until i found you

Victoria Bylin

BETHANY HOUSE
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2014 by Victoria Bylin

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bylin, Victoria.
Until I found you / Victoria Bylin.
pages cm.
Summary: "Nick Sheridan has made a vow: no dating for a year. And he's keeping it just fine—until Kate Darby turns his world upside down"— Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-0-7642-1152-2 (pbk.)
1. Dating—Fiction. 2. Caregivers—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3602.Y56U56 2014
813′.6—dc23 2013047201

Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Paul Higdon with Andrea Gjeldum

Author is represented by The Steele-Perkins Literary Agency

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

To Sara Mitchell

Beloved friend
Gifted author
Esteemed mentor
Lover of adjectives
Dear sister in Christ

Play the tape!

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Loose yourself from the chains around your neck,

O captive daughter of Zion.

Isaiah 52:2 NASB

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Prologue

the august sky radiated a perfect blue as Leona Darby carried her morning coffee out to the deck surrounding her log home in Meadows, a small community in the Southern California mountains. The blue jays wanted their daily peanuts, and she needed her moment of quiet. Never mind a nagging headache and the stiffness of old age. For the past twenty-two years, most of them with her husband, Alex, she had started the day by lifting her eyes to Mount Abel, the balding peak behind the house they had built together.

Alex was gone now, but Leona still ran the *Clarion*, the newspaper they started when Alex sold his photography business. Their only son, Peter, had died long before her husband had, and Peter's wife died of cancer several years later. Only Leona's granddaughter was left to carry on the Darby family traditions.

Beautiful Kate.

Troubled Kate.

Leona curled her gnarled fingers around the steaming cup, closed her eyes, and prayed the prayer she had murmured

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

every day since Kate was born twenty-nine years ago. "Protect her, Lord. Be with her . . ." Tears welled in her faded eyes, because Kate was lost—seeking without finding, knocking on doors that led to empty rooms, and asking for things she didn't need.

"I'd do anything for her, Lord," Leona prayed.

The dull ache in her head expanded like a balloon, pressing and pushing until the pain exploded in a burst of light. Her coffee cup crashed to the deck, but she barely heard the thud. Neither did she feel the hot liquid on her open-toed slippers or the thump of her body hitting the redwood planks. Her mind shattered into silvery shards, each one a picture of the past—Alex aiming his Nikon at a condor landing in a stream bed. Peter playing fetch with the family dog. She saw her parents, her deceased brothers, cousins, friends, family pets.

Oh, what a glorious time!

It became more glorious still, when Alex lowered his old Nikon F, smiled and winked in that special way, then reached for her hand. Heaven was a pulse away, a last breath. She yearned to go home, but a shadow cast by giant wings blocked the light. The mirrors dulled to pewter, and she understood her glimpse of heaven was only that—a glimpse, a gift to sustain her, because her work on earth wasn't finished.

Twelve hours later she woke up in the ICU with a needle in her arm, a tube in her nose, and a clip on her finger.

"Nonnie?"

She dragged her eyelids upward and saw Kate at her bedside, grown-up Kate with her father's blue-green eyes, eyes now damp with tears. Wanting to comfort her, Leona opened her mouth to say she'd be all right. "Buh-buh-buh—"

She tried again. "Buh—" Gibberish.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Dear Lord, what's wrong? With her heart pounding, she mentally recited her name and age, address, birth date, and even her Medicare number. Next she tested her arms. She could move the left one but not the right. Her legs were in the same state of confusion.

"Buh-buh-buh!" She lay trapped in her body, paralyzed, and unable to speak.

Tears blurred her vision, but Kate's steady voice calmed her. "Nonnie, you had a stroke. We'll face it together. I promise."

"B-u-u-h."

"It's going to take time, but the doctor says you can recover." Even as a child, Kate had been optimistic to the point of pain. "You're going to need help when you go home. If you'd like, I could move in with you for a while."

No! I'd rather go to a nursing home than be a burden. Leona shook her head as hard as she could.

"I know you've always been independent." A smile tipped on Kate's lips. "I am, too."

Yes, you are.

"But right now my life's . . . confusing."

Leona hoped her eyes asked the question. *Tell me, honey. What's wrong?*

"You know Joel left."

Good riddance!

"Work isn't going well, either. Remember the Eve's Garden account?"

Of course. Eve Landon was Leona's favorite actress of all time. She also owned a famous spa, and Kate had designed the advertising. Leona would never forget the birthday when her granddaughter surprised her with Eve's autograph.

Kate squared her shoulders. "Eve put off going national until sometime next year. Without that account, there's a chance I'll be laid off. Taking a leave right now is a good idea."

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Oh, honey. I'm sorry.

"So," Kate said with her typical brightness. "Moving in with you would be good for both of us."

With utter clarity, Leona recalled her glimpse of heaven and the claim she'd do anything—*anything*—for her granddaughter. God, it seemed, had taken her at her word. Before Leona went home to heaven, she had one last mission. Kate still needed her, and Leona knew exactly what she had to do. Even with her knotted tongue and limp right hand, she had to tell Kate about the condors.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

1

Kate Darby clutched the steering wheel of her BMW with both hands. According to the state of California, San Miguel Highway was only the twenty-sixth most dangerous road in the state. That's why the county refused to pay for guardrails to protect motorists from the cliffs looming on the outer edge of the slick asphalt. October drizzle collected on the windshield, blurring the steep drops until the wipers brought the view back with startling clarity. The mountains plummeted three hundred feet to the valley floor, and the highway twisted so tightly she could see four sharp turns ahead of her.

She couldn't imagine driving this road more than occasionally, but that's what she'd be doing for the next two months, or until Leona recovered enough to live alone and go back to overseeing the *Clarion*. The stroke had occurred six long weeks ago. After a two-week stint in the hospital, Leona was transferred to Sierra Rehab for four weeks of therapy of all kinds—physical, occupational, and speech. She could feed herself now, bathe, and get around with a walker, but she still couldn't talk. The prognosis was uncertain. The doctors

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

and therapists all said the same thing. Only time would tell if she fully regained her speech, a process that could take up to a year.

In spite of the damp air, Kate lowered the side window. The hiss of rubber on the wet pavement assured her the car had good traction, though she wished she had replaced the worn tires. There simply hadn't been time. Between arranging with her boss for a leave of absence, packing her things, and visiting Leona at the rehab hospital, Kate's days were a blur. Three days from now she'd pick up Leona, but tomorrow belonged to Kate alone. She needed to unpack and buy groceries, but then she could curl up on the couch and lick the wounds left by Joel and cope with the lingering sadness of being away from Sutton Advertising. The boutique ad agency fit Kate and her talents perfectly. She was good at her job, and she loved the people, but she loved Leona more.

Sighing, she pressed the accelerator to climb a steep hill. When the tires spun helplessly on a patch of sand, adrenaline shot through her body. Local residents called the next curve the hanging hairpin. It was the highest drop on the road and had taken nine lives in ten years.

Her grandfather had taught her to drive, and now his calm instructions echoed in her memory. *"Brake going into a turn. Accelerate coming out of it."* Nervous, she steered into the hairpin with her foot on the brake. Centrifugal force pulled the car toward the cliff, but the tires held, and she confidently pressed the accelerator and rounded the bend.

A black bird standing three feet tall—a California condor—stood eating roadkill directly in front of the BMW.

The condor flapped twice, took flight, and grazed the windshield with its massive wing. A large yellow tag marked 53 in bold print slapped across Kate's field of vision, blinding her as she stomped on the brake. When the BMW fishtailed, she

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

knew what to do—steer into a skid. But she had nowhere to go. The car was aimed toward the cliff. Frantic, she cranked the steering wheel downhill and to the left—a mistake because the right front wheel ran off the road. The car lurched to the side, throwing her off balance as the chassis sank into the shoulder, a strip of dirt about a foot wide but soft with rain.

Slowly, afraid to breathe, she eased the gearshift into Park and turned off the ignition. Silence engulfed her with the force of a dive into a swimming pool, but then the car tilted and she screamed. The new angle tugged her body forward—a death sentence if she moved. Beyond her vision, rocks careened down the slope in a rhythm as erratic and unstoppable as a heart attack.

"No," she whimpered. *"No!"*

Tentatively she dropped her gaze to the canyon below. Pine trees pointed upward like spikes, their tops a mile way. No way could she open the car door. The BMW would plummet down the slope. Neither could she reach the cell phone tucked safely in her purse, out of reach on the backseat, where she wouldn't be tempted to use it while driving. The notes of a high-pitched scream gathered in her throat—terror, hysteria, the irony of cautious Kate, a woman who didn't take chances, dangling over a cliff without her cell phone. Her ribs squeezed her lungs, and somehow she hurdled back in time to the day of her father's funeral . . . to her childhood home . . . to Leona and a flat of blue and yellow pansies.

"It's all right, Katie girl," Leona had said. *"We'll plant these together."*

The day before a car accident took his life, Peter Darby and his seven-year-old daughter had purchased flowers at the Green Thumb Nursery. She picked out the prettiest pansies, and he promised to plant them with her on Saturday. Instead, he died on a Friday afternoon in a twenty-car pile-up

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

that made headlines on CNN. After the funeral, little Kate found the pansies wilting in the sun. She cried for a while, then put the flowers in her wagon and hauled them to the front yard to plant along the walk. Dirt was everywhere when her grandmother crouched next to her. In the first of many rescues to come, Leona helped Kate plant the flowers and clean up the mess Kate's mother didn't see at all through a haze of sedatives.

Without Leona, Kate wouldn't have survived those years. Staring into the canyon—an abyss, it seemed—Kate wished she had her grandmother's faith.

But she didn't.

Kate lived in the moment. She savored beauty where she found it, reveled in experience, and rolled with the punches.

Her friends changed with the seasons of her life—college, her first job, the big break at Sutton Advertising.

Men came and went. Joel was boyfriend number three.

Her addresses improved with her income—the latest being a tiny condo with a massive mortgage.

She took life as it came, good and bad. Why fight a string of random events? Accidents happened. Fathers died in fires, and grandmothers had strokes, also known as CVAs or cerebral vascular accidents. Sometimes condors landed in the middle of mountain roads, and cars skidded over cliffs. But why today? Leona needed her, and Kate didn't want to die. With the car teetering on the cliff, she thought of the stubborn faith that made her grandmother so strong. If Leona were in the car, she'd ask God for help. Kate didn't have that faith, but sometimes she wished she did.

Staring down at certain mayhem—injury, maybe death—she closed her eyes. "Are you real?" she whispered to Leona's God. "Because if you are, I need help."

There was no answer at all, only silence. But the BMW

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

stayed wedged in the mud. Was it wiser to stay still and wait for help, or to risk opening the door and jumping to safety? A shudder and a tilt made the question moot as the BMW plunged down the mountainside.

If he'd been a cautious man, Nick Sheridan would have spent the night in Valencia, a suburb on the northern edge of Los Angeles. His brother Sam had offered him the couch in the small tract home Sam shared with his wife and two young sons, but Nick resisted Sam's offer. Instead he raced his Harley up I-5 in an attempt to beat the storm. The sky opened up ten miles from the Meadows exit and he got soaked, but the adrenaline rush was worth both the chill sinking into his bones and the speeding ticket tucked in his leather jacket.

Considering Nick's former bad habits, an occasional traffic violation didn't seem so terrible. He considered it a business expense, not that he'd report it to *California Dreaming*, the travel magazine that paid him to write about everything from hiking trails to art festivals. Nick loved his work, but he hadn't always written for such a dignified publication. He was also—to his embarrassment—the author of *California for Real Men,* aka *CFRM*, a bestselling travel guide that had sold over a million copies to date and generated a popular app. Between the blockbuster sales, good investments, and his free-lance work, Nick's career made him financially comfortable. It had also made him a veteran of life in the fast lane.

A retired veteran, he reminded himself.

God was good.

God was merciful.

God had a sense of humor, because He'd taken one of the biggest sinners in California and turned him into a monk.

Nick hoped it was a temporary calling, because he hadn't

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

taken to celibacy like the apostle Paul. Sam, the preacher—his older brother who headed up international missions at a megachurch—was right. Nick needed a wife. But Sam had been blunt in the rest of his advice. *"I'm telling you what I tell everyone undergoing a big change. Don't make any major decisions for at least a year. You need time to shift gears."*

Sam had a point and Nick knew it. On his own he had taken the advice a step further and made a personal pledge—no dating for one year. A social sabbatical made sense for a man who did everything too fast.

Six months down. Six months to go.

But what then? He couldn't see himself among the singles at Sam's church. The women he met there were lovely, talented, and dedicated Christians, but Nick didn't fit in with all that niceness—nice barbecues, nice houses, nice everything. He'd been washed clean by the blood of Jesus, but six months ago he'd emerged from a very dark place. Sometimes the past pulled at him like gravity, and he had to fight to keep from sliding back into old habits. Those habits died hard, and some died harder than others.

He didn't drink anymore, but sometimes a cold beer sounded really good.

If he cursed, it was because he hit his thumb with a hammer.

He had always played it safe on the Internet, and he still did. No temptation there, because the porn industry disgusted him.

On the other hand, a man couldn't help but notice an attractive woman. Nick no longer viewed dating as a sport, and he was sorry he ever did, but he very much wanted to finish his sabbatical, fall in love, and settle down with the right woman.

Cold and wet, he veered on to San Miguel Highway, cranked the throttle but immediately eased off. Rain and speed didn't

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

mix, especially on a road littered with rocks and decomposed granite. He didn't mind slowing down. He had lived in Meadows for six months now, and the drive through San Miguel Canyon still worked the same magic. His pulse slowed and his lungs filled with piney air. A deep breath scrubbed away the past, and he silently thanked God for that night on Mount Abel when he had grieved his mistakes and burned a copy of *CFRM* a page at a time. When the fire died to embers, Nick saw his life in the ash and called Sam.

"I'm done."

"With what?"

"Everything."

Sam had paused. *"You better explain, because 'everything' is a big word."*

Leave it to Sam to be dramatic, a side effect of taking the gospel to cannibals in New Guinea. Nick admired him for it. In a way, for a period of time Nick had been a cannibal of another kind—a man who fed off other people. He'd been a user back then, a taker. That night, his voice had cracked when he finally replied to his brother.

"Pray for me."

Nick still smiled at Sam's reaction. *"You idiot. I pray for you all the time."*

Silence.

"Pray for yourself, Nick. I'll listen."

More silence. Darkness. Then a breeze stirred the ash and a charred log glowed from the inside out. The orange sparks lit up a single moment of the endless night, but that moment changed him. With Sam on the phone, Nick cracked like an egg and spilled his guts, cursed like a sailor and cried like a little girl all at once. What a mess he'd been—and still was. Sam said Christ had died for his sins. It was that simple. Nick had believed and prayed, but Sam's next words made no sense.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

"God forgives us, little brother. Now you have to forgive yourself."

Nice words, but his straight-arrow brother had no idea how it felt to get slapped with a paternity suit for a dead child—a baby girl who had endured open-heart surgery, infections, and two weeks in the NICU; a child who should not have been conceived. Nick barely remembered the Santa Cruz waitress who gave birth to the baby, but the genetic tests were a perfect match. He helped with the medical bills, then dealt with his guilt that night on Mount Abel. Those few hours changed him forever. The next morning he had ridden into Meadows, bought a half-finished log cabin, and officially become a monk.

Monkhood had some advantages. He slept when he wanted to and wrote at night, an old habit he still enjoyed; and to keep from becoming a weird recluse, he free-lanced for Leona Darby and the *Clarion*. With journalism and Christianity in common, the two of them had become good friends. The morning of the stroke, when Leona failed to show up at the office, it was Nick who found her and called 9-1-1. He often visited her in rehab and had promised to keep an eye on the house. But Leona wanted more. *And Kate,* she had scrawled on a paper tablet. *Be her friend*.

Nick had agreed, of course. But the last thing he needed in his head was the image of the pretty redhead he'd seen in photographs displayed in Leona's home and office. For now, monkhood suited his purposes.

With the Harley burbling at an easy pace, he decided to pick up tacos for dinner and then hammer out the article for *California Dreaming*. The free-lance work was a good distraction while he waited to hear from his agent about his newest manuscript—a memoir about what led to that night on Mount Abel. The income from a sale would be nice, but mostly Nick wanted to atone for *CFRM*.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

He navigated the next few miles at a snail's pace, then slowed even more as he came around the hanging hairpin. What he saw put him on full alert. A quarter of the road had crumbled into a muddy slide. Nick braked to a halt, whipped off his helmet, and heard three short blasts of a horn . . . then three long ones . . . and three short ones.

SOS.

Someone had gone over the side and was alive. He snatched his phone and called the Meadows fire station. Captain Rob McAllister picked up on the second ring.

"Rob, it's Nick Sheridan. The hairpin crumbled."

"How bad?"

"It's down to one-and-a-half lanes. Someone went over the side."

"How far?"

"I can't see, but they're honking an SOS."

"We're on our way."

Nick wasn't about to wait for the rescue crew before he climbed down the canyon, but first other drivers needed to be warned. Helmet unstrapped on his head, he steered the Harley to the top of the hill, parked it across the lane and turned on the emergency flashers. He hoped no one plowed into it, but that was a risk he had to take. As he strode up the hill, the car horn continued to honk, three beeps at a time, over and over, in a cry as calm and desperate as the radio signals from the *Titanic*. He strode purposefully to the edge of the hairpin, looked down, and saw a metallic gray BMW wedged in a patch of scrub oak. The flimsy bushes made a fence of sorts, but any minute the roots could pull loose and the car would plummet another two hundred feet to the rocky bottom of the ravine.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hello!"

Hooonk. Hooonk.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

"Hang on," he yelled. "I'm coming down."

The horn blared again—three erratic beeps that sounded like *Yes! Yes! Yes!* He sized up the slope, didn't like what he saw, and decided to approach from farther down the road at a more horizontal angle. Staying close to the mountain, he walked several feet past the crumbled road before venturing to the cliff's edge. A slight bulge in the mountain offered the best approach, so he gingerly found footing and began the descent.

When he was halfway to the car, he called to the driver. "Can you hear me?"

"Y-y-yes."

A woman. Nick knew just about everyone in Meadows, and he didn't recognize the BMW. A visitor, he decided. Or someone speeding down an empty road the way he sometimes did. "Are you alone?"

"Yes." She sounded a bit calmer. "I'm afraid to open the door—"

"Don't."

"Are you close?"

"About thirty more feet." His boot slipped and he landed on his chest. Grunting, he maneuvered with the climbing techniques he'd learned in Yosemite for the "Daredevil" chapter of *CFRM*. His foot slipped again and knocked a rock down the slope. Female whimpering made his gut clench.

"Are you still there?" she called to him.

"Just a few feet to go."

He inched to a spot where he could see the shrubs bending with the weight of the car, their roots straining against the mud and close to breaking loose. Any minute the car could plummet to the distant bottom of the ravine. He listened for sirens but heard nothing. The rescue squad was at least five minutes away, and it would take time to rappel down the

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

mountain. Nick glanced again at the scrub oak and got a bad feeling. He needed to get the woman out now.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"I'm just . . . just shaken up." An off-kilter laugh spilled through the window. "It's—it's a good car. I c-c-could do a BMW s-safety commercial."

"You could star in it," he replied lightly.

Bracing in the mud, he peered through the window and saw a woman in her twenties with blue-green eyes, ivory skin, and a swish of auburn hair. She was beautiful in a girl-next-door kind of way, and he recognized her instantly from Leona's gallery of photographs. This was Kate, Leona's granddaughter. Kate, whom he had called when he found Leona unconscious on her deck.

The woman's alto voice skittered out of her throat. "I-I'm afraid to m-m-move."

"I can see why." If he stayed calm, so would she. "We have to get you out of there."

She shook her head. "If I move, the car will f-f-fall."

"We'll work fast."

Pressed against the seat, she had one foot on the brake and was pushing as if her strength alone could hold the car in place. It couldn't. Neither could his. God alone had that power. Nick hoped He planned to be merciful today, because Leona loved Kate and needed her.

Her pale eyes flared into black disks. "Did you call 9-1-1?"

"They're on their way."

"How long?"

"Ten minutes. We can't wait." His gaze shifted to the bottom of the canyon. A few boulders jutted from the mountain, but most of the remaining drop resembled an expert-level ski slope. Nothing at all blocked the fall.

If Kate kept panting, she'd hyperventilate. And if she

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

thought too much, she'd be paralyzed with fear. He inched closer, braced against the slope, and kept his voice casual. "I'm going to pull you out of there."

He reached through the window and popped the door lock, praying God would keep the BMW steady for the two seconds he needed to open the door and pull her free. He hated to break her gaze, but they had one shot to get the angles right. He stepped back, gripped the door handle and prepared to grab her. The next step would be difficult. "You have to undo the seat belt."

"I-I c-can't move."

"Yes, you can."

"B-b-but—"

"Trust me, Kate. I'll won't let you fall."

"You know my name—how—"

"Later," he said. "We'll do it on the count of three."

She inched her hand to the seat-belt release button, closed her eyes, and pushed. The belt rolled smoothly into place. In the distance, a siren wailed. "Wait!" she cried. "They're coming!"

A root pushed through the crumbling earth. "There's no time."

"But—"

He gripped her wrist through the window. "One—"

"No!"

"Two."

Her fingers dug into his leather sleeve. Before he said "three," a branch snapped and the BMW started to roll.

Victoria Bylin, Until I Found You
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)