wouldn’t happen today—not with a Code Adam reminding her of Allison Drake, an FAS teenager nicknamed Allie Cat. It had been two years since Allison had vanished from Sparrow House, the home for troubled teens where Carly had been employed as a counselor, two years since Carly had thrown a vulnerable seventeen-year-old girl to the wolves.

She still searched for Allison online and hoped the girl would send her a text out of the blue, even call the phone number Carly would keep forever, or until Allison was found, dead or alive. The

old pain congealed in her throat, thickening until she swallowed it back. The Bible said she was forgiven by the grace of God, but how did she forgive herself?

Pocketing the register key, she headed for the front corner of the store, scanning the aisles even before she started the Code Adam protocol. The first leg of the search took her past the Bear Pit, crowded today with a birthday party. She studied the group but didn't see a girl fitting the Code Adam. Jungle Land came next. There were only boys in the aisle, paired with two watchful adults.

With only the Friendly Forest left to check, she sent up a prayer for the lost little girl, for lost children and teenagers everywhere, including Allison. Carly's heart thudded sluggishly, maybe from caring too much for too long, but then she spotted a little girl playing with the stuffed rabbits, and her pulse sped into a gallop. With a blond ponytail and denim overalls, the child matched the Code Adam perfectly. Carly needed to call Mall Security, but she didn't want to leave the child for even a minute. She had slipped away once and could do it again. With her coworker supervising the birthday party, Carly decided to take the girl to the front counter where she could use the phone.

Children this age were typically shy and suspicious of strangers, so she snagged a lion off the endcap, ambled to the girl's side, and crouched down. Using the stuffed animal as a puppet, she spoke in her growliest voice. "*Grrr*. I'm Lance the Lion. Who are you?"

The child broke into a smile. "I'm Penny. I have a dollar, and I'm going to buy a rabbit."

"Excellent," Lance declared with a shake of his tawny mane. "I'll lead you to the cash register."

"Okay, but I have to pick which one." Penny turned back to the bin and resumed her hunt for just the right rabbit.

Every second was an eternity for a worried parent, but Carly didn't want to frighten the child by rushing her. There was something oddly intense about the pinch of her eyebrows, the careful

way she inspected each rabbit before hurling it to the floor. With a BA in biology, a masters in social work, plus a year of PhD work at UCLA, Carly knew kids. Something about Penny's expression struck her as atypical.

Hoping to nudge the girl along, she picked up a brown rabbit with a white tummy and black button eyes. Wiggling the rabbit's head, she made her voice squeak. "I'm Tiffany Rabbit, and I need a home."

Penny's blue eyes lit up. "Me too."

"You do?" Tiffany asked.

"I do," Penny repeated. "My mommy's not here."

The poor woman had to be worried sick. Using Lance again, Carly spoke in his voice but with more authority. "Come with me, Miss Penny. I'll help you find her."

"She's in heaven."

No . . . No . . . Not this sweet child. An old wound split open, and Carly swallowed a familiar lump of grief. She'd been fourteen when her mother died of a fast-moving cancer, leaving her to be raised by her father and older brother and sister. The gold locket hidden under her red polo shirt, warm from her skin and memories, had belonged to her mother and was Carly's most treasured possession. She made Lance dip his head in a kind of prayer. "I'm sad for you, Miss Penny."

Penny nodded solemnly. "I'm sad, too."

"Do you have a daddy?" Lance asked.

"Sort of." Penny heaved a very adult sigh. "Mostly I have nannies. Dr. Tremaine—he's my daddy—he works all the time. Kyle is nice, but I *hate* Eric. He took me to the arcade, and I *hate* the arcade. It smells bad." Her lower lip popped out, stiffened, and trembled with the threat of tears.

Tiffany Rabbit hippety-hopped to the rescue. "I need a mommy, too. Can I come home with you?"

Penny raised her skinny little arm and patted Tiffany on the head. "I want this one."

Tiffany turned to Carly, who looked at Lance, who did another puppet shake of his mane while speaking to Carly. “We *both* want to go home with Miss Penny. Is that okay?”

Carly finally used her own voice. “I think we can work something out.” She had already decided to buy both animals for Penny, who probably didn’t understand the price tags. Every dollar counted for Carly, but she could live on Cup O’ Noodles a few extra days. Aware of the Code Adam and the ten-minute limit, she tucked Lance under her arm and reached for Penny’s hand. “Let’s go pay.”

Penny took Carly’s fingers as if they were already best friends, and they walked together to the counter where Carly made the call to Security.

“Keep her there,” the operator said. “Her father’s on his way.”

Good, Carly thought. She wanted a word with the man about his daughter. She understood a child getting lost in a mall. It happened. They were little human beings with minds and feet of their own. But Penny’s instant attachment indicated a dangerous lack of healthy suspicion. If Carly could win her trust with a stuffed animal, so could a predator. Penny needed to be taught to protect herself, especially with her mom in heaven.

Carly paid for the toys with her employee discount, then handed Tiffany Rabbit to Penny, who told the rabbit she’d get to sleep in Penny’s bed tonight along with a bunch of other stuffed friends. Carly joined in the conversation with Lance, who did lots of growling while they waited for Penny’s dad—the man she called Dr. Tremaine. The more Carly thought about the circumstances, the more she worried.

“Penny!”

A deep voice shot through the store. Turning, Carly spotted a tall man with close-cropped dark hair, narrowed eyes, and a lanky build striding toward the cash register. Presumably this was Dr. Tremaine. Dressed in khakis and a navy polo shirt, he dodged children and parents with the agility of an athlete. She supposed

he was handsome, even striking, but his steely gaze lacked warmth of any kind.

Carly laid a protective hand on Penny's shoulder. "Your daddy's here."

The child looked at her father, her expression blank as she lifted Tiffany Rabbit and made her talk. "Hi, Dr. Tremaine," she said in a squeaky voice. "I'm Tiffany Rabbit, and I'm going home with Penny. Lance is coming, too."

The man stared at the rabbit, speechless. He clearly didn't know how to play with a child, and Penny plainly needed someone who did. When his gaze shot to Carly's face, his blue eyes collided with her brown ones the way an empty sky touches flat brown earth. Fear glittered in his irises, but so did arrogance. Carly didn't like that cold glare, not one bit. Penny needed a daddy, not this man who oozed tension, maybe anger.

Determined to make her point, she raised Lance and gave an enthusiastic growl. "*Grrr*. I'm Lance the Lion. Nice to meet you, Dr. Tremaine."