

Streetwise to Saleswise

Become ObjectionProof™ and Beat the Sales Blues

by

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Prologue

Well, that's just great, Thaddeus Tucker! What are you gonna do now?

Thaddeus sat on the bench overlooking the waterway in New Orleans' Louis Armstrong Park. What *was* he going to do?

He gazed up at the arched bridge of exposed steel and weathered wood that spanned the lush lagoon and fountains. To his right, the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts; to the left, the towering statue of the great Louis Armstrong. Satchmo: the master of scat. King of improvisation.

Thaddeus sighed. If only he could improvise like Satchmo. Maybe this day would have ended more like a jazz classic.

Instead, it ended like a semi-truck full of pianos in a head-on collision with a busload of tubas, mangled brass and whipping strings scattered everywhere along the freeway.

And to make matters worse... it was him that caused the crash.

Those words taunted his memories again.

Well, that's just great, Thaddeus Tucker! What are you gonna do now?

Were those his own thoughts? Or was he recalling his mother's words from his misspent youth?

Maybe both.

She always used his full name when she was scolding him for inappropriate behavior, which happened pretty often back in his teenage years. 'Course, you'd expect a certain amount of that from any young man who spent as many hours on the streets of New Orleans as he did. But Thaddeus seemed to excel at making borderline bad choices.

Inappropriate behavior? Indeed.

Trouble? No doubt.

At least he had a gift for avoiding anything that would cause harm to himself or others. He stayed just out of reach of the long arm of the law... and from the even longer arms of his mama.

Streetwise.

That's how Thaddeus explained it to his mother.

"I'm streetwise, Jolie. Just havin' fun with my friends. We ain't doin' nothin' bad. I know where to draw the line."

"*Streetwise*? You aren't even streetwise enough to know better than to call me Jolie! *Wise-mouthed* is more like it."

She'd put her hands on her hips and leaned forward for emphasis. "You can call me 'Mother.' You can call me 'Mama.' Better yet, you can just call me 'Ma'am.' But if you call me Jolie one more time, the only thing you'll be puttin' into your mouth for dinner tonight will be a bar of soap!"

She turned around and headed into the kitchen. "Don't you *ever* call me 'Jolie' again," she muttered.

Being streetwise, and knowing that his mama was making fresh-baked bread along with a rich potato stew for dinner (his two favorite dishes in her repertoire), he wisely chose hunger over valor and said, "Yes, ma'am."

Thaddeus had been trying to get his mother to call him Thad instead of Thaddeus, which to him sounded like an old geezer's name. He smiled now as he thought back on how miserably he had failed in that effort.

His friends called him Thad. So did his teachers.

But not his mother.

Attempting to budge her insistence on using his full name, Thaddeus had gotten the bright idea that every time she did so, he would refer to her by her given name as well.

"Thaddeus, would you please set the table?"

"Yes, Jolie."

“*What* did you call me?”

“‘Jolie.’ That *is* your name, right?”

“Yes, but why are *you* using it?”

“I’m almost a man now, Jolie. And I want to be called ‘Thad,’ not ‘Thaddeus.’ I’ve asked you to do that a hundred times. But since you won’t, I thought I’d start calling you ‘Jolie.’”

He delivered those words with a significant amount of pride in how grown-up he’d felt. *Almost a man*. That was his favorite part.

His pride, along with his *almost* manhood, shriveled like a leaking balloon as he saw the look on his mother’s face.

She spoke slowly, emphasizing each word, a sure sign that his mouth had taken him one step beyond safety.

“I did *not* name you Thad.”

Her pace quickened. “And what’s a *Thad*, anyway? I named you Thaddeus, which means *courageous heart*. That was my grand-daddy’s name. That’s your name. And that’s the name you *will* be called, young man.”

“Well, it’s a good thing it means courageous heart.” he replied.

“Why’s that?”

“I’d better be courageous, ‘cause with a name like Thaddeus in this neighborhood, I’m gonna get beat up a lot!”

She remained annoyed—but also stifled a laugh.



A magical sound coming from his left interrupted Thaddeus’s memories.

A nearby Dixieland band struck up one of his favorite tunes, “Muskrat Ramble”, a tune first recorded in 1926 by none other than Louis Armstrong himself. Starting at Satchmo’s feet, the band marched toward the bench where Thaddeus sat.

Marched?

More like sauntered.

Actually, *ramble* put it perfectly.

When Dixieland bands move, it looks less like a military formation, and more like friends out on a stroll. They *rambled* toward Thaddeus.

Thaddeus looked up at the statue again.

Mama's been gone for a while now, Satch. It's up to you. What do you think I should do?

Thaddeus had a good heart. He was a relatively bright man and could learn most anything he set his mind to. Hard work was no challenge for him. He was kind, energetic, and had a great—although often ill-timed—sense of humor.

In so many ways, he was the type of man anyone would enjoy calling a friend.

The one exception? His mouth.

Sure, his driver's license said he was thirty-three. But the words from his lips were often more akin to those of a smart-aleck teenager who needed to be grounded. Inappropriate comments landed Thaddeus in trouble more than once.

He leaned back on the park bench and closed his eyes. A slow, deep breath filled his lungs. His heart, on the other hand, was filled with the sounds of the music and thoughts of his mother.

Mom, I wish you were still here.

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The Cause of the Crash

That morning had started off pretty much like every other August morning in the Big Easy, a nickname that perfectly reflected the music, the cuisine, and the local culture.

Thaddeus awoke at 6:30 a.m., when the timer on his programmable coffee-maker clicked on, and the machine began to make a *Darth Vader*-like noise.

Hissing.

Gurgling.

It almost seemed to say, “*Thaddeus... hiss... hiss... I am your coffee.*”

Thaddeus watched as the carafe finished filling with his morning brew, an aromatic blend of his own creation. Coffee with chicory, cinnamon, and just a pinch of cayenne pepper.

He poured a cup and slowly inhaled. The aroma traveled deep into his lungs and comforted his mind.

He smiled and took a sip.

Many of Thaddeus’s friends liked cinnamon in their coffee. Some liked chicory. But almost no one wanted cayenne pepper.

When he and his friends would meet at a coffee shop, Thaddeus would bring a small jar of organic cayenne pepper. He would offer the spice to his friends. Most would decline. Although a few would give in after Thaddeus’s repeated insistence that they expand their horizons.

For whatever reason, Thaddeus felt completely at ease telling everyone how they should drink their coffee.

How to do their jobs.

How to run their businesses.

And how to best enjoy the city.

He wasn't bossy. At least he didn't think so. He just knew how things should be done and didn't mind imparting his knowledge to those within earshot.

Fortunately, he had learned at a very young age to use humor when this particular habit got him into uncomfortable situations. But *un*fortunately, according to his friends, that humor was often sarcastic and made things worse.

Sarcastic? Me? I'm not sarcastic! I'm funny!

Thaddeus walked out onto his small back patio, eased down into the chair, and absorbed the sights, scents, and sounds that gave New Orleans its distinctive character. It was a warm and humid morning. Condensate was dripping off his patio furniture.

"Ahh. New Orleans, Louisiana. Home of the *air you can wear*," he said with a sigh. He loved his city, except for the hot and humid summers.

He drank his coffee, scrolling through the sports and local news on his smartphone. He browsed the headlines and when something piqued his interest, he would click to learn more.

This morning, one particular headline caused his thumb to stop quickly.

Local Company, Stiller Incorporated, Acquired by Stencil, Osgood, and Broughton, LTD.

Hoping that the headline was a click-bait lie, he followed the link to read the article.

It was not click-bait.

Local employee benefit-services company Stiller Incorporated, to be acquired by the nationwide insurance brokerage company, Stencil, Osgood and Broughton, LTD. Terms of the deal have not been re-

leased. Local customers and employees likely to be absorbed into their existing operations.

He didn't read any further. He slid his phone onto the table and took another sip of coffee.

Thaddeus started at Stiller ten years earlier in an entry-level position. Over that time, he'd earned promotions consistently, impressed the owner on many occasions, and was now the head of customer service for the company.

Well, that stinks! I've really enjoyed working at Stiller.

His mind raced through several possibilities. Would he be laid off?

His stomach churned. Could've been the chicory in his coffee. Could've been the cayenne pepper. Or it could have been the fear that came from knowing that his future was about to make an unexpected course change.

He went inside, took a long shower, and got dressed for the day.

On his drive in to work, the local radio station talk show was discussing the acquisition as well.

"This will be great for New Orleans!" said one host. "The company will be stronger, and jobs will be more secure."

"I don't agree!" said the other voice. "This is just another example of big companies swallowing smaller companies. The employees and customers will all suffer."

Thaddeus turned the radio off.

If I wanted to listen to people argue over things that already make me uneasy, I'd turn on the national news and get the latest political commentaries.

Arriving at the office, he noticed a few of his work friends hanging around outside. The nervous group was almost whispering, as he joined them.

Marcel, one of the floor managers, said, "Did you hear the news, brotha? Dey've done sold us out."

"Read about it this morning," replied Thaddeus.

“Well, I ga-ron-tee dat dis ain’t gonna go so pretty well. We’re all in a beaucoup o’ trouble when dis shakes out. I may give ol’ Cooter Brown a run for his money tonight!”

Ellen, who hadn’t lived in New Orleans for very long and still struggled with the local dialect—especially Marcel’s thick *Cajun* accent, asked, “Uh... wha... what was that?”

Antoinette replied, “That fool thinks—no, that fool *guarantees* we’ll be in a lot of trouble when the details come out. And he plans to have a few drinks tonight.”

Marcel said, “More than a few!”

Ellen raised an eyebrow and asked, “*Ol’ Cooter Brown?*”

Thaddeus replied, “That’s a saying around here if somebody plans to really tie one on. They’re gonna get drunker than *ol’ Cooter Brown.*”

Ellen said, “Well, a lot of sayings around here are new to me, but I’ve never heard that one! Where’d that originate?”

Looking around at each other, no one had the answer. Finally, Marcel spoke up and said, “Sha, it don’t matter. It just *is.*”

Ellen asked Thaddeus, “Why did he call me shy?”

Thaddeus laughed and replied, “Not *Shy*. It’s *Sha*. It’s a term of endearment. No worries.”

“Well, we’d all be better off not expecting the worst as we go in there this morning,” Ellen said. “Maybe it’ll work out for the best. It could mean that we get a lot more work.”

Thaddeus said, “That’s right, Marcel. You may get busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kickin’ contest!”

They all laughed. It was a nervous laugh, but it seemed to brighten their mood, at least a little.

As they walked inside, Philip, a coworker from the shipping department, was standing there to greet them.

Philip was famous for two things: singing at the top of his lungs so that he could be heard over the general office chatter, and his absolutely *horrible* voice.

Philip held up a sign he’d made.

It said, “Will stop singing for five dollars or two beignets.”

Everyone laughed again.

Philip said, “I’m just gettin’ ready for life on the street. I’ve already picked out my corner near the Cafe du Monde.”

“If you’re standing there singing, people will pay a *lot* of money to get you to stop. Brilliant marketing!” laughed Thaddeus.

Philip tapped the side of the head with his index finger and winked. “Always thinking!”

A notice posted in the lobby asked all managers to report to the conference room upon arrival. Thaddeus, Ellen, and Marcel grabbed cups of coffee and took seats, side by side.

Mr. Stiller walked into the room, followed by a woman and a man Thaddeus didn’t recognize. They took seats in the back as Mr. Stiller walked up to the front.

Mr. Stiller was a good man. He started his company when he was a young twenty-five-year-old. He and his wife had worked very hard together and built a business that now employed more than fifty local people. He was respected. He was loved. But unfortunately, he was also getting older. He and his wife now planned to travel the world and spend their remaining years visiting their grandchildren.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard the news by this point,” Mr. Stiller began.

“I apologize that the story got out to the press, and you didn’t hear it from me first. But Marie and I have decided to sell the company.”

Murmurs quietly circled the room.

Mr. Stiller raised his hand. The noise faded into silence.

“I want to thank each of you. It’s been my honor to work with you over the years. I couldn’t have asked for anything more. I know that you’re concerned, but Stencil, Osgood, and Broughton have assured me they plan to keep as many employees as possible. Also, Marie and I have decided to give each employee a bonus of five percent of your annual salary. You’ve helped us build this company. We wanted to do

more than just tell you how much we appreciate you. We decided to make it something tangible.”

People around the room expressed their thanks.

“At this time, I would like to introduce Ms. Victoria Stencil, president of Stencil, Osgood, and Broughton.”

A few people in the room began to applaud, but their efforts quickly faded into an awkward silence.

Ms. Stencil began. “Thank you, Mr. Stiller. You’ve been a great competitor and we’ll miss you. I know your employees will, too.”

Turning to the managers, she said, “I know you’ll all have many questions...”

His nerves getting the best of him now, and trying to add a little levity to the moment, Thaddeus raised his hand. “I have a question.”

Ms. Stencil stopped and looked at Thaddeus. “Alright. Go ahead.”

Thaddeus asked, “Would you mind starting this meeting near the end? We’re all really anxious to find out how this story turns out.”

Everyone laughed. Well, almost everyone.

Ms. Stencil didn’t seem to find the question all that humorous.

Zip it, Bud! Or you’re going to be on the streets.

Though obviously annoyed, to her credit, Ms. Stencil maintained her demeanor and simply nodded.

“Yes, I will. As concerned as you all must be, that’s certainly a reasonable request. We plan to sell this facility. We think we’ll be able to offer all of you positions within our company. There’ll be some cases where similar positions would result in a duplication we really won’t need. So in those cases, we’ll try to find you another position. We truly don’t want anyone to be unemployed.”

After spending a few minutes telling the group about the history of Stencil, Osgood and Broughton, and their business philosophy, Ms. Stencil closed out the meeting by saying, “Have a little faith and give us a chance. We’ll do our best. We’re going to meet with each of you individually today and start interviews.”

She looked at a list of names on a clipboard. “Hmmm. Let’s see. We’ll start with Thaddeus Tucker.” Looking around the room, she asked, “Which one of you is Thad?”

Thaddeus awkwardly raised his hand and said, “That would be me. It’s... it’s *Thaddeus* Tucker.”

Ms. Stencil smiled. “Alright, *Thaddeus*.”

Thaddeus held up his hands. “You can thank my mother for that.”

Ms. Stencil laughed. Seeing that, the rest of the group relaxed a little and laughed as well.

As everyone filed out of the room, Thaddeus, Ms. Stencil, and the other man took seats at the end of the conference table.

Ms. Stencil began. “Mr. Tucker, you’re pretty funny. A sense of humor in the right situation can be a tremendous asset.”

Thaddeus replied, “Yes, ma’am.” Dropping his head, he added, “And today was not the right situation, I’m guessing. I apologize for that.”

Ms. Stencil shook her head. “No, Thaddeus. Today is understandably a stressful day for you. We all handle anxiety in our own way. You can relax about that.”

Thaddeus was pleasantly surprised. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Ms. Stencil asked, “Would you like to come to work for our company?”

“Honestly, Ms. Stencil. I don’t know you guys yet. So, I’m not sure. I guess it will depend on if you have a position for me that pays well and that I’m qualified for.”

Ms. Stencil thought for a minute, and said, “Since you’re the customer-service manager, what we had in mind for the first ninety days is for you to be our transition coordinator.”

“What’s a transition coordinator?”

“That’s the person who’ll visit all of Stiller’s clients, explain the buyout, and make sure we don’t lose the loyal Stiller customers in the process.”

Suddenly, Thaddeus began to have an all-too-familiar feeling. His mouth was again getting ready to overpower his common sense.

“Ms. Stencil?”

“Yes?”

“I have a question.”

“Then ask it.”

“About twenty-five percent of our customers used to be clients with you all. What do I tell them? How do I get them to give you another chance?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Thaddeus regretted them. He didn’t mean any disrespect. It was a serious attempt for answers. Realizing how it sounded, he tried to add a little laughter in his voice, but the laughter only gave his comments a cynical tone. He knew he’d just made a mistake... a big one.

Ms. Stencil looked down, nodded, then looked back up at Thaddeus. “That certainly could be a challenge, couldn’t it, Mr. Tucker?”

Closing her folder, Ms. Stencil said, “Mr. Tucker, we have a customer-service manager already. I’m not sure what other position would be suitable for you. So, just to be safe, I’m going to recommend that you begin a job search now. You’ll get paid through the end of the month. But please feel welcome to take the rest of the day off and get started—today.”

The man at the other end of the table had stayed silent all morning, and it made Thaddeus uncomfortable. Who was this guy, anyway? Was that a smile on his face?

~ ~ ~

Thinking back on his words from this morning, as he now sat on the park bench, Thaddeus shook his head and stared, dazed, at nothing.

As if on cue, a bird landed on the statue of Louis Armstrong and chirped in Thaddeus’s direction as if scolding him.

“I know, I know! I can’t believe I said that either!”

This morning, he had a job.

This afternoon, he had free time.

And the sound of his mother's voice echoed through his mind again.

Thaddeus may have had no idea what he was going to do next, but one thing was certain: changes were headed his way like a speeding train.

And he'd just stepped onto the track.

The Busker

Livia Aurelia Cole was a breathtaking young woman. Her mother was Creole, her father Jamaican. If there were ever a lottery winner in the genetics category, Livia had received the grand prize. She had an exotic appearance, a brilliant smile, and deep sparkling eyes that would draw people into her kind-hearted nature from the very first glance.

“You’re the second most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Livia,” said her father on numerous occasions.

“Second? Who’d be the first?” Livia would ask, feigning surprise. She always knew the answer.

Her dad would smile and glance toward her mother.

“That’d be dat woman, right over there. She had more faith in dis man than he ever could. The one dat brought you into dis world, twenty-five years ago...”

“I’m twenty-six, Daddy.”

Her father knew her age, but rarely said it correctly. It was funny to him.

It was funny to Livia too.

“What? How’d you get so *oooold*? I know *I* haven’t aged twenty-six years since you were born. How could you?”

Livia laughed. “I’m gaining on you, Daddy!”

“Dat’s right!” Her father laughed, and said, “Remind me how you do the math on dat one.”

“Sure, Daddy. When I was one, you were twenty-five. I was exactly four percent of your age. I’m now twenty-six. You’re fifty. That makes me fifty-two percent of your age.”

Her father nodded. “You *are* aging quickly, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir! At this rate, when I turn sixty-five, I’ll pass you.”

On this morning, her father had already left for work by the time Livia pulled her cart into the living room. Inside was an amplifier, microphone, and several bottles of water.

From the kitchen, her mother heard Livia, and asked, “Livia! Are you going out to sing today?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she replied with a sweet smile.

“Your father will work late today. Mind makin’ groceries on your way home?”

Makin’ groceries was pure New Orleans. As a matter of fact, if anyone referred to the task as “shopping”, or “going to the store”, locals shook their heads, grinned, and said, “Tourists!”

“Not at all, Mom,” Livia said, as she walked into the kitchen and gave her mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Do you have a list for me?”

“I do,” her mother said, tearing the list from a pad attached to the refrigerator. Livia smiled as she saw the image on the magnetic clip—a family heirloom now for over fifteen years. It was a picture of her very first appearance on stage. She had given an absolutely thrilling solo performance of *A Perfect Little Puppy* in the third-grade musical production of *Adopt Me! I’m Too Cute to Pass Up!*

That solo brought the audience to its feet for a standing ovation. Well, at least two people were standing and cheering—her mom and dad. They’d always been her greatest supporters.

She couldn’t have asked for better parents.

Livia knew how blessed she was to have such a stable home life. Growing up in what the media often referred to as an *under-resourced*

community, she understood not everyone in her neighborhood had that same sense of security.

Her father had often said, “*Under-resourced? We’re not under-resourced*. Oh no, no, no. Maybe we don’t have a lot of money, but we have enough of the resources that matter the most. Way more than I had as a ragamuffin in Montego Bay. We’ve got food. We’ve got work. Most important—we are bless up with love in dis house.”

Hugging Livia’s mother, he would add, “Me and my *boonoonoonoos* make sure of dat.”

Livia loved her father’s accent, although it had faded a bit over the years since moving to New Orleans as a teenager. He had a colorful flair for intentionally mixing the local New Orleans dialect with his native Jamaican *patois*.

Boonoonoonoos, a word roughly translated as “sweetheart”, was one of her favorites.

Maybe her fondness for the word was because the simple act of saying “*boo—noo—noo—noos*,” was so much fun.

Maybe it was because of the rich and deep tone of her father’s voice, which had the timbre of a classically trained bass vocalist reciting the lyrics of a song.

Or maybe it was because of the look on her father’s face when he said it. Whether speaking to Livia or her mother, the man’s eyes showed total adoration when speaking to his family... his *boonoonoonoos*.

It warmed her soul.

She also loved the music of her father’s heritage. The rhythmic style and instrumentation of Jamaican music, especially reggae, always lifted her spirits.

Livia loved their family trips to see her grandparents in Montego Bay. Those journeys cemented lifelong memories of *bashments*—large parties, with people laughing, singing, and dancing.

Oh, yes... and drinking Red Stripe Beer, the national beer of Jamaica.

Her uncle Martin often said, “Ya mon! Do you know why Red Stripe Beer has dis ‘DG’ ting on the label?” Pointing to the bottle, he said, “Because it *is* DG - Damn Good Beer!” Although she was too young at the time to join in the drinking, she gleefully danced and sang with the group.

In Livia’s singing, the rich cultural influences of Jamaica, New Orleans, jazz, R & B and soul came together like the ingredients of a great dish, creating a musical style that remained in the audience’s mind long after their melodic dining experience was over.

Her mother handed Livia the grocery list. “Thank you, baby. What time will you be home?”

“I’ll catch the lunch crowd, make groceries, and still have plenty of time to get back for the dinner crowd.”

Livia’s beautiful voice and her singing versatility were unusual. Impossible for most people.

She could effortlessly sing melodies with a soft jazz style. She could improvise a scat solo that would have made Louis Armstrong proud. But she was equally adept at singing reggae, rock, R & B, or hip-hop.

Her parents had never earned a lot of money. But they worked extra shifts, did odd jobs, or sold old household items, so that Livia could take private vocal lessons from a very early age.

“God gave her talent. It’s our job to help her grow it,” said her mother on Livia’s fifth birthday.

Her parents were so proud of her.

Not because of her beauty.

Not because of her talent.

But because of the person she had always been and the adult she had now become.

Her parents told her, “Your looks will fade someday. Your voice may lose its richness. But your kindness, your willingness to expect the best from yourself and see the best in others, and your gentle

strength—those are the things that make you who you are, a wonderful young woman that we are so very proud of.”

Living at home in her mid-twenties wasn't something Livia planned. She'd thought of getting her own apartment. But her parents encouraged her to not worry about that for now. They wanted her to take this time to focus on making a living as a singer—instead of getting a job to pay for a place to live.

She agreed. But only after they acquiesced to her insistence on paying \$1,500 per month in rent. She said, “You two have to let me do that, or I'll need to get a place of my own.”

Her parents reluctantly agreed, and Livia had never missed a single payment.

Walking out the door, Livia said, “Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, baby. Be careful.”

She winked at her mom and said, “Always.”

Livia walked down Bourbon Street, taking in the sights and sounds along her route, savoring each step.

New Orleans is filled with many rich and wonderful traditions that give the city its flair. The unique food has its definitive taste, appealing to almost any palate. The architecture spans a myriad of styles, influences, and cultures. And the history of the area inspires both awe and reverence. Walking through the many historical cemeteries and seeing markers of local citizens dating back for hundreds of years gives one a perspective that deeply touches the heart.

But for Livia, New Orleans was all about the music.

It was the birthplace of jazz and the blues. It had been the home of many famous musicians, such as Louis Armstrong and Fats Domino. And Livia loved the French Quarter—its streets filled with clubs where she could hear live music on almost a 24/7 basis.

Many of those famous musicians began their careers as buskers—musicians who performed on the streets. Their income came primarily from tips they would earn from tourists and locals passing by. If on the

right corner at the right time, buskers could earn enough to keep a roof over their head, food in their stomach, and even afford a few luxuries now and again—such as a late-night gathering with other street artists at one of the local clubs after they'd all finished their performances for the evening.

Livia was a busker—and a good one at that.

Her rich voice and gentle nature effortlessly drew crowds around her. She captivated them with her elegant renditions of jazz classics. She surprised them with her repertoire of reggae and hip-hop. And she often finished with her original compositions.

On this morning, as had been the case for almost a month now, Livia rolled her cart to the corner of Royal Street and St. Louis Street, in front of the Judge Fred J. Cassibry Square. She set up her amplifier, microphone, and her tip bag, placing each on the ground in front of her. One by one, she placed items into their exact positions, in a display she often convinced herself was for the crowd to enjoy.

Truth be told, it was only a little about the crowd.

Mostly, it reflected Livia's desire to have an order to the things around her.

A place for everything and everything in its place.

She sat on the retaining wall, chose music from her smartphone, and then gave the surrounding crowd a musical experience that was delightful and well appreciated. After each song, she gave a shy smile to the crowd as they applauded and dropped money into the bag on the ground.

Livia was at peace.

She had parents who were supportive and gave her unconditional love. She lived in a city that filled her yearning for music and culture. And she was earning a living—a modest living—singing.

For most of the buskers in New Orleans, crowds are primarily comprised of people who stop for just a few minutes, applaud when appropriate, then drop a dollar or two into the busker's tip bucket. The crowds rarely stay around for a full song unless the busker also has someone working the crowd to keep them in the vicinity longer.

However, the musical experience with Livia was different.

She needed no one to keep the crowd engaged with her performance. Her voice did that well. People planned to pass on by. But once hearing the exceptional melodies coming from this beautiful woman, they found themselves staying longer to enjoy the music. Many stayed so long that by the time Livia finished her forty-five-minute set, the sidewalk was completely full of people, and it was difficult for anyone else to proceed.

Livia had also shown a bit of business savvy in her young busker career. She had a sign professionally printed with links and QR codes that would allow her benefactors to use their smartphones to tip for her performance. Effortless and convenient.

“Touchless Tipping” was printed across the top of the sign with bold colors. Below the title, Livia’s sign said, “If Livia has added to your enjoyment of New Orleans, you are welcome to take selfies and videos with her as she sings and share them on your social-media platforms. Please use the hashtag, #lovingliviaainNOLA, and we will say hello to your friends too. For your convenience, if you’re so inclined, please tip with cash or your favorite cash app. Both your financial kindness and your sharing Livia with the world is greatly appreciated.”

The sign worked well... very well. Livia was surprised. Her income had more than doubled almost instantaneously. Although many still tipped in cash, the crowds seemed to love the convenience of the payment choices and the sanitary nature of a touchless system. Livia loved that she didn’t have to carry so much cash around. She’d never been robbed. But she was always a little wary of her surroundings as she gathered her tips.

As she finished her first song, there were already eight people gathered around—phones raised high—filming.

Of course, New Orleans boasts a tremendous tourism industry. As a result, Livia would sometimes see posts from people around the world. They were sharing their good times, the sights and sounds of the city, and Livia’s performances. She didn’t check social-media often. But when she did, it made her smile.

A couple in the crowd asked, “Is your music available for purchase online?”

“No. I’ve never really done that. Producing the music would be very expensive. And for me, the fun part is sitting out here with y’all and enjoying each other’s company.”

Even though Livia was telling the truth, or at least part of the truth, there was much more to the story than her answer revealed.

The music business was tough. Record companies didn’t just give young buskers a contract with loads of cash and limousines. For the most part, they simply turned buskers down, and not always in a polite manner. The thought of someone rejecting Livia’s singing was very unsettling to her. Her music came straight from her heart. It felt as if they were rejecting her *personally*... instead of making a simple business decision that didn’t go her way.

In her heart, she knew she had talent. She wasn’t afraid of hard work. And she knew that the people surrounding her loved the experience. But even if a record label agreed to produce, distribute, and promote her music—they would also keep the lion’s share of her royalties. That all gave her doubts about even asking. It was a cutthroat business. And Livia wanted neither her throat, nor her business, cut.

She was excellent at what she did. The crowds loved her. But she also had a bit of self-doubt to contend with.

How can I expect someone else to believe in me when I struggle with that myself?

Livia loved her music. She loved her city. And she loved performing to her audience on the corner in front of the park.

She really wasn’t looking for anything more from life at the moment.

But life can be surprising. Events were already in motion that would indeed bring Livia more than she’d ever dreamed.