

true calling series ~ book two

LOVE'S TRUE
Home

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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC

15 Lucky Lane

Morrilton, Arkansas 72110

<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-395-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-396-6

Editors: Amy R. Anguish and Heidi Glick

Cover by Linda Fulkerson, www.bookmarketinggraphics.com

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For Daddy.

CHAPTER ONE



The bouquet sailed through the air, like a guided missile zeroed in on its target.

Hemmed in all sides, Ally had no choice but to catch the thing. That, or let it hit her smack in the face, which would be even more humiliating than being out here to begin with.

Why, oh why, hadn't she gone to the ladies' room when they announced the tossing of the bouquet? Or pled a stomach bug and skipped the wedding altogether?

Because she didn't want to look like a heartsick sore loser, that's why.

So the man she'd once considered the love of her life had just married the love of his. She was over it. She was.

Mostly.

Squeals split the air as her friends, including the gorgeous bride, enveloped her in a group hug.

Ally's gaze traveled past the women surrounding her. Wyatt, *aka* The Groom, stood across the ballroom amidst a crowd of kids from ConnectUP, the student ministry he'd founded and with which she still volunteered. He leaned back and laughed, and thankfully, her pulse didn't do that skippy thing it had the first moment she laid eyes on him in their

college library almost four years ago. A welcome sign much progress had been made in her Year of Getting Over Wyatt.

After posing for the obligatory photo with the bride, Ally returned Harper's tight hug. If anybody understood how weird this was for her, it was Harper.

Ally pulled back and looked at her radiant friend. "I'm so sorry if I've made this at all awkward for you."

Harper put her hands on Ally's shoulders, her green eyes sparkling. "I'm happy you caught it. God has something wonderful planned for you, beyond your wildest dreams. And I can't wait to see what that is." She leaned in close. "Or who."

Ally chuckled, buoyed by her friend's sincerity ... and humor. "Me, either. But please know how happy I am for you. For both of you."

After another hug, she returned to her table while Harper joined Wyatt at their four-tier cake festooned with strings of pearls and fresh, blush-pink roses. When the newlyweds fed each other, the wedding guests' *abbs* floated through the room while the ConnectUP kids egged them on to not be so neat about it.

The teens' antics made her grin, until her breath snagged in her throat when Wyatt and Harper shared another tender kiss. They truly were beautiful together, in every way. A match made in heaven. Or in kindergarten, according to Wyatt's toast to his bride, for that's when he said he first fell for her.

Her friend Shannon, a striking, petite blonde in an emerald-hued bridesmaid's dress, set a glass of punch on the table before taking her seat. "Who is that tall, scrumptious-looking drink of water? With the flower girl."

Ally followed Shannon's line of sight to a dark-haired man with a little slip of a girl in a frilly, white dress perched on his back, his elbows hooked around her legs. He jostled her up and down, and her giggles rang out across the room. His suit coat and tie were no doubt hanging on a chair in deference to the mid-July Dallas heat, and he'd rolled the sleeves of his

white dress shirt to just below his elbows. His wide smile never left his face, and Shannon was right. He *was* tall—at least as tall as Wyatt, who at six-foot-two had been the perfect height for Ally's five-nine. Back when it mattered.

"Considering the girl is Harper's niece, my guess would be a family member. Maybe a cousin?" Her hand found the pendants hanging from a thin, silver chain around her neck, her index finger running across the surface of the little house that hung there with four others. One in the shape of Texas, another of a small dog, a bouquet of flowers, and the last one a cross, reminding her to keep Jesus in the middle of it all. Her dream charms, she called them. Like her own personal vision board worn above her heart.

"Maybe. No wedding ring." Shannon picked up her glass. "I saw him earlier and looked."

Ally let go of the small charm and laughed at her friend, another CU ministry leader, and one of her favorite people. "You're impossible."

Shannon finished off her punch and looked back across the room at the handsome stranger. "Cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring doesn't look like he has a plus one. You should ask him to dance when they start."

"Not happening. He's all yours."

"No, ma'am. I'm taking a break from dating after things went south with Joel." Her always bright countenance clouded. "I wish he hadn't left ConnectUP just because we broke up. The kids loved him, and he enjoyed working with them so much. I feel like I ruined that for him."

Ally reached over and rubbed Shannon's shoulder. "His reaction is not your fault. You couldn't stay in a relationship you didn't believe was right for you. And if it wasn't right for you, then it wasn't right for him. He'll see that someday."

Just as she had. Finally. Coming back from a year-long, self-imposed sabbatical in Central America to find Wyatt had moved on squashed any hope he might have reconsidered in

her absence. But seeing him with Harper over the last several months, well, it was impossible *not* to know he was with exactly who he should be.

The lights dimmed as Harper walked onto the dance floor with her father, followed by Wyatt's dance with his mom. Harper then joined him in the middle of the floor for their first dance as husband and wife, Arlene handing him off with a kiss to the cheek of her new daughter-in-law. All eyes followed them as they swayed together, their arms around each other and faces close as they spoke words meant for nobody else. And when Wyatt took his new wife—*his new wife*—by one hand, spun her, then pulled her back into his arms for another kiss, Ally's chest hollowed, as if all the air had left it. The image in front of her blurred. What she'd said to Harper was true. She sincerely was happy for them.

But some dreams were hard to let go.



Zane smiled as the limousine pulled away amidst cheers and waves from the wedding guests. The new Dr. and Mrs. McCowan were on their way to building a life together, and he couldn't be happier for them. Maybe he hadn't known them as long as most of the others, but working so closely together over the last seven months, albeit from two different states, had made them more like family.

Closest thing he had to one, anyway. Which was fine. He was used to it. He made family-friends every time he settled in a different place or in a new job. What did Harper call them? Framily. That was it. They were framily.

Over their time together, he'd heard all about Wyatt and Harper's story. How they'd been best friends as kids until a falling out in high school. They hadn't seen nor spoken to each other for over ten years before she showed up as a student in a psychology class he was subbing in at Dallas Heritage

University. They rekindled their friendship, which quickly blossomed into something more, and now they were husband and wife. Two years younger than his thirty-one and on their way through life together. As a unit. A partnership knit with strands of faith and trust, love and respect.

What must it be like to find the *one* who filled that space inside your heart shaped only for her?

Back in the much cooler ballroom, he bobbed his head along to the catchy country tune. Some of the remaining guests hit the dance floor while others clustered in small groups at tables to visit. At his chair, he pulled his phone from the pocket of his suit coat he'd left draped over a chair. He winced at the missed call notification that popped up on his screen. Considering it was an hour later in Atlanta, he should return it now rather than later.

With the music and dozens of voices talking and laughing all at once, he needed to find a quiet place to make the call. He threaded his way through the tables out to the terrace, disappointed when his friend's voicemail picked up.

"Hey, sorry I missed you." He turned back toward the ballroom. "I'm at the reception but give me a call when you get this."

He opened the French door to return to the cool inside and nearly collided with a woman on her way out. Her head popped up, and she stopped short. "Talk to you later, Phebes." He disconnected and looked at the young lady standing in the doorway. "Sorry 'bout that. I shouldn't walk and talk at the same time. Dangerous combination."

"No, I'm sorry." She stepped to the side. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

He tipped his head. "You're the one who caught the bouquet, right?"

Pink suffused her face. "Yes. Excuse me."

Her voice broke over the words, and her eyes filled before

she walked away, which told him her evening could only go up from here.

She stopped at the ornate, Italian-esque balustrade, her arms crossed tight over her middle as she stared out over the courtyard below. Something wasn't right, but he didn't know her from Eve. Best to let her be.

On his way through the door, he took another look over his shoulder. She was tall, thin but not skinny, with thick, honey-blond hair falling to the middle of her back. When she sniffled and brushed a finger under her eye, he reached out, letting the door hit his open palm before it could close. Probably not the wisest idea to get involved in some emotional business that wasn't his, but now that he was aware of her, how could he just leave? He was a minister, after all. This was his calling, to help others.

He moved toward her and stopped several feet away so as not to startle her. "Excuse me. I know I'm overstepping, but is there anything you need?"

She swiped at her face but didn't turn. "Um, no. I ... I just wanted to get some air."

A tear rolled its way down her cheek, and he questioned again the pull that had brought him over here. He wasn't all that great with tears, seminary degree or not.

He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and held it in front of her. Dad was right. One never knew when a hankie might come in handy.

She hesitated a moment before accepting it. "Thank you." She patted her cheeks, then glanced over at him. Something was definitely up. Or the girl really didn't like weddings.

"Can I get you a glass of punch? Or water? I think champagne is the only thing stronger they're offering, but I can grab you one. Or three."

That elicited a small chuckle. "No, I'm fine." She looked at him again. "Thank you, though."

“No problem.” When he didn’t move, she held out his handkerchief. “Keep it.”

She nodded and turned away again.

Should he go away? Leave her to her thoughts? Her rigid posture screamed that’s exactly what she wanted. But he couldn’t make himself walk away.

The crickets and the muffled strains of a country tune blended in the air around them as he debated what to do next. *Lord, a little wisdom here, please. Do I leave her alone? Do I stick around? What would You do?*

The answer came as quickly as his plea. Jesus had never left someone in need.

“They say I’m a pretty good listener, if you need an ear. Or two. Which I have.”

Another chuckle escaped. Good. If he could get her laughing, she might even decide to go back in and join the fun. He’d noticed her earlier, line dancing and laughing it up with her friends. What could have happened since then?

He took a step closer to lean against the balustrade, stuck his hands in his pockets, and grinned at her. “You know, I’ve been to a lot of weddings, and I’ve seen women practically tackle each other to catch the bouquet. But I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone try so hard to *not* catch it.”

Even in the dim light, he noticed the blush that tinged her pretty features. She looked down at her hands, twisting the handkerchief around her fingers.

“I figured you had a flower allergy or rose phobia or something.” He gestured toward her with his head. “Clearly, it’s an allergy.”

A smile pulled at her lips when she raised her eyes to him. “Yes. Exactly. That’s what this is. Allergies.”

Her willingness to banter encouraged him to keep her talking. “So, honestly. What’s the story with your aversion to bridal bouquets?”

She shook her head. "It was a little ... awkward, I guess you could say."

"Not from what I saw. Maybe you didn't want to, but your catch was spot on. Like a third baseman fielding a line drive without thinking about it."

This time her smile revealed straight, even teeth set behind full lips with only a hint of added color. She didn't need it, in his opinion. But then, he preferred the natural look.

"Didn't want to take it in the face, or duck and let it hit Shannon, who was hiding behind me." She rolled her eyes. "Chicken."

Progress. He'd take a smile any day over tears. And she apparently had a sense of humor.

A breeze lifted a lock of her hair, and she brushed it behind her ear. Her hand moved to the pendants hanging around her neck to slide them back and forth along the delicate chain. He'd never seen someone wear more than one on a chain at the same time, but these delicate charms suited her.

Peals of laughter, the hum of conversation, and the strains of a power rock ballad made their way to the veranda when the door opened and a couple stepped outside. Would she want to dance if he asked? Or was there another guy in the picture? Perhaps the reason she was out here crying instead of partying with the other guests?

When she offered nothing more about whatever had brought her out here for *some air*, he cleared his throat. "Um, I was wondering, would—"

His phone vibrated, and he reached back to pull it from his pocket. He checked the screen and swept his finger from one side to the other. "Hey, Phoebe. Just a sec." He took the phone away from his ear. "I'm sorry. I need to take this call. A work thing. But, listen, I'd love to talk some more. Would you save me a dance?"

Her face blanched, and she let go of her necklace to wave him off. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"No, I mean it. I'll look for you in a few minutes."

She only nodded before he turned and put the phone to his ear. "Hey, thanks for calling me back."

Ten minutes later, he returned to where he'd left the pretty lady in the light floral dress. When she wasn't there, he went inside, where the reception was still going strong. He walked around the ballroom, even watched the hallway that led to the restrooms for a few minutes, but she never appeared.

Ashlen, Harper's three-year-old niece who'd acted as the flower girl, skipped by carrying the bouquet her aunt had tossed earlier. "Hey, Ash."

She turned around, and her little face lit up. "Mr. Zane! Horsey ride!"

"Sure thing." He knelt down and helped her climb up onto his back again, the bouquet still clutched in her hand now dangling below his chin. The scent of roses wafted around him. "Where did you get your pretty flowers?"

"Miss Kay gived 'em to me."

Kay. He at least had a name, although it was clear that dance wouldn't be happening. Guess his mystery lady would have to remain just that.