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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arterburn, Stephen, date.

Paige / Stephen Arterburn and Angela Elwell Hunt.

p. cm. — (Young believer on tour ; 4)

Summary: On the way to the float from which YB2 will be performing in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, Paige is separated from the other singers and kidnapped, but with the help of God and a homeless woman, she might get free in time for the pop group's television appearance.

ISBN 0-8423-8338-7 (sc)

[1. Kidnapping—Fiction. 2. Blind—Fiction. 3. People with disabilities—Fiction.

4. Homeless persons—Fiction. 5. Parades—Fiction. 6. Musical groups—Fiction.

7. Christian life—Fiction.] I. Hunt, Angela Elwell, date. II. Title.

PZ7.A7435Pai 2004

[Fic]—dc22

2003024937

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 04
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

City street newsboy yells out the bad news,
CNN broadcasts grief, gloom, and despair,
People hunker down behind their closed doors,
Been so long since they have lifted a prayer,
God's still great and he is still on his throne,
Evil can never gain the upper hand,
If we call out we'll get a clear dial tone,
God's line is faster than the hottest broadband.

—Paige Clawson and Shane Clawson



FROM "COME ON (IT'S TIME TO TAKE YOUR STAND)"
YB2 MUSIC, INC.

November 15

YB2 DEBUTS IN HARTFORD

By Brooklyn Smith, the Hartford Register

"Welcome, Hartford, to the YB2 Never Stop Believin' Tour," Shane Clawson announced after taking the stage Saturday night. "Are you ready to go higher?"

And with that the band launched into "Go Vertical," a song currently riding the top of the pop charts. Whether you're into the teen scene or not, sales figures, polls, and the covers of teen magazines indicate that YB2 has already conquered a higher plane. The other young pop bands are struggling to keep up. Saturday night's appearance—the first for YB2 in Hartford—was even better than the concert I caught last year in Washington, DC. The band has matured, not only in age, but also in style. The vocalizations are more polished; the lyrics deeper than the bubblegum pop the group promoted last year. The group's moves are still tight, their friendship still evident. The teenage concertgoers got into the music and sang along with all the songs . . . when they weren't shrieking out the names of the group's resident heartthrobs.

YB2 leapt into the limelight two years ago when Ron Clawson formed the vocal group with his teenage offspring, Paige and Shane, then added newcomers Noah Dudash and Liane Nelson. This year he replaced singer Vance Gerkin with Josiah Johnson, a thirteen-year-old who packs a lot of punch in his pint-size frame.

The high-energy program kept the teens around me jumping up and down and singing along for nearly two and a half hours. During the break between the first and second sets, program director Ron Clawson made a striking choice—Paige Clawson and Noah Dudash performed a duet accompanied by keyboard and guitar—a quiet, moving tune that seemed to draw back the curtain on a teen's troubled soul. After all the celebration and joyous abandon of the first set, I was glad to see the singers acknowledge that pain exists in the world . . . and I was grateful they're willing to sing about it.

Songs like "Your Word" and "Just the Way That I Am" reveal

Paige

the group's Christian background, but tonight's show wasn't centered on religion—it was centered on music. Lively, hoppin' music.

The concert offered the ultimate in pop stargazing for fans who paid more than \$60 for the majority of the convention center's 15,000 seats.

As the program wound down, some fans started moving toward the exits, but when the strains of YB2's monster hit "Y B Alone?" began to play, the teens halted in the aisles and the screaming began again.

I don't know if YB2 has what it

takes to last ten years in this business—after all, these young singers have lives to begin, educations to pursue, careers to evaluate. Standing in the packed aisle, I wondered if they missed their families and friends back home.

But when I looked up at their images on the Jumbotron and saw the smiles on their faces, I thought, *Who wouldn't want to do that?*

If I were fourteen again, I'd sell my sister for the opportunity to be on that stage.

YB2. Long may they rock.



1

Thanksgiving Day

Paige groaned as the alarm clock buzzed from the bedside table. The air around her felt heavy, as did her arms. From the next bed she could hear the regular sounds of Liane's breathing.

"Hey, Lee." She fumbled to push herself up. "Can you reach the clock?"

"Hmflghpgh," Liane mumbled through her pillow, then Paige heard the sound of slapping. Finally, the clock fell silent and the room filled again with quiet.

They couldn't enjoy it, though. Today was Thanksgiving.

Paige sat up straighter and shook her head to clear the cobwebs from her brain. "What time is it?"

Silence. Then Liane sighed. "Six a.m. We'd better get moving."

"You want the bathroom first?"

"No. I want to sleep."

"You can't."

"I can dream, can't I?"

"As long as you don't go back to sleep."

Paige waited a minute, then threw back the covers and swung her feet off the bed. Liane would *have* to get up if Paige went through the room turning on the lights and the television. Though blindness prevented Paige from seeing the TV, she liked the noise, especially when they had a call time at 6:30 a.m.

Renewed groaning came from Liane's bed after Paige found the switch on the desk lamp. "Good grief, do you have to blind me?"

"Get up." Paige tapped her fingers over the desk in search of her hairbrush. She found it and began to pull the tangles from her short, soft hair. "You knew we'd be getting up early today, but you were so excited about this gig you talked until well after one o'clock last night—"

"All right, I'm up!"

Paige halted, listening, then she heard the sounds of Liane thumping across the floor. "I'm going to jump in the shower, okay? I'll be out in a sec, then the bathroom's all yours."

Paige nodded. "I'm going to check for messages."

Her searching fingers found her laptop right where she'd left it, so she lifted the lid and tapped the touch pad. A moment later the machine beeped to indicate she'd received at least one message during the night.

She touched the Enter key, which would highlight the

first message in the queue. Taz Trotter, YB2's soundman and technological genius, had equipped Paige's computer with a program that read her e-mails in a fairly realistic voice.

"Good morning, Paige," the male voice read, "don't forget to dress warmly under your black costume—though it's supposed to be sunny today, the forecast high is only twenty-four degrees. You girls can wear your coats down to the float, but you'll have to take them off when the parade starts. Okay? See you at the viewing stand. Break a leg. Dad."

Paige clicked the down arrow, but the little voice remained silent. Good—no more messages. She had enough to remember today. While the majority of American teenagers slept in on this holiday morning, she and her teammates would be shivering and singing in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

She knew she ought to be excited . . . and she was. But couldn't they hold this parade later in the day—say, four o'clock?

They'd arrived in Manhattan late yesterday afternoon. While Larry Forsyth, their bus driver, took the bus to a parking garage, Paige and the other members of YB2 had hauled their luggage into the Mayflower Hotel across from Central Park.

Paige had stood in the center of the lobby, breathing in the scents of the building. "This place smells old," she'd said to no one in particular.

Noah had heard her, and laughed. "How can you tell?"

Paige lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I dunno. New places smell like paint and carpet and cleaner. This place smells like wood and age and . . . dogs."

She had no sooner said the word than she heard barking.

"Do I hear dogs?" Noah asked the girl at the desk.

"We're one of the few hotels in Manhattan that accepts dogs," the girl answered. "Dogs that come to New York for the Westminster dog show stay with us."

It only made sense, Paige reasoned as she followed Liane to the elevator. Dogs would need to be across the street from a park, wouldn't they?

After checking in and unpacking, the group had gone out for a festive pre-Thanksgiving dinner, then they had taken a cab to an area between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. RC, Paige's father and YB2's director, knew a network somebody who knew a Manhattan somebody who got them into a many-windowed room overlooking the area where volunteers inflated the huge parade balloons.

While her friends gasped in amazement, Paige had sat in a chair and tried to imagine what they were seeing. Taz was the most understanding—after watching for a few minutes, he stepped back from the window and tried to explain everything that was happening on the streets below.

"The people from Macy's call those inflatable things falloons," he said, "because they're part float, part balloon. They have to be filled the night before the parade."

"What are they filled with?" Paige asked.

"Helium, I think," Taz answered. "Though it must take an awful lot of the stuff to get those huge things up in the air."

"Ooooooh, I know all about that," Liane said, butting into the conversation. "I was reading an article about the parade just yesterday. An average large falloon will weigh over four hundred pounds uninflated and can be up to forty feet tall when inflated. They hold over fifteen thousand cubic feet of helium, and sometimes it takes up to thirty people to guide the falloon as it moves down the parade route."

"Thank you, Miss Encyclopedia," Paige drawled.

Apparently not willing to be outdone in the parade trivia category, Taz cleared his throat. "I read they're all made in New Jersey and transported in trucks through the Lincoln Tunnel—so when they're packed they can't be any bigger than twelve and a half feet tall and eight feet wide."

"Well I read," Liane began again, "that in 1958 there was a helium shortage—"

Not in the mood for a history lesson, Paige interrupted her friend. "What kinds of falloons do you see out there?"

"Well—" she heard a smile in Taz's voice—"there's a huge peanut M&M with dangly arms and legs, a penguin, and a Spider-Man. A couple of blocks away, there's a huge Tasmanian devil."

Paige laughed. "I've always wondered if your folks named you after him."

"I sure hope not. But no telling what my parents were thinking back in those days."

Paige fell silent as Liane squealed from the window. Sometimes she struggled not to feel resentful when her best friends were having fun and all she could do was listen. Sometimes being blind was a total bummer and life seemed incredibly unfair.

Last night had been one of those times.

Now she raked her fingers through her short hair, wishing she could scrub the memories of last night out of her brain. She needed a positive outlook because today was an important day for YB2. The organizers of the Macy's Parade didn't invite just anybody to participate in their extravaganza, and YB2 had been given one of the best floats of all: the "Big Apple," the traditional float designed to honor New York City.

Aunt Rhonda, YB2's manager and publicist, had sent all the singers an e-mail explaining the float's significance. "It's a wonderful model of the city skyline," she had written. "It also features huge pieces of sports gear, so it's bound to please you guys. It's a huge thing—over thirty-seven feet long, with lots of room for all of you to sing and move around—carefully!—as you parade down Broadway. Taz will ride underneath the flatbed with the driver."

Paige and the others didn't need to be told that the New York City float would have special meaning this year. It had been years since the awful day of September 11, 2001, but no one had forgotten that more than three

thousand people had died in that terrorist attack. New York City was still recovering from the disaster, and every member of YB2 wanted to honor the Big Apple.

They also wanted to perform for the fans across the country . . . if any of them made it out of bed in time to watch TV. Last night RC had reminded them that NBC's television cameras had been stationed at the viewing stand set up just before the end of the parade route. They'd stop there to sing their set, and approximately 60 million people would see that live television performance.

Paige had tried to imagine 60 million different people, all of them watching her, but her brain couldn't handle numbers that big.

She turned as she heard the bathroom door open. "It's all yours," Liane said, her voice muffled as if through a towel. "I'll dry my hair and do my makeup out here. What time are those girls from Macy's supposed to be here?"

Paige sighed as she stood and moved toward the bathroom. "Six-thirty, I think. I still don't understand why they're sending people to baby-sit us."

"They're not baby-sitting us, they're *escorting* us." The bed creaked as Liane sat on it. "RC said it's a great honor for them to be chosen as 'Macy's minders.'"

"Whatever." Shaking her head, Paige felt for the door frame, then stepped into the tiled bathroom. The floor felt cool under her bare feet, and the countertop wet under her fingertips. Liane had a habit of splashing water all over the place.

Paige reached for her velveteen toiletries case, then pulled out her toothbrush and toothpaste. She didn't really want a minder from Macy's or anywhere else. She'd spent fourteen years learning how to cope in a world where she couldn't see, and she didn't need some Macy's employee leading her through Central Park. The entire idea seemed like overkill, especially since Macy's had promised to send a minder for each member of YB2.

Muttering with every move, Paige brushed her teeth, washed her face, then swiped her underarms with deodorant. She pulled her overnight bag from beneath the vanity, then pulled fresh underwear from the silky "clean" bag. After taking off her pajamas, she stuffed them into the rough knit bag for dirty clothes.

She had a system for everything—packing her suitcase, reading her e-mail, putting on her makeup. She could apply lipstick without any help at all, and blush was fairly easy—as long as she had Liane check her cheeks afterward. Mascara could be tricky, so Paige settled for a light brush of her lashes with a smear of Vaseline. Since she wore dark glasses almost all the time, her eyes didn't usually show.

She lifted her overnight bag and moved back into the room. "Lee, check my face?"

A moment of silence, then Liane said, "Almost perfect. Wait a minute—"

Paige stood in silence as Liane rubbed at a spot on her cheek. "There. One side was darker than the other, but you're okay now."

"Thanks."

"Don't forget," Liane added, "it's going to be cold. We need to wear our wool socks and those undershirt things Aunt Rhonda sent us."

"Right," Paige said, even though the idea of having Aunt Rhonda dictate her clothing choices grated on her nerves. She loved her aunt—the woman had been like a mother to her ever since Paige's own mother had moved out when Paige was a baby—but sometimes Aunt Rhonda seemed to forget that Paige was a professional singer and almost independent.

Still . . . maybe she had a point about the cold. Paige had grown up in Florida, and when they traveled she was rarely out in the cold for more than a few minutes. Today they would spend all morning outside, and twenty-four degrees *was* below freezing.

She fumbled through her suitcase until she found the right items, then pulled them on. The tight thermal shirt warmed her almost instantly. If they didn't hurry and get outside, she was going to roast.

"I'm ready."

"Hang on. I can't get this thing over my head—"

Paige sank onto the bed as Liane struggled with her clothes, then stood when she heard the sound of a long zipper. She knew Liane was opening the costume bag that held their black outfits. Paige's costume consisted of black jeans, a black shirt, and a sheer silver-and-black skirt that swirled around her ankles when she swayed behind the piano. Liane, who moved around a lot more

during the program, had been given black stretch jeans and a sequin-spattered top.

Paige had often tried to imagine what their costumes looked like, but she wasn't sure her mental image matched up with reality. Because her fingertips were her eyes, she could never know if what she imagined matched what everyone else saw.

She had just finished smoothing her skirt over her jeans when she heard a knock at the door. She touched the face of her Braille watch and read the time—6:25.

"If that's one of our escorts—" she moved toward the door—"they're early."

"It might be one of the guys," Liane called. "But check through the peephole before you open the door."

Paige sighed softly as she crossed to the door. She couldn't look through the peephole. Liane and the others were pretty good about catching themselves when they said stupid things like that, but occasionally they slipped up.

Paige pressed one hand to the door. "Who's there?"

"It's Melinda Grant," a young voice answered. "Your Macy's minder? I've come to escort Paige Clawson to the parade site."

Paige drew a deep breath. If not for this minor annoyance, it might be a perfect day.



Go Vertical!

Lord, sometimes I get confused
With all I hear and see
Choices come from every side
They push and pull on me.
Help me to
Look up to you
And in everything I do—

Go Vertical—
Trusting in your plan for me.
Go Vertical—
Always looking for your will
Every single prayer I pray is a miracle
Go Vertical.

There are times when friends want me
To do something that's wrong

Lord, I need you in my heart
To help me to be strong.
Be my guide
And send your Light
So that all will know that I

Go Vertical—
Trusting in your plan for me.
Go Vertical—
Always looking for your will
Every single prayer I pray is a miracle
Go Vertical.

Come and be
Alive in me
'Cause I want to faithfully

Go Vertical—
Trusting in your plan for me.
Go Vertical—
Always looking for your will
Every single prayer I pray is a miracle
Go Vertical.

Go Vertical—
Lifting up my life to you.
Go Vertical—
Raising up my voice in praise
Every single prayer I pray is a miracle
Go Vertical.

WORDS AND MUSIC BY STEVE SILER, KENT HOOPER, AND HENRY SILER, 2003.