

CHAPTER THREE



“Thanks, Ally. I knew we could depend on you.”
Wyatt’s reply ricocheted around in her head.

Depend. One little word. But for Ally, her personal kryptonite. It went against everything she was to bow out of something others needed her to do. No matter the cost.

At the tender and baffling age of thirteen, back on the mission field with her father ... without Mom ... thousands of miles from her brother Michael ... she’d discovered her strength and purpose in taking care of others. First, taking care of her widowed father, then stepping in wherever she could at the mission. Which, in turn, led to her chosen profession. One where employers and patients alike relied on her to show up, to have the answers, to *care*. It’s what she did. It’s who she *was*. And she’d always found satisfaction and peace in her purpose.

Until maybe just now. Because of her love for, and commitment to, ConnectUP, the ministry heads could *depend* on her to work with Zane. Count on her to follow through. No pressure at all. If only she could convince her roiling nerves of that.

Wyatt stood and looked around. “Hmm. I don’t see Zane.

I'll go find him so I can introduce you. Then you guys can make a plan on when to meet."

She simply nodded instead of correcting his assumption they had never met, because how could she possibly explain *that?*

Oh, Zane and I go way back, from the night he found me melting down at your wedding.

Yeah, no. Definitely wouldn't be offering that information.

Rising, she followed Wyatt to the kitchen.

"Harper," he called out to his wife working at the opposite counter. "You know where Zane went?"

"His room," she answered over her shoulder. "To return a call."

Okay, that was good. Maybe it would be a long one, affording Ally the time she needed to organize her jumbled thoughts. When her phone pinged with an incoming text, she stepped away from the group helping themselves to the food covering the kitchen island. She pulled the device out of the back pocket of her red shorts and brought up the message from her brother.

Have you talked to Dad today?

Odd question. Michael knew she talked to their father every other Tuesday night, because Michael's calls were the other Tuesday nights.

Not today. Why?

Her head still down waiting for Michael's reply, she walked back to the family room. When a pair of strong hands took her by the arms, her head snapped up, and her stomach relocated to a different part of her anatomy.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She stared into the deep brown eyes of their new Becker ministry coordinator and held up her phone. "My brother. In Colorado. Texted me." She blinked. Where had all those years of education gone? She could decipher

medical jargon in an instant, but she suddenly couldn't string more than two words of English together.

"No problem. Good thing I wasn't a wall, though, or you could have a concussion now." He released her, and extended his hand with a grin that sent her insides into a jitterbug. "We've never been properly introduced. Zane Carpenter."

"Allyson Kincaid." She slipped her hand into his, and her skin tingled all the way up to her shoulder. She really needed to get her act together. Sure, the guy was nice-looking, although not in a movie star or magazine cover model kind of way. His was more that all-American, rugged, guy-next-door brand of handsomeness. Dark hair, eyes to match, and just enough stubble on the face to be casual but not unkempt.

His smile left and forehead scrunched as he stared at her. "I thought it was Kay."

She cocked her head. "Where'd you get that?"

"Ashlen. At the reception. Had your flowers. She said *Miss Kay* gave them to her."

"Ohhh." She smiled. "I help out in children's ministry at church on Sundays when they need extra hands, and I've been in Ashlen's class a few times. The kids call me Miss K, for Kincaid. She stopped me on my way out to tell me how pretty my flowers were, so I gave them to her."

There was that grin again, with those twin dimples. "I think that little beauty could talk a miser into giving her his last penny."

"Right?"

"Allyson, then. Not Kay."

"Not Kay. And most everybody calls me Ally."

His eyes widened. "Oh, *you're* Ally. My new Phoebe."

Phoebe. The girl who'd called him that night on the terrace? "Excuse me?"

"Phoebe's my co-worker in Atlanta. Kept me in line. Guess that's supposed to be your job now. If you're up for the challenge, that is."

Oh, wow. It *had* been a business call. “A-And you’d be okay with that?”

He turned his head slightly and narrowed his eyes at her. “Some reason I shouldn’t be?”

A loud burst of laughter from the kitchen made her jump. She’d been so focused on the man in front of her, she’d forgotten anybody else was in the room.

Zane glanced past her to the others before looking back at her again. “Have you had anything to eat yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.” And now she wasn’t sure she could, no matter how hungry she was.

The phone in her hand vibrated with an incoming call. She’d turned the sound off for the meeting, but the caller ID told her it was Michael, which upped her worry meter a notch or two. He’d never called her on CU planning night before. “I’m sorry. My brother. If he’s calling now, it must be important.”

“Absolutely. Take it. We’ll catch up later.”

She nodded and pressed the green button on her phone. “*Miguelito*. Hey.”

“Hey, *’manita*. I know you’re busy, but can you take a minute?”

She stepped out the back door to the covered deck with its hanging strings of lights. “Sure. We’re done with our meeting. What’s going on?”

“Hopefully nothing.” With the door closed behind her, the sound of crickets and cicadas replaced the voices and music from inside. “I got a voicemail from Dad asking if I might be able to get on your video call tomorrow, but he didn’t say why. Just wondered if you knew anything.”

Her stomach rumbled with a mixture of worry and hunger. The three of them had a regular video call every second Sunday of the month, so the last was only two weeks ago.

“No, I haven’t heard from him today. But it’s odd he’d ask

us to be on one so soon." Her mind halted at one possibility. "Unless ..."

"He's coming home." Her brother finished the thought for her when she paused.

"You mean *leaving* home." Mercy, had she said that out loud?

"Al ..."

Yep. She had. "Sorry. But you have to agree, he's never thought of the States as home. Even with you and me here." Even with their mother buried here.

His sigh carried through the line. "I know, *'manita*. I get it. But the concern is why he needs to talk to us both right now."

She bowed her head. So selfish of her to not think of that. "You're right. I hope he isn't sick or something."

"Let's not assume anything yet. I just wanted to see if you'd talked with him. Guess we'll find out tomorrow."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Anything yet on the job front?"

She grimaced. "I've had some offers, but nothing's felt right."

"What are you looking for?"

Good question. Fulfillment, purpose, challenge. Making a difference, doing something meaningful. "Not sure. I just know none of these gigs the temp agency has sent me on is something I'd like to do full time. I'm not ... I don't know."

"Zealous about it. Not like when you were in Central America working with those kids. You were all in."

"All in," she echoed under her breath, her thoughts meandering back to that year, working side by side with her physician father in his remote clinic. Treating illness, disease, injuries, the likes of which one rarely saw in the modern doctor's offices and hospitals here in the US.

"These other jobs can't be as challenging as what you had to deal with at the clinic. I kind of thought that's why you went back to Arlington, that maybe it was too much."

“Working at the mission clinic was only supposed to be for a few months, remember? I never intended to stay as long as I did.” When her dad had mentioned their head nurse had to leave unexpectedly, it seemed like perfect timing to go help until the replacement got there. Things had just ended with Wyatt, and she’d needed some time away.

Somewhere to run. Where she wouldn’t have to see him at church or ConnectUP. Somewhere she could focus on other people’s troubles and forget her own. Which had worked a little too well, leaving her unprepared to find Wyatt was more than over her when she returned. He was in love with someone else.

“But when the new nurse arrived, we were in the thick of a Zika outbreak. I couldn’t leave with so many sick, and before I knew it, I’d been there a year.”

“Everybody knows they can depend on you to get the job done. Dad was really hoping you’d stay.”

And there it was. That word again. *Depend*. Not a bad word, but sometimes she wondered about her compulsion to never say *no*. To always be the one people knew they could turn to.

“Oh, trust me. He asked me often enough. But it was never my intent to go into full-time foreign missions.”

“I understand. I’ll pray you find something soon that fulfills you as much as the work there did.”

“Gracias, Miguel.”

“Are you seeing anybody?”

“I see lots of people.”

His laugh carried through the line and made her smile. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“I’m not looking for anybody. I’m working on being me and finding my place here. I don’t need a man mucking up the works.” *Not even a charming, dark-haired guy who carries a handkerchief.*

Good night, where had *that* come from? Sure, cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring might have entered her thoughts a time

or two, or a few dozen, over the past month. But that was when he was the fantasy guy from the terrace she'd never see again. He was *safe*.

Her brother's chuckle brought her back to the present. "I hear you. Just don't be afraid to get back out there, *hermanita*. No doubt there's a great guy out there for you."

"*Gracias*." It was natural for them to sprinkle Spanish into their conversation when they talked. Having been born and raised on mission fields in Central America, Spanish was practically their first language. They spoke it more growing up than they did their native English. She and Yolanda still had complete conversations in Spanish, years after leaving Guatemala. "I'll keep my eyes open."

"And your heart?"

She stared at the moonlight's reflection dancing on the surface of the pool. Was her heart ready to let someone else in who could fracture it all over again? It had been almost two years since the break-up, and so much had changed. Wyatt was married now, and she hadn't even been on a date since that last one with him.

But maybe it was time to test the waters. Take all she'd learned over the past twenty-three months, about herself, life, God, what she wanted versus what was best, and step out in faith into uncomfortable territory.

"Working on it." Just not with cute-guy-Zane, who probably wasn't interested anyway after witnessing her at her humiliating worst.

"That's all I can ask."

"So, when are you and Paige going to be making an announcement?"

"Hopefully soon. I already have the ring."

"No, seriously? Oh, I'm so excited! You'd better tell me the second she says *yes*."

"Maybe not the very second, but you'll be the first person I

call. *Te amo Allyson. Vaya con Dios.*" *I love you. Go with God.* The way he always ended their calls.

"I love you, too, *Miguel. Dios te bendiga y te guarde.*" *God bless you and keep you.*

She disconnected and sighed. How she loved her brother. Three years her senior, he'd been her best friend, confidant, and protector in a world where nobody had looked like them, with their blond hair and light skin. Their brown eyes were the only physical characteristics they'd shared with the other children. Yet it hadn't mattered as they'd run barefoot through the village, played soccer in the dirt streets, ate tropical fruit right off the trees.

She swept her hand across her forehead. Although night had settled in, the heat was palpable. Time to face cute-guy-Zane. Or just Zane, as she should probably start referring to him. She'd need to keep her wits about her if she was going to work with the guy.

Assuming he hadn't changed his mind. He'd appeared nonplussed about the pathetic figure she cut the night of the wedding. But now that he'd had a few minutes to think about it, maybe he would decide he needed someone more stable to help him out with something so important. Nothing she could do but go in and face the music, despite her bone-deep embarrassment.

But inside the house, all she found were the ladies gathered around the kitchen island.

"Did y'all kick the menfolk out?"

Harper shook her head. "The college guys challenged the old guys to a game of hoops, so they're headed down to the park around the corner."

Ally grabbed a paper plate and eyed the food. "Works for me." On so many levels. "I'm starving."