

PLAY IT AGAIN

by

Tracy Krauss



Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

Copyright © 2011 Tracy Krauss.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, of the publisher.

Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
Houston, TX 77065
www.sbpri.com

ISBN: 978-1-61204-392-0

Introduction and Acknowledgements

This book represents a slight departure from my usual romantic suspense genre in that it is a romance, plain and simple. Hopefully, it does incorporate some of the ‘edge’ that I try to put into my writing, which comes unapologetically from a Christian worldview. *Play It Again* also represents the resurrection of a dream since the original manuscript was the first novel I ever completed. It has gone through many revisions and changes since then to reach this final stage. Thank you to Priscilla Benterud for her honesty and efficiency during the editing process. It is my desire that this book will inspire readers to realize that God can take the discordance of life and turn it into beautiful music.

Tracy Krauss



1 Samuel 16: 7b – For God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (NASB)



FIRST MOVEMENT:
Overture

Chapter One

Smoky tendrils drifted in time to the soft strains of jazz music that filled the dimly lit lounge. Russ Graham surveyed the clusters of patrons at each small circular table, resting on the troupe of aging jazz musicians for a moment, before focusing on the amber liquid swirling in his own glass. It was not the kind of place he normally frequented, but business had brought him out to the island for a few days and there wasn't much else to do in the evening. Alone.

Earlier he'd noticed a sign in the hotel lobby advertising the Jazz ensemble. "Jack Burton Band" the sign read. He looked a little more closely at the aging troop and decided that Jack Burton must be the one wielding the saxophone and counting out the time. He was small and wiry, with thinning hair- probably in his early to mid sixties. Next, there was a burly, white haired, black man on the drums; a gangly, hawk nosed man bending over the piano; and a stocky man with longish gray hair and a mustache leaning on a big, bass violin.

Despite the band's aging appearance, the bluesy jazz that came from their instruments seemed to transcend all barriers of age and time. Russ closed his eyes for a moment and let the strains of music wash over him. How long had it been since he just let himself relax? Just let go and *be*. Too long. Much too long.

He quickly opened his eyes. Guilt and pride, his two constant companions, would not allow even this brief reprieve. He should probably just head back up to his room. He needed an early start tomorrow in order

Play It Again

to finish up his business and head back to Winnipeg. Mark was in good hands at his mother's house, but he didn't like leaving him for too long. He took his responsibilities seriously, and he didn't like pawning his son off on others. Even his own mother.

Russ raised the tumbler to his lips and downed the rest of the fiery liquid. As if on cue, a pretty waitress was there to whisk the glass away and offer another. "Um ... I guess another wouldn't hurt," Russ said, glancing at his watch. It was only 9:30. He didn't drink much, as a rule, but one more was no big deal. Besides, who was here to see?

As the waitress retreated, Russ glanced around the room once again. What little light there was in the room cast an ethereal glow over the crowd. His gaze stopped at a young woman, sitting enraptured at a small table near the stage. Her hair, which was very short, appeared to be some shade of red, although it was difficult to tell in this light. Large hoop earrings hung at her ears, swaying in time to the music. She looked awfully young to be in a bar, but then again, there was also a sense of worldliness about her. She was a strange combination of girl and woman.

He was jolted back to reality by a resounding slap across the back. "Hey, bro! Fancy meeting you here!"

"What the ...? What are you two doing here?" Russ sputtered.

Ken Graham, Russ's older brother, stood next to him grinning, his wife Kathy hovering nearby. The contrast in appearance between the two brothers was as marked as their personalities. Ken was well over six feet tall, broad and well built, with sandy blonde hair and twinkling eyes. Although he was already thirty-seven, his boyish expression allowed him to pass for a much younger man. Russ, on the other hand, had a firm set to his chiseled features. His dark blue eyes held a deep intensity and his hair, which was dark and wavy, he wore in a neatly trimmed, conservative style. Shorter than his older brother, he still maintained a powerful, trim physique.

"Didn't I tell you me and Kath were coming out to Hecla for the weekend?" Ken asked as he plunked himself into the chair opposite Russ.

"No, I don't recall," Russ muttered.

"Must have forgot," Ken shrugged. "The company's having a sales convention. Wives are invited so Kathy came along." Hecla Island was a popular spot for business meetings with its scenic location just a two hour

drive from the city of Winnipeg. Ken raised a hand and caught the eye of the oncoming waitress. "What about you? I didn't expect to see you here."

"My firm does their books, remember?" Russ answered. His scowl deepened as the waitress arrived with his scotch.

"What have we here?" Ken queried, raising his eyebrows as he looked from the glass to Russ.

"I'm not allowed to have a drink?" Russ asked.

"No, go ahead," Ken laughed. "It's just good to see you take off your priest's collar once in awhile."

Russ clamped his jaw tight. He wasn't about to react to his brother's jibes. "Where are the kids?" he directed at Kathy.

"Your mother's," Kathy sighed, as if that explained everything.

Russ frowned. "Oh. I guess three isn't too much for her to handle . . ."

"Relax," Ken said. "You've got nothing to worry about. At least your kid isn't a brat like some people's." He jerked his head in Kathy's direction.

"They're your kids, too, remember?" Kathy quipped. "Or have you forgotten already?"

"Whatever you say," Ken shrugged, taking a swig of the beer that had just arrived. He leaned in toward Russ. "Greg's not used to staying overnight without his mommy," he snorted.

"He's only five," Kathy sniffed, digging for a cigarette.

"She keeps babying the kid. No wonder he's such a brat," Ken continued.

"I hated to leave them, the way your mother was carrying on," Kathy explained, taking a long drag on her cigarette.

"Do you have to blow that right in my face?" Ken complained, waving at the smoke. "And just what did that mean anyway?"

"You know exactly what I mean," Kathy said, expelling another puff of smoke. "She's always trying to interfere with how we raise our children." Ken grunted, dismissing the comment. "No, I mean it! She's always pushing all that religious garbage at them. I've had it with them coming home and asking me if I'm going to heaven or hell. It's scaring them."

"A little fire and brimstone never hurt anybody," Ken defended. "Look at me. I turned out okay."

"Fine example," Russ noted dryly.

Play It Again

“Oh, right, “ Ken snorted. “Mr. Perfect talking.”

“Is he always this sociable?” Russ asked Kathy, striving for lightness.

“Only on good days,” Kathy laughed. There was no humor in the sound. She stubbed out her cigarette.

Ken tipped his beer back and guzzled the rest as if in some kind of competition. “Ah!” he breathed, followed by a loud burp. “What’s a guy got to do to get another drink around here?” Kathy just rolled her eyes. “Hey, bro. Order us another round while I take my wife for a spin,” Ken said. “How about it, Kath? Wanna dance?” He was already dragging her toward the dance floor.

Russ watched the pair with a combination of amusement and pity. Kathy was now laughing breathlessly up at Ken, obviously happy to be the recipient of some positive attention. It was a shame that it took liquor.

His attention was caught by another couple on the dance floor. It was the girl that Russ had noticed earlier, dancing with Jack Burton, the aging saxophone player. He’d laid aside his instrument while the rest of the troupe carried on. Mismatched as they were, they seemed to dance as one with energetic abandon. And despite what Russ considered to be her somewhat unbecoming attire – cut off jeans, a turtle neck sweater and hiking boots - there was something provocative about the way she moved with such grace and fluidity. In fact, she was so immersed in the dance, she seemed oblivious to any onlookers.

When the song ended, the young woman and her partner retreated to her table, laughing. The other band members took a break and joined them. The older men seemed very familiar with her. Especially the leader. He placed a possessive arm about her shoulders and was leaning in close to whisper in her ear. Something rose up suddenly within Russ’s chest. Disapproval? Disgust? Envy, maybe?

He slammed back the rest of his scotch, wiping his mouth just as Ken and Kathy reappeared.

“Did you see that couple out there?” Kathy enthused. “Weren’t they great? Just like out of a movie!”

“The old man certainly seems lively for his age,” Russ offered with a shrug.

"I wasn't lookin' at the old man," Ken guffawed with a wink. "Mm-mm. Them's a great set of legs!"

"I didn't notice," Russ shrugged.

"Oh right," Ken laughed. "You can fool most of the people most of the time, but this is your bro, here, man. I know you've still got some red blood in there somewhere, no matter what you want people to believe."

"Whatever. She's not my type."

"She too skinny for you?" Ken asked.

"Just drop it," Russ responded tightly.

"Maybe it's been so long, you forgot how . . ."

"Shut up," Russ clipped.

"I know Miranda was a bitch, but –"

"I said, shut up." Russ rose from the table, his anger barely contained.

"Where you going?" Ken demanded.

"To my room. Goodnight." Russ turned sharply and headed for the exit. For a moment the three Scotch that he'd just downed went straight to his head. He slowed his pace enough to regain his bearings and then continued toward the door.

Directly in front of him, also nearing the exit, were the wiry old musician and the strange young woman. She had her arm slung casually around his shoulders, while his encircled her slim waist. Another wave of something he couldn't name flooded Russ's body as he watched them. He told himself it was loathing, but other parts of his anatomy whispered 'lust'. Probably just the Scotch. He wasn't used to drinking anymore.

Who cared, anyway? What wayward girls did with aging jazz musicians was really no concern of his. So why couldn't he get her image out of his head?

Chapter Two

Deanie yawned and stretched as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She padded to the window, threw it open, and inhaled deeply of the fragrant autumn air. It was early September, and some of the trees had already taken on a twinge of color, yet the air was still very warm. It was going to be a beautiful day.

She smiled to herself. She hadn't felt this good in a long time. All her senses were alive this morning. Perhaps it was a sign of good things to come.

A snore came from one of the double beds. She looked over at the small man who lay tangled in the sheets and allowed a fond smile to cross her lips. How many mornings had she awakened like this? Different hotel rooms, different cities. Being the daughter of a vagabond musician was an unconventional upbringing, to be sure, but it was one that she wouldn't trade for the world.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," she said as she gently shook the man in the bed.

"Wha. . . What?" Jack Burton opened groggy eyes, finally focusing on his daughter.

"Go away, girl! You know I don't like mornings!" With a sound similar to a growl, he turned over and put his head under the pillow.

"Not so fast! I haven't seen you in six weeks, remember? I didn't come all the way out here just to watch you sleep."

"What time is it?" Jack's muffled voice came from under the pillow.

"9 A.M.," Deanie replied, glancing at the digital clock on the night stand.

"Really, Honey, couldn't you let your old man sleep for just another hour? You know I'm not much good for anything in the mornings. And I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Well. . ."

"You go on ahead. Do some exploring or something. I'll meet you for lunch." With a sigh, Jack settled back down into his pillow.

Deanie gave him a playful shake, but conceded. "I'll let you get away with it this time."

She thought she heard a mumbled, "Don't know what I ever did to that girl," coming from under the pillow. She just smiled.

Actually, she was surprised at how wide-awake she felt this morning considering she had driven out to Hecla last night after work. She hadn't seen Jack for most of the summer, what with his group traveling to so many summer festivals. It was a grueling pace for the aging foursome.

Deanie's own job as a waitress in a Winnipeg bar kept her from joining her father on the road, as she often liked to do. Serving drinks in a lounge was not a profession she would have chosen - given a choice. But she needed to make a living and the tips were good. She'd saved enough money over the course of the summer to pay for her tuition and books for the fall semester at the university.

She'd arrived last night after her father was already performing. It had been so good to see him again. And just as wonderful to hear him play. She loved her father's music, almost as much as she loved the man behind it. It was such an inseparable part of him. An extension of his spirit that allowed others a glimpse of the man within.

She was beginning to wonder if she was being too rigid in her decision to quit the music scene, herself. Oh well. There was no point in trying to figure her entire future out in one morning. Especially on such a beautiful morning! It was warm and sunny, even for September. What she really needed was to catch some more of those late summer rays before they gave way to the inevitable icy winds of a Manitoba winter.

She donned a pair of shorts and a halter top, catching a glimpse of herself in the full length mirror. She winced. Tall was okay, and most

Play It Again

people would do anything to be so slim. But she did wish, on occasion, for a few more curves. You made due with the hand you got dealt, though. That's what Jack always said. She shoved her dark glasses onto her nose and strode out the door.

The deck wound around the hotel, a rambling two-story structure with a distinctly Icelandic flair. Some small private patios off the main floor suites were connected to a large common area that overlooked a small pond. Flowers still bloomed brightly along its edges and there were plenty of deck chairs.

There was a breeze blowing off the lake beyond, ruffling the leaves of the deciduous trees. Already, the brilliant gold and burnt reds of autumn had touched much of the foliage. Several people were out enjoying the morning. She noticed a dark, well built man stretched out on one of the loungers, reading. She also noticed an empty lounge chair beside him and headed in his direction. "Mind if I sit here?" she asked.

The man looked up. If she wasn't mistaken, he didn't seem pleased. "Suit yourself," came his crisp reply.

She bit back her own curt response. She felt like turning around, but pride wouldn't let her. Keeping her head high, she settled herself into the lounge chair. "Thanks. Beautiful day, isn't it?" she commented, overly bright. The man appeared to be ignoring her. "I said, beautiful day, isn't it?" she repeated.

"Hmm," was the man's noncommittal grunt. He didn't look up.

"I'm just here for the weekend," Deanie continued. "From Winnipeg." She wasn't sure why, but she felt determined to get a response. "Some weather we're having, eh?" She frowned. What was the guy's problem? He could at least be civil. Her own hot-temper was beginning to take over. He *would* speak more than a mumbled syllable, even if she had to irritate him into doing it.

"I think fall must be my favorite time of year. Don't you think so? The air is so fresh and clean. And being out here in the wilderness - it just makes you feel alive. Don't you agree?"

The man sat silently for a few more moments before lowering his papers with deliberateness. He lifted his sunglasses and his dark blue eyes

bore straight through hers. "I'm not interested, so you might as well not waste your time, or mine."

If irritating him had been her objective, she certainly seemed to have succeeded. "Excuse me?" she asked, her voice rising ever so slightly. She sat upright in her lounge to look him squarely in the face.

"I don't want or need your services," was the blunt reply.

"WHAT?" Deanie's temper exploded as she catapulted from the chair, sending it onto its side. "What the hell? What kind of thing is that to say to a perfect stranger?"

"I saw you hanging all over your sixty year old 'boyfriend' last night. But don't worry. I won't tell him about today." He eyed her with open contempt.

"Sixty year old boyfriend?" Deanie echoed, her brow creasing. "What the. . ." Suddenly, the light of understanding dawned across her face. Her look of outrage was replaced by a slowly spreading grin. "You thought. . . ? Jack and I. . . ? Wow. That is too funny!"

Russ's frown only deepened. "Rather than laugh, you should be ashamed -"

Deanie cut him off. "Ashamed? Of what? Jack Burton is my father."

Warm color slowly suffused Russ's cheeks.

"Now, I think you're the one who should be ashamed for even thinking such a thing," Deanie said with a wide grin.

"I thought. . . I mean, I didn't think. . ." Russ fumbled for words. "I beg your pardon. I'm very sorry." He jumped to his feet and righted her lounge chair, waiting until she had seated herself before sitting down again himself.

"Forget it," Deanie said lightly. "Phew! I've been accused of a lot of things but. . ."

"I really am extremely sorry," Russ repeated. "I don't normally jump to conclusions without knowing all the facts."

"It doesn't matter," Deanie waved a dismissive hand. "Actually, it was pretty damn hilarious. Wait till I tell Jack. He'll get a charge out of it, too." Deanie began chuckling softly.

"It wasn't that funny," he said, the corners of his own mouth beginning to twitch.

Play It Again

“Sure it was. Especially when you realized. You should have seen yourself! I swear you looked like you could have just crawled under the nearest rock to hide!”

“I guess I really did put my foot in my mouth, didn’t I?” Russ grimaced. “Please accept my apology?”

“I told you I already did.”

There was an awkward moment of silence. Deanie was trying to hide the smirk that was relentlessly pulling at the corners of her mouth. Finally Russ cleared his throat, “Well then, allow me to introduce myself properly. I’m Russ Graham.” He reached over to extend a hand in a businesslike manner.

Deanie took his hand. She wasn’t prepared for the warmth that shot straight up her arm and through her chest. He must have felt it, too, judging from the little intake of breath

she heard upon contact. “Nice to meet you, Russ. I’m Deanie. Deanie Burton.” Their eyes caught and held for a moment as they continued to shake hands in slow motion..

Russ cleared his throat and retrieved his hand. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, his voice sounding gruff. He cleared his throat again, and picked up the discarded papers, shuffling them.

Deanie felt a rush of butterfly wings in her stomach. He was so good looking. And his eyes . . . She felt a sudden wave of inadequacy. Why hadn’t she worn something more flattering? Sexier? Normally, she didn’t care what other people thought of her. She was who she was. Sometimes she even enjoyed trying to shock people, or at least get their attention. But this morning she felt overly aware of any shortcomings in her physical makeup.

“Well, I suppose I’d better let you get back to your reading,” she said, adjusting herself in the chair.

“That’s okay,” Russ said as he quickly lowered the papers. “It wasn’t that interesting.”

“Business?”

“Yeah. Our firm does the books for the resort,” Russ replied. “I’m an accountant.”

“I should have pegged you as an accountant right off the bat,” Deanie

said, scrutinizing him sideways out of the corner of her eye. "You look like an accountant."

"Hm. I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not," Russ laughed. "And what about you?"

"I'm a student, mostly. At the U of M. I'm going into social work, I guess," Deanie shrugged.

"Doesn't sound like you're sure," Russ noted.

"I really would like to help people," Deanie replied. "You know, people who are down and out and all that. It's just that sometimes I miss the music business, you know? It's pretty much been my whole life."

"So you think you might like to follow in your father's footsteps, so to speak?"

"Well, yes and no. It's actually kind of complicated, right now. My life, I mean." She looked down at her hands.

"Life can get that way sometimes, no matter how carefully you plan it," Russ reflected.

"Actually, that's probably most of my problem right there," Deanie laughed. "I don't often plan anything. I just kind of let life happen."

"Having a plan can be a good thing," Russ stated.

"Guess that's why you're an accountant. All those columns and numbers and stuff," Deanie teased. "You're probably good at it. Probably good at whatever you do."

Russ cleared his throat, and sat up a little straighter. "Well. Speaking of plans, I do have a meeting. It was nice meeting you, Miss Burton," he said, gathering his things and rising.

"Deanie will do, thanks. And likewise."

"Yes. Deanie." He hesitated momentarily, turned to leave, then stopped again and turned back toward Deanie's chair. His gaze seemed fixed on some point just above her head. "I'd like to make it up to you, if I could, for being so rude to you earlier."

"Forget it. I already accepted your apology."

"How about dinner tonight?" he blurted.

Deanie blinked. "I'd love to," she accepted. "I'll have all afternoon to spend with Jack and the guys, and then I'll be free all evening while they're playing at tonight's gig."

Play It Again

“Fine,” Russ nodded. He stood for a moment, awkwardly. “Fine,” he repeated. “Would seven be alright?”

“Seven would be great.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby, then. At seven.” Without further hesitation, Russ turned and strode toward the hotel entrance.

Deanie flipped her glasses up onto the top of her head and watched his retreating figure. She settled back into the lounge, a smile of satisfaction playing across her lips. It felt good to be back in the game.