

An Unforgettable Love

My darling bride is like a private garden, a spring that no one else can have, a fountain of my own.

—Song of Solomon 4:12 Living Bible

MIKE SOUGHT THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS and avoided those he had known in another lifetime. His family and the mansion he grew up in on St. Charles Avenue were the stuff of his nightmares. They made up the skeletons that second-lined through his consciousness day and night.

After an all-night drinking binge, Mike had his usual craving. His favorite cure for too much grape was kumquat. He was glad to be back in New Orleans at the beginning of the kumquat season. The late October breeze from the Mississippi River felt good against his chest as he parked his Mustang convertible in the Quarter and walked over to the French Market.

It was 1986. Mike had spent the past seventeen years working construction jobs in Chicago. At thirty-six, his deeply-etched face and calloused hands bore witness to the hard lifestyle he chose. He had chosen to endure Chicago's wintery hawk by building during the day and burning his liver each night with a six-pack of beer. It was all a futile attempt to wipe out the bad memories.

Then in March Mike received a letter from the Trust Corporation of New Orleans offering him a job as warehouse foreman. The letter stated that the Trust Corporation was recruiting Louisiana military veterans. The offer came at a time Mike was collecting unemployment checks because of a downturn in the economy. He decided to take the job just temporarily until the construction market picked back up in Chicago.

Surprisingly, he found that being back in the Big Easy was good therapy. He indulged in the many distractions a man can easily find in the city of no last call in order to avoid his personal demons.

He picked an orange teardrop from the crate and popped it into his mouth. He bit down on the fleshy fruit which immediately sent shots of citrus stinging through his nose and forehead. Mike quickly inhaled the life of another kumquat to resuscitate his own.

If he were a praying man, he would have thanked God for this little burst of excitement in his otherwise dull life. But Mike had long been a man who walked by his wits and not by faith. He piled as much nectar as he could into a brown sack.

“Mike. Mike Beauchamp?” The soft voice caused Mike to stop in mid chew. He knew that voice. He looked up and squinted into the western sun. He placed a hand over his eyes to focus as the silhouetted figure emerged as an exotic beauty. Her fragrance floated toward him. Mike inhaled the light aroma of a sweet olive in bloom.

She wore khaki shorts and yellow cotton shirt that exposed her tanned, lithe legs and arms. Mike couldn't see her eyes but he knew behind the sunglasses were the grey reflection pools he had gotten lost in long ago. Just as he knew, without seeing, that her glossy black hair dangled down in a ponytail to the middle of her back.

His brain said run. His galloping heart knew it was already too late. Clover LeBlanc removed her sunglasses and her eyes swallowed him whole. She scanned the tall, muscular man wearing faded blue jeans and tank top. His size was intimidating but his bloodshot eyes told the real story. They carried the dregs of his childhood. Clover reached out and touched his stubbled jaw.

As a child she had nursed animals back to health. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not heal Mike's hurt. It coursed through him like a rattlesnake. And Clover knew that rattlesnakes have a nasty bite. She too had spent seventeen years nursing her own wound.

Their break-up long ago had also haunted Mike. He fumbled for words. “Clover, I said some things to you. You know I wish I could take . . .”

She placed a finger over his lips. “Forgotten.” She was being kind.

The next few minutes passed in a blur of mindless small talk. But they both felt that something beneath the surface had just awakened from hibernation.

After one casual date, they were back in each other's clutches. Their instincts told them they were headed for disaster, but they couldn't fight the urge to be together. Clover had once told her childhood sweetheart they were twin spirits destined to be together. Perhaps she was right.

Mike had never known anyone as deeply spiritual as Clover. Even though they were both now in their mid-thirties and living in the if-it-feels-good-do-it '80s, sex for Clover was out of the question. Mike knew their physical attraction was mutual. He could feel the passion rising whenever they kissed. Yet Clover always gently, but assertively, pushed Mike away. She refused to break a vow she made to God. Mike could not coax her into bed anymore than Clover could coax him into church.

Clover's love for Mike defied reason. Yes, he had the rugged good looks that had made Clint Eastwood a star. And yes, his gentle kisses were sweeter than

honey. But the attraction for Clover was not physical. It was spiritual. She knew the goodness that was inside of Mike. He had exhibited great acts of heroism and compassion throughout his childhood and then later in Vietnam. The memory of what Mike once was and could be again kept her riveted to him.

While Clover turned Mike on physically more than any woman he had known, the attraction went much deeper. He felt good again for the first time in a long time. He could laugh again. She brought sunlight into his shadowy existence.

Whenever Clover sang, she transported Mike to another world. Sometimes they spent the day at City Park or in Jackson Square. Mike started painting again. His high school art teacher had said he was gifted, but after David's death he lost the desire to paint. He tried painting again when he returned from Vietnam but his abstract paintings of death and destruction only drove him deeper into the bottle.

Yet as Clover strummed her guitar and sang, Mike was able to paint people and landscapes. She liked singing inspirational ballads. Mike could not fully understand the lyrics but they made him feel at peace. And he painted better when Clover sang those strange songs she'd composed about God's love. He was actually happy, a feeling he thought he could never experience again.

Clover did have one trait that Mike found annoying. She was constantly striking up conversations with strangers. It didn't matter if it was a bag woman or a bank president. Clover wanted to know what was going on in other people's lives.

During the week of Christmas, Mike and Clover were strolling through Jackson Square. In sharp contrast to the holiday cheer Papa Noel spread among shoppers and tourists, a couple of wandering souls sat cross-legged on a blanket. The teenage girl wore a serape over her halter top. Her long, straggly black hair blew across her face as she attempted to sing, accompanied on the guitar by a young man with even longer dirty hair. Mike wanted to move on. Their music was not any good as the empty tip can attested. But Clover wouldn't budge.

She waited for them to finish their ballad, such as it was, about free love. She turned to Mike and asked him to give her some time alone to talk to the pair. Mike was confused by the request but moved to a nearby bench and set up his easel. As he painted, he looked up occasionally at the trio.

He could not hear what was said, but it was clearly an emotional conversation. An animated Clover sat on her knees conversing for almost an hour. The faithful and the curious went about their business, entering and leaving the St. Louis Cathedral which towered before them.

Mike shook his head as he watched Clover get out her checkbook. She handed them a check and hugged them both. Then Clover picked up her guitar and joined Mike.

“I hope those panhandlers didn’t hit you up for much,” Mike muttered.

Clover didn’t respond. She watched the weary teenagers collect their things and depart. Then she picked up her guitar. Her fingers trembled as she strummed.

She began to sing but her soprano voice had an uncharacteristic husky edge. The song was almost a moan. “Okiahsampa . . . laytiwoumba seemedah . . . there was a young girl who lost her way. She forgot to pray, trust, and obey . . . the apple looked tantalizingly sweet so she took a bite and the devil ate her sweet heart . . .” Tears seeped through her closed eyelids as she sang. Tourists stopped to listen to her slow, painful ballad. Mike, who had never seen Clover this way, didn’t know what to do.

“LATASAMAY . . . LATASAMAY . . . COOSABAY . . . COOSABAY. She followed the path that led to an empty place . . . She stumbled in the gutter and dirtied her life. The devil played the chords of her heart with a knife. Then a man came along filled with grace. TUSAKALA . . . MAYTAYAHMA HA . . .”

Clover abruptly stopped singing her ballad when she felt Mike’s hand on her back. Her eyes bucked open. The crowd let out a sigh of disappointment.

“Clover, are you alright?” Mike gently rubbed Clover’s back.

She self-consciously wiped the tears from her face and nodded.

“What language was that mai tai whatever?”

“Tongues.”

“What?”

“Prayer language.”

“Whatever. It was strange.” Mike quickly added, “But beautiful.” After the crowd dispersed Mike took Clover’s hands. “I know what brought on that song.”

“You do?” Clover’s eyes widened.

“Your song was about those two panhandlers.”

Clover’s eyes fell. Mike detected a hint of disappointment—or maybe it was modesty.

“You want to save the world . . . one lost soul at a time. How much did they hit you up for?”

“Hit me up?”

“I saw you give them a check.”

“I gave them money to go home for Christmas.”

“You really think she is going to use that money to go home? Clooover.”

“Yes, I think they’re ready to go back home to Arkansas. Life on the street is not what they thought it would be.”

“Clover, you don’t know what the real world is like. You’ve spent all of your life in the church. You’re like a fruit cake. Nutty but sweet.” He tenderly pushed a wisp of hair back from her face.

“Stop it, Mike!” Clover’s anger caught Mike off guard.

“Those kids really upset you. What did they tell you?”

“They’re just a couple of mixed-up kids who need to be back home with their families. Stop talking about them as if they were tramps. And stop trying to make me out to be some kind of saint.”

“I shouldn’t have compared you to a fruit cake, Clover. But you are naive. You know more about the Bible than you do about life. I don’t think you have a clue about the sin-sick world you sing about in your nice hymns. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not mad at you for not knowing. That’s kind of what I . . . what I like about you. You’re so innocent.”

“I’m not . . .”

“Clover. Take it from me. They are going to take that money and buy enough weed to last into the New Year. Forget about them.”

Clover stared intently upward and then looked him in the eyes. “Mike I have something to tell—”

“Excuse me,” a short plump man with a boyish face interrupted, “my card.” He held out a business card which Mike apprehended. It indicated he was Jake Jackson, associate producer of the nationally syndicated *Terry Talk Show*.

“What can we do for you, Mr. Jackson?” Mike asked warily.

“Well, for starters,” he thrust out his hand, “I want to shake the hand of Clover LeBlanc, America’s next big star.”

Clover weakly accepted his hand. “What are you talking about? And how do you know my name?”

“I’m a talent scout and it’s my job to uncover good stories. I can’t tell you my source but I was told you are a kindergarten teacher at McDonogh One elementary school who performs in Jackson Square on weekends for tourists’ tips.”

Clover laughed, “Your source has given you bad information. I love to sing. I don’t get paid for it.”

“Well, judging from what I just heard you should be getting paid. A lot. And when I tell Terry about you, he is going to go bonkers.” Jake pulled up his designer sunglasses and his eyes gleamed with excitement. “You have heard of the top-rated *Terry Talk Show*.”

“Yea Clover, you’ve heard about Terry the Terrible. He’s the guy who lays land mines for his guests and then stands back while they are blown to smithereens,” Mike interjected matter-of-factly.

“That’s not true,” Jake gave the troublemaker a sideways glare and then smiled at Clover. “This is your lucky day. I just happened to be looking for new talent that Terry can feature when he tapes his Valentine’s Day show in New Orleans. He wants to spotlight New Orleans talent since this is a city known for great music.”

"I don't sing jazz or R&B. I'm into gospel music exclusively," Clover smiled.

"Your point? Mahalia Jackson, one of the top recording gospel singers of all time, grew up in New Orleans." Jake grabbed Clover's hand. "You would be great for the show to spotlight the diversity of New Orleans' contribution to the music world!"

"I don't know if" Clover started but was interrupted by the fast talking New Yorker.

"I am authorized to offer you a spot on the show. You'll be seen by millions nationwide and a recording contract won't be far behind. Terry has made many big stars," Jake said enthusiastically.

"And many big stains," Mike interjected in a deadpan tone.

"Thank you very much for the invitation. But this is not for me," Clover responded.

"What!? You would be crazy to pass up this opportunity. Do you know how many people come crawling to us every day for the chance we are willing to give you?" Jake threw his arms open.

Mike stepped between Clover and the exasperated man. "Look, Jack or whoever you are, what don't you understand? The lady said no. Now go scouting someplace else."

"There is no reason to be rude," Clover whispered in Mike's ear.

Jake slapped his hands to the sides of his leather pants and pulled the sunglasses down from their perch on top of his head. "Terry will be in touch with you, Clover," he said and sauntered off.

"What's with him?" Mike returned to his painting.

"I could have handled him myself," Clover said with her palms turned upward. "He was just trying to do me a favor."

"He made my eyeballs itch," Mike groused. "There is something not right about this situation. Promise me you won't change your mind about going on the Terry show."

Clover picked up her guitar and began strumming. "I won't change my mind."

But a couple of weeks later, Clover told Mike she had changed her mind.

"What?! Clover, you promised!" Mike bellowed.

"But you didn't talk to Terry," Clover soothed. "He told me he is aware his show has taken a bad direction and he wants to raise the standards. He says as a contemporary gospel singer I can reach people who would never go into a church or pick up a Bible."

Mike closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Don't you see," Clover placed her hands on his hard biceps. "I have to do this. It is my opportunity to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and take the Gospel into all the world."

“Clooover, what am I gonna do with you?” Mike threw his arms around her, catching her thick braid and giving it a gentle yank. “I don’t trust Terry and I don’t know what he has planned. But if you insist on going into that lion’s den, you won’t go alone. I’ll be with you.”

Clover gave Mike a peck on the cheek.

“Oh you can do better than that,” Mike whispered before planting his lips over hers.

Seeing one woman exclusively was a new experience for Mike. Since his painful break-up with Clover decades ago, his motto had been “score and run.” But no more.

The iron door that he had slammed shut on his heart was slowly creaking open. For the first time as an adult he was seriously thinking commitment. He used to fear that loving Clover would only lead to being hurt. But with each passing day his trust in her, and love for her, grew.

It was becoming more and more appealing—the idea of having Clover to return home to after work each evening. He imagined what their love life would be like. Clover had saved herself all of these years for her husband. And the idea of being with a woman who had never been with another man appealed to Mike. But that was lagniappe. What appealed most to Mike was Clover herself. He was unable to concentrate on anything else.

“What are you thinking about?” Clover asked as she snuggled next to Mike on the couch in the guest waiting area of the *Terry Talk Show*.

Mike put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. “I’m thinking about how much I wish this television gig were over so we could get on with our lives.”

“Now if I’m not nervous, you shouldn’t be either,” Clover said with a concerned look.

“You’ll do fine babe. But I’m not so sure Terrible Terry has turned over a new leaf. He is known for his wicked sense of humor. I just don’t want you to get hurt.” Mike smoothed back a wisp of Clover’s hair.

She took his hand and held it in both of hers. “Look—nothing’s going to happen. I’m going to sing a couple of songs for the Lord and hopefully touch some hearts.”

“Ms. LeBlanc,” a production assistant assertively interrupted. “Please come with me. It’s time. Someone will be coming to take your friend to a reserved seat in the front row.”

As she got up to leave, Mike grabbed her hand. “Clover I’m here for you no matter what. And I have something for you after the show that will make this a very special Valentine’s Day. So let’s get this over with quickly, OK?”

Clover gave Mike a quick peck on the cheek. “See ya on the other side.”

Clover disappeared and as promised Mike was escorted to a front row seat.

He waited nervously for Terry's introduction, which only made him more nervous.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our next guest, Clover LeBlanc, is in a soundproof area so she can't hear me." The robust man with shocking red hair then leaned forward conspiratorially. "Folks, Clover is in for the Valentine's surprise of her life. She thinks she is just here to sing a song for Jesus, but she is in for a blessing. And you are all in for a blast. I'm telling you, you're not going to believe your eyes. Hold on to your seats." Eyes glowing with elfish delight, Terry stood and beckoned the audience to applaud. "Ladies and gentlemen, the next star of the galaxy, Clover LeBlanc!"

Mike looked frantically at Clover as she made her appearance on cue. Smiling radiantly, dressed in a sunny yellow pantsuit saucily adorned with a silk scarf the show's wardrobe lady had insisted she wear, Clover sat down confidently at the piano and gave Mike a reassuring smile. As her fingers began flowing over the keys, Mike wiped his hand over his face and waited.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," Clover's voice began softly and reverently, "that saved a wretch like me."

She closed her eyes and her voice trembled with wonder. "I once was lost but now I'm found was blind but now I see."

Then her eyes opened and the joy poured out of her as her voice crescendoed. "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved!"

Then suddenly a man's velvety voice joined in. "How precious did that grace appear; The hour I first believed."

Terry's booming voice thundered over the music, "Ladies and gentlemen—**EDDIE FRANCISCO!**" The crowd leaped to its feet cheering. Clover froze.

The heart-emblazoned curtain parted to reveal the superstar.

A purple silk shirt clung to his lean torso complimenting his rich mocha complexion. Black casual slacks and Italian loafers completed the look. His star was bright enough to forgo the heavy jewelry and glitzy suits other lesser celebrities used to bolster their images. Francisco's afro had diminished in size over the years, but not his appeal. There was something about his hotter-than-lightning gaze and vocal inflections that caused even sophisticated ladies to lose their cool. He had what they call in the entertainment industry "it."

"Please keep playing, Clover," Francisco said gliding towards the piano. "This is one of my favorite hymns."

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. This was all there was to the surprise. Just giving a small-city girl a big-city treat. Clover looked over at Mike, obviously not knowing what to do. Mike nodded furiously for her to continue. She obeyed.

Her fingers tapped out the notes but she could not bring herself to sing a duet with Francisco. He didn't need help. Francisco held the audience captive as he

had done countless times before with his love songs. His honey voice poured out the remainder of "Amazing Grace."

At the conclusion the audience rose in vigorous approval. "Eddie Francisco!" Terry wailed. Francisco nodded to the audience but his gaze was fixed on Clover who looked back at him with pleading eyes.

Terry beckoned them to join him at the interview set. Eddie extended his hand to Clover but she did not accept it. He leaned over to her and whispered, "Isn't that Mike Beauchamp over there, your boyfriend?"

Clover looked over Francisco's shoulder and saw Mike smiling and tilting his head toward the interview set. Francisco took her hand, "You may not care about my feelings but you don't want to disappoint Mike."

Reluctantly Clover rose from the piano bench and walked over to the guest sofa.

"You two make a perfect Valentine's Day couple," Terry smiled approvingly. "Don't you agree, audience?" And again the audience roared its approval.

"Clover, I understand you go way back with Francisco," Terry began the interview.

"We met in college," Clover responded. "But that was a long time ago and I really don't think your audience is interested . . ."

"Friends, Clover LeBlanc is a very modest lady. We used to sing together," Francisco interjected, ignoring Clover's eyes which urged him to stop. "She is the best woman I have ever known, and I don't mean to be immodest, but I have known quite a few." The audience chuckled. Mike leaned forward in amazement.

"Not many people know this, but Clover is the first woman I ever loved. I begged her to come with me when I left New Orleans but she turned me down. All I have to say to the man she is with tonight, you are one lucky dude."

Mike nodded proudly as Clover continued to stare at Francisco with pleading eyes.

"Today's show was all Francisco's idea," Terry said savoring his media coup. "If it weren't for Clover we wouldn't be broadcasting this show from New Orleans. You know this show would move heaven and earth for Eddie Francisco. And when he told us there was this special lady in New Orleans he wanted to impress, well we said count us in."

"That's right, Clover all of this is for you," Francisco said, moving his arm from the back of the sofa to Clover's shoulder. "All of the other people here are just walk-on cameos in your movie. You're the leading lady and I'm auditioning for the role of leading man." Francisco brought his other arm around Clover and pushed his lips against hers.

"Ooooh!" the audience gushed. Mike's mouth dropped open. Clover pushed away from Francisco. Regaining her composure she said in a

commanding voice, “If this is a show for surprises, I’ve got one I’d like to share. You see that man sitting right in front of us?” she pointed at Mike. “His name is Michael Beauchamp. Mike, I’d never thought I’d be saying this on national television, but I want the world to know I love you with every fiber of my being.”

Francisco’s eyes glazed over as Clover left the stage and into Mike’s grateful arms. She hoped that it would be a sign to Francisco to discontinue his advances. But the star refused to be extinguished. “I have a new song coming out and the name of it is ‘Clover.’ It’s based on our relationship. The night you said you loved me. Do you want to hear it?”

The crowd applauded eagerly on cue. Lowering his eyes to look deeply into Clover’s, Francisco said earnestly, “I still love you Clover. I’ll always love you.”

“Let’s leave,” Clover whispered to Mike. There was an edge of panic in her voice.

“No, I want to hear this.” Mike refused to budge.

Francisco began singing. “Shimmering hair on my pillow and her grey asking eyes . . . send a flaming arrow plunging into my heart. We kiss and make sweet love til the moon turns into sun. Virgin love is the sweetest . . .”

Mike looked at Clover, not believing what he was hearing. Had Clover and Francisco been lovers? He looked at her expecting her to deny what the lyrics described, but her downcast eyes told Mike more than he wanted to know. He let go of Clover.

“She is the light of my night . . . she gave me the night of my life. We make love in the darkness til the sun shines . . . ooh ooooh ooh.”

Mike couldn’t take anymore. He bolted from the theater. Clover followed with her head bowed. People who had stared admiringly at her when she entered now averted their eyes the way people do when passing an animal’s carcass in the middle of the road.

Francisco didn’t notice. His eyes were closed as he caressed Clover’s memory, unconcerned with the devastation around him.