



MULTI-PLATINUM RECORDING ARTIST

SARA EVANS

WITH RACHEL HAUCK

Softly & Tenderly

"Fans of Karen Kingsbury's tender family stories will love this southern-flavored tale of triumph and grace."

-LISA WINGATE, National Best-Selling Author of
Tending Roses and Larkspur Cove

*Softly
& Tenderly*

SARA EVANS
WITH RACHEL HAUCK



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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ADVANCE ACCLAIM FOR
Softly & Tenderly

“Popular country-singer/writer Evans (“A Little Bit Stronger”) and talented Christian fiction author Hauck have teamed up to pen this second installment in Jade’s journey (*The Sweet By and By*, 2010). Hang on for an emotional ride as a woman who “married into a Southern soap opera” learns to forgive and trust again.”

— BOOKLIST

“[E]xquisitely written, an achingly beautiful story about lost and found relationships . . . this story is not to be missed.”

— SUSAN MAY WARREN
RITA award-winning, best-selling
author of *Nightingale*

“Fans of Karen Kingsbury’s tender family stories will love this southern-flavored tale of triumph and grace.”

— LISA WINGATE
best-selling author of *Tending
Roses* and *Larkspur Cove*

ACCLAIM FOR
The Sweet By & By

“Enter the magic of Whisper Hollow and open your heart. Like Sara Evans’s bittersweet songs, the notes and melody of Jade Fitzgerald’s past sing a new future. In a world of wounded souls, forgiveness and redemption are the lyrics of this enchanting story.”

— PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY
New York Times best-selling
author of *Driftwood Summer*

“A heartwarming collaborative debut.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“*The Sweet By & By* is the flowing story of a family struggling across the generations for redemption and reconciliation. The women in this novel are sometimes funny, sometimes serious, but always interesting. I was hooked from page one.”

— HOMER HICKAM

best-selling author of *Rocket Boys*
and *Red Helmet*

“... witty dialogue, believable characters and a page-turner of a plot. Just what I look for in a good book!”

— CASSANDRA KING

author of *The Same Sweet Girls*

“Conveys a meaningful message about forgiveness.”

— CBA RETAILERS +
RESOURCES

“Beautifully real characters shine in this even more beautiful story. A wonderful first novel.”

— EVA LONGORIA PARKER
actress and model

“Wow! I am completely inspired by this book. I have always admired Sara’s ability to tell stories through her music, and now I can say wholeheartedly that she is able to make a great story sing on the pages of this book. This is a beautiful, breathtaking novel full of redemption, reconciliation, and grace. I fully recommend it!”

— ROBIN MCGRAW
#1 *New York Times*
best-selling author

Softly
& Tenderly

Other Books By Sara Evans with Rachel Hauck

The Sweet By & By

Other Novels by Rachel Hauck

Lost in Nash Vegas

Diva Nash Vegas

Sweet Caroline

Love Starts With Elle

Dining with Joy

*To my mom, my granny,
and all the women out there just
trying to live a little stronger.*

One

Whisper Hollow, TN

Along the first of spring, when winter began to ease its grip on Whisper Hollow mornings, the word *barren* began echoing over the shadowy recesses of Jade's mind.

"You're quiet." Her mother-in-law peered at her from the passenger side of Jade's truck. She looked out of place perched on the faded red, torn vinyl seat wearing a haute couture pink suit.

"Thinking." Jade forced a smile just as the tires hit a bump in the road, jostling the passengers from side to side.

June grabbed the dashboard. "Mercy me."

"Sorry . . ." Jade urged the truck up the hill to Orchid House, her husband's

childhood home. “You feel everything in this truck. No matter how new the shocks.”

Truck shocks aside, Jade had managed to hit all the holes today. Holes in the road. Holes in her business. Holes in her heart. With a slow exhale, she propped her elbow on the door and pressed her fingers against her forehead.

Today it seemed that every woman, *every* woman, who came into Jade’s downtown shop was pregnant. Nearly picked clean her retro maternity clothes. She’d been folding and hanging the remaining items when June called and asked Jade to give her a ride home.

“It’s beyond me why you still drive this old bucket of bolts, Jade. Why don’t you just buy a new truck?” June brushed a piece of foam from the crumbling ceiling off her skirt. “You’re a Benson now. A successful business owner in Whisper Hollow and riverfront Chattanooga. Surely you can afford a vehicle better than this. Max would buy you one if you asked. I’m quite sure he—”

“Your pink suit is beautiful. Did you get it on your girls’ shopping trip in Atlanta?”

June cut Jade a glance. “Paris, last spring. I figure I could risk wearing it another season.”

“Do I get dibs when it’s out of season in twenty years?”

“Shug, this thing will be completely out of vogue in three months. And by the end of summer, sold at the club auction.” June ran her hand along the three-quarter sleeve, finally smiling. Ever since Jade had picked her up from the Read House Starbucks, she’d been fuming beneath a stone face.

“So Rebel got tied up with a case or something? Couldn’t bring you home?” Jade asked. June had yet to say why she was stranded at Starbucks, and so steamed.

“Oh, who knows? That man. He can be so self-focused. I specifically told Rebel that Honey Andover could not drive me up to the house when we returned from Atlanta. Her granddaughter’s birthday party is up in Knoxville, so she

wanted to get back on the road. So . . .” June fiddled with the air-conditioning vents. “Rebel agreed to meet me at Starbucks.”

“The truck doesn’t have air, June.”

“Well, why not? Mercy, Jade, buy a decent truck. What’s this thing, a hundred years old?”

“Thirty-eight. So what happened with Honey? What’s got you riled?”

“Nothing happened with Honey. She dropped me off at the Read House Starbucks like we planned, right by Benson Law, right by my husband’s office, where he agreed to be. But Rebel’s nowhere to be found.”

“You tried his cell?”

“I’m angry, not addled, Jade. I called his cell and his office. Gina didn’t know where he was—and if she doesn’t know, he’s gone. Vanished into thin air.” June twirled her hands in front of her.

“Maybe Reb hit the golf course, taking a break from the class action suit the firm’s been handling. That case has Max preoccupied and bleary-eyed.”

“Nice try, Jade, but Reb hasn’t *worked* a case in years. He just *oversees*. Charms. Asks a few tough questions in court when they want to intimidate someone.” June snatched her handbag from the seat and stuffed it into her lap. “He’s probably schmoozing someone in the governor’s office, hoping he’ll get a special appointment should one ever open up.”

“Reb has political aspirations?” Jade crested the hill and rounded the bend toward the Bensons’ white brick estate.

“Jade, have you learned to tune out his ramblings already? Reb wants to run the universe from his throne on the moon.”

A fawn suddenly leaped onto the road from the cluster of trees tucked into the curve of the bend. Jade hammered the clutch and brake.

“Sake’s alive.” June smacked the dashboard with her Gucci bag.

Stiff-arming the steering wheel and mashing the brake, Jade winced as the truck drifted into a blinding patch of sun. Anticipation drilled a hole between her ribs.

When there was no impact, breath exploded from her lungs. Just beyond her windshield, a black-eyed doe and her two spotted fawns crossed the road into the woods on the other side.

“My heart is thumping in my throat.” June spanked the dash grit from the smooth leather of her handbag. “Can you imagine if you’d not seen?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to sleep for a week.” Jade watched the doe as she led her young to the other side, her head high, her steps neat and sure. Jade pressed the clutch and shifted into first with a final glance at the creature.

In the grass, just beyond the trees, the doe turned and fixed her polished gaze on Jade. *Yes, I know* . . . A motor roared, and the doe dashed into the tress the moment a car whizzed around the bend.

“Farrel Lawrence,” June said. “She’s got a lead foot.”

Run, girl. Run. Jade eased off the clutch, and the truck chugged up the last few feet of the hill, the heart of the doe and the sensation of beauty resonating within her.

The Bensons’ foyer was cold. Jade shivered as she followed June inside, carrying a few of the bags and boxes her mother-in-law had collected from three days of shopping in Atlanta with Honey.

“Constance?” June clicked on the table lamp. The soft yellow light caught the gloss and glimmer of the polished mahogany. The wood grain matched the banister of the sweeping, curved staircase that spilled from the second floor into the Italian marble foyer. “You here, Constance?”

Jade dropped the packages at the base of staircase, rubbing the bend of her arm. “What did you buy? Bricks?” She peered into the Neiman Marcus bag. “Christian Louboutins? Don’t you have, like, four pairs already?” Jade sat on the bottom step and lifted the lid off the shoe box, inhaling at the sight of dark red patent leather heels. “Wow.”

“And now I have five pair.” June scouted the formal living room for signs of life. “I bought them for the club’s Christmas ball. Reb? Constance?”

Barely emerging from winter's gray, and June was already planning for Christmas. Jade could learn something here . . . What, she wasn't sure, but the moment sure felt teachable.

"How much?" Jade dug around for the receipt.

"Didn't your mama teach you it's impolite to ask how much? Get your nose out of my bags." June gazed into the family room on the other side of the foyer. "Well, the place looks tidy."

"Six hundred dollars?" Jade dropped the shoe back into the box and let the receipt go, fluttering into the bag. "You can buy a lot of food for the poor with that kind of money."

"For Pete's sake, Jade, don't preach to me. Reb and I give plenty to the poor." June turned for the kitchen, her low heels beating a rhythm against the marble. "Why don't you call Max and have supper here? Run quick to pick up your mama too. Mercy, I pay Constance for a full day's work and I want a full day. Whether I'm here or not. Constance!"

"Max is working late." Jade sauntered into the kitchen. "Mama's still recovering from the last round of chemo. Why don't we try for another time?"

"Well, if you're sure, fine . . . another time." June stood in the middle of the arching, stainless steel kitchen looking disconcerted.

Jade leaned against the ivory and green island. The kitchen was like a structural hug, cozy with June's Southern hospitality and dabbled with yellow and gray Smoky Mountain sunshine dripping through the skylight.

"How about we get Reb to fire up his grill this weekend?"

"He'd love that . . . We can thaw the kobe steaks." June opened the fridge and then closed it without looking inside. "I am sorry Beryl's not feeling well. Tell that mama of yours I'll be over tomorrow for a game of hearts."

"She'd like that. June?" Jade peered into her pinched eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. I've just been shopping for three days. Now, how about some hot tea? The house is freezing." June walked over to the basement door. "Constance?" June shoved the door closed. "That girl . . . I'm docking her pay a whole day."

“Why don’t you hear her out first?” Jade slipped onto one of the island chairs and watched June fill a kettle with water and drop it onto the stove with a clank.

It was nearing five. Jade would have to leave after this cup of tea to get Mama’s dinner. The latest round of chemo had zapped her energy more than the previous treatments. She slept most of the day, eating only when Jade urged her. Leukemia was a cruel taskmaster.

June set two mugs in front of Jade. “So what’s new with you in the three days I’ve been gone? Have you and Max made any decisions?”

June never hesitated to dig around in Jade’s life, prying open internal windows. Didn’t Honey empty June of all her idle words? Didn’t the woman just want to relax in a hot bath, order a Mario’s pizza, and curl up with Rebel and a good TMC movie?

“A decision? In three days? I’ve hardly seen him.” Her sorrow over the plethora of pregnant shoppers at the Blue Two this afternoon surfaced, gasping for air.

Perhaps June had a right to know if she would ever be a grandmother. Or not. Jade’s private life with Max was private. And if Jade was . . . barren . . . then she needed to deal with that first, on her own, without her mother-in-law peering into her heart.

“What about a surrogate? The Bidwells had great success.”

Or without offering myriad unwanted solutions.

“June, please, Max and I have talked ad nauseam about the options.” Jade pressed her fingers into the taut muscles along her shoulders and propped her elbows on the light-kissed granite countertop. “I can get pregnant; I just can’t stay pregnant. And I’m sorry, but I’m not open to using another woman’s womb. It would be like . . . like having an affair, inviting another woman into our marriage. Either Max and I make a baby together, or we don’t have a biological child.”

“Then you’ll adopt.” June set tea bags and sweeteners on the island.

Jade exhaled. “If and when we decide. You can’t just pick up a child like a Jiffy Mart stop for a gallon of milk and loaf of bread.” Didn’t she just have this conversation with Max the other night? His response and tone had been almost identical to June’s. Matter-of-fact, devoid of an emotional response or commitment. But the Bensons made things happen. There was a fix for everything. “Why can’t a family just be a man and his wife? Do children validate us? Prove we make love? Make us more complete? What if we’re happy . . . just Max and me?”

“Are you?” The kettle rumbled from its perch on the gas flame. June reached for it and filled the cups. “If you’re happy, then I’m happy.” She smiled. “But every time we talk about children, I can see the pain in your eyes, hear the longing in your words. You want what you never really had growing up. A family.”

“I have a family. You and Reb, Mama, Aiden and Willow.” Jade tore open a packet of sweetener and dumped the white powder into her tea.

“Is that good enough? Max wants children, Jade. He doesn’t care if they’re biological or not.”

“June.” Jade fired her name with a caustic edge. “We’ll have children if we are meant to have children. Maybe Max and I aren’t meant to be parents. What if God doesn’t find me trustworthy? Why would He give a child to a woman who . . .”

“Why would God decide you aren’t . . .” June dipped her head to see into Jade’s downcast eyes. “Oh, I see.” Her spoon tapped out a beat against the ceramic mug as she stirred her tea. “You think God would choose you out of all the women in this world who’ve had abortions to say, ‘No baby for her; she blew it?’”

“Feels like it sometimes.” Jade sipped her tea to hide her emotion. She ignored the yearning most of the time. But it had been stirred today, by the pregnant women, by the doe with her fawns. If she could finally carry a baby to term, not miscarry again, she’d feel like her past was truly forgiven and God was smiling.

“You’re young, Jade. It’ll happen.” June’s words brought little comfort.

“Sure, I know.” Jade sipped her tea.

“I’ve got just the thing for you.” June motioned for Jade to pick up her tea and follow.

Jade carried her tea up the stairs behind June, whose narrow hips swung from side to side. She’d spent her entire marriage, the past two and a half years, trying to convince herself that children didn’t matter. Max completed her. God, as she was beginning to know Him, completed her. But a child . . . one of her own. Jade could imagine the joy.

She’d lost their honeymoon baby after ten weeks. It was a long eighteen months before she got pregnant again, only to lose the baby last summer, two weeks before Mama came down for a short visit.

But her August visit never ended. Mama’s leukemia symptoms had intensified since Jade had seen her the Christmas before, so she refused to let her return to Iowa to live in the old farmhouse, alone.

Between managing the shops, the Blue Umbrella in Whisper Hollow and the Blue Two in downtown Chattanooga, Jade cared for Mama, driving her to doctor appointments and chemo treatments.

Into the crisp, golden fall and blustery holiday season, the busyness of the shop and town celebrations kept Jade’s yearning for babies at bay. When she discovered she was pregnant at Thanksgiving, she laid awake that night in bed, pools in her eyes, crunching her fingers around Max’s fisted, sleeping hand. The God of mercy bestowed favor on her.

“So, June, where are we going?” Then she had her third miscarriage in January. “What’s this *thing* you have for me? Stuffing envelopes for the club’s Spring Life Auction and Dance? Or licking stamps?”

“Jade, really, no one licks stamps anymore.”

At the top of the stairs, June stopped short. Jade nearly slobbered her with tea.

“What’s wrong?” Jade peered around her mother-in-law’s shoulder. The pink hue of her suit brightened the dim light of the landing. The media room

door was ajar with an eerie blue tint emanating from the flat-panel TV screen. “Is someone here?”

“Constance?” June thudded toward the door, a matronly authority in her stride. “You best not be napping. I warned you . . .”

“June.” Jade hurried behind her, hoping to cushion the clash between Constance and her mistress. “So what if she fell asleep? It’s not like she ignored her chores. The house is immaculate.”

“I don’t pay her to sleep.” June raised her voice as if giving Constance one last chance to wake up and feign dusting before June crashed through the door and flipped on the light. “Constance Filmore?”

Jade hung back. Constance didn’t need an audience when June reamed her out. *Be awake, Constance . . .*

“Oh my, oh, oh?” June crashed backward into the door, her teacup toppling to the plush cream and beige carpet. The golden-brown liquid spread through the fibers, sinking into the pile, creating a sprawling stain.

Jade surged into the room, accosted by the pungent scent of day-old cologne and sweat. As she stooped to pick up June’s mug, her gaze strafed a topless woman standing on the other side of the U-shaped sofa. Her tangled, bleached hair stood high over her head and her unfastened jeans rode low on her hips. Surprise shoved the woman’s name through her lips.

“Claire?”

Wasn’t she one of June’s best friends? *What’s going on?* Jade averted her eyes from Claire’s form and glanced at June.

Her mother-in-law’s high, rosy cheeks faded beyond pale, her eyes fixed, and for an insane moment Jade wondered if she was even breathing. “June,” Jade whispered, gathering June’s cup by the tips of her fingers.

“June . . . we didn’t know . . .” Claire Falcon tugged on her cotton top, then hunted around for her shoes. “We thought you were—”

“We? Who’s we?” June’s blank, unblinking gaze matched her monotone.

“I gotta go.” Claire peered down at the sofa before darting for the door, her