

CHAPTER THREE



Harper sat in her sister's office and released a weary sigh.

"He really blew you off?" Emery walked around her French Provincial desk and sat in the other floral-print chair. For the past four years, Harper had been working at Emery's family medicine practice, and this was her favorite part of the day, a few minutes of sister-talk after the last patient left.

"Couldn't get away from me fast enough."

Emery crossed her legs and folded her hands across her stomach. "High school was a lifetime ago, Harper. Hasn't enough water passed under that bridge by now?"

"Guess not." Doubtful there was enough water in the world to cover the pain she'd caused. "You should have seen his face."

"Little Wyatt McCowan." Emery shook her head, her long, dark ponytail brushing her back.

"Little? When did you last see Wyatt?"

Her brow furrowed in thought. "I guess when you were about twelve, thirteen. I wasn't able to make your graduation because of finals, so I didn't see him give his Salutatorian

address. You guys were the best of friends growing up. What happened in high school?"

Harper hitched a shoulder in a shrug, the old regrets surfacing once again. "What usually happens? A huge change takes place between the ages of nine and fourteen. By the time we got to high school, I was hanging with a completely different group. And he didn't ... I mean, he wasn't ... you know."

"He didn't fit in with your new, popular friends."

Harper stared at her hands clasped in her lap. "I thought I'd found a group I belonged with until I realized they didn't think much of Wyatt or the other uber-smart kids. But by then, I was so afraid of being made fun of that I distanced myself from him."

She looked at Emery, tightness filling her chest. "It's ironic how people perceived me as the girl who had it all together when I was acting out of utter insecurity. Wyatt had much more self-confidence than I ever did, yet I was the one everybody admired. So upside down."

"High school is weird. And hindsight is much clearer than trying to see what's right in front of you at the time." Emery put her hand to her neck and rotated her head from side to side. "It's how we use it that truly defines who we are. I would hope you know now you don't have to live your life to match somebody else's vision of who you should be. Make your own decisions, be who you were meant to be—who God says you are."

"Working on it. Going back to school seems like a good place to start."

Emery nodded and grinned. "Is he still skinny with that curly mop of red hair?"

"Not at all," Harper answered with a chuckle. "Think less Howdy Doody and more Prince Harry. Only more handsome."

Emery stared at her for a moment. "Is the student falling for the teacher?"

“Oh, please.” Harper rolled her eyes. “I did have to take a second look, though. I haven’t seen him for over ten years.”

Ten years and a lifetime ago.

“Let’s Google him.” Emery jumped up, grabbed her laptop off the desk, and took her seat again. She typed his name and clicked a couple of times before her mouth dropped open. She turned the screen so Harper could see the headshot from his counseling practice website. “*That’s* Wyatt?”

“Told ya.”

She turned the laptop back around. “Wyatt J. McCowan, M.S. in Psychology, Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology, private practitioner in Adolescent Psychology, and adjunct Professor of Psychology at Dallas Heritage University.’ There’s a list of awards and honors he’s received longer than my arm. And published in multiple professional journals.” She quirked an eyebrow at Harper. “Married?”

“No ring.”

“Not that you were looking.”

Harper tipped her chin. “Of course not. But his hands weren’t exactly in his pockets for the entire class.”

“I see. Well, he’s quite accomplished for somebody not even thirty.”

Harper pulled her arms tight against her middle, but the tidal wave of insecurity crashed over her anyway. “And here’s Harper Townsend, college drop-out because she got herself knocked-up, married at nineteen, divorced at twenty-four, working for her sister because she has no discernible skills. A mother with no child. A real success story.”

“Oh, honey, that’s the enemy talking.” Emery set the laptop back on her desk. “Don’t believe those lies. The Lord could very well have someone for you out there, and you can still build the family you want so badly.”

Regret, all too familiar, blocked Harper’s throat. In her heart, she knew God was making her new. But her head still held all of the memories of what she’d been, all she’d done,

everything she'd lost, trying to be what she thought would bring her value, affirmation ... love.

Until the truest love she'd ever known came into her life, and she at last felt whole. Then it, too, was taken from her, leaving her broken and searching all over again.

She swallowed hard against the knot of grief that still resided in the deepest recesses of her heart. "Difficult to picture that. Besides, what good, godly man would want me?"

"One who knows a good, godly woman when he sees one. Keep the faith." Emery circled the desk. "Speaking of a good, godly man, I should probably get home to mine."

"Probably."

"Come over. Have dinner with us."

Harper shook her head as she stood. "I need to hit the books, so I'll just throw something together. I have some reading for my World Lit class, and Hunky Professor gave us a heap for Wednesday's General Psych class."

Emery laughed. "Hunky professor? And you're not crushing on the teacher?"

"Not my name for him. Shannon, my new study partner, or so she told me, calls him that."

"She *told* you she's your study partner?"

"Shannon's definitely not shy. Darling little, bouncy, blonde thing. Told me straight up, 'Harper, we're going to be great study partners!' and proceeded to put her number into my phone. I think we're the oldest students in the class, although she's not quite as old as I am. Took three years off after high school and is in her third year at DHU. It's nice to have a friend, though, even if she's probably no more than twenty-three, if a day."

"Age is a number. She sounds like a hoot. And have fun with all that studying. You sure didn't choose an easy field, sister of mine. I hope you know what you're getting yourself into."

Apprehension coiled in Harper's belly. "You don't think I have what it takes?"

"Oh, I have no doubt you can do anything you put your mind to. I just don't want it to be about Mom and Dad. If you want to go into psychology because it's how you think God has wired you, then go for it. But if it's for any other reason, you should ask for the wisdom to find what it is He has for you. Something you're passionate about, that you can't wait to get up and do every day."

"Passionate about," Harper muttered.

"And you know your hours here are flexible. Whatever I can do to help you, I will."

"You always have. But aren't you tired of taking care of your little sister?"

Emery slung her purse over her shoulder and walked over to take Harper in a tight hug. "I will be here for you until my last breath."

Tears welled in Harper's eyes as she clung to her. "And I for you."

How she adored her sister. She considered her and their older brother, Connor, her closest friends. Both of them had walked alongside her during her most desperate of times and still encouraged and loved her without condition.

If only they hadn't been away at college when she'd started dating Brett Ellison. Maybe they would have seen what she hadn't been able to until it was too late.