

CHAPTER TWO



On time and with five minutes to spare.

Ally let herself in the front door of Wyatt and Harper's house just before seven after getting caught late at the hospital. She'd barely had time to change out of her scrubs into shorts and a light blouse to make it to the Monday ConnectUP planning meeting. The cool air in the foyer offered a welcome respite from the late August heat as she followed the cacophony of voices and laughter down the entry hall to the family room where the other eleven team members gathered.

"Ally!" Harper scurried around the expansive kitchen island to envelop her in a tight hug. Honestly, Harper gave the best hugs. One never walked away from a Harper hug without knowing they were cared for.

Ally pulled back and smiled at her beaming hostess. "Wow, married life looks good on you."

"You're very kind. And look amazing, as usual. Let's plan a day here soon to catch up."

"Absolutely. As long as it involves shopping."

"But of course! We'll get Rhonda, Shannon, and Yolanda, and make a girls' day out of it."

Wyatt walked up and drew her in for a side hug. “Great to see you. It’s been too long.”

Five weeks, to be exact. The newlyweds had been on their Hawaiian honeymoon for ten days, and, since taking more administrative duties with ConnectUP, they’d given up their leadership of the Arlington club to move around all four. This would be their first time back with their original team since the wedding.

And the first time Ally had seen them since they left their reception to begin a new life together. But instead of the heaviness of heart from that night, she now sent up a silent prayer of gratitude that she no longer experienced a sense of loss around Wyatt. In its place was peace in accepting that, although her first love, he was never meant to be her forever love.

“Good to see you too.”

When Reed, Wyatt’s older brother and new captain of the Arlington club, called for everybody to find a seat, Ally planted herself on the short side of the sectional between Shannon and Jenny, Reed’s wife and her long-time friend.

Jenny grabbed her hand. “Oh, good, you’re here!”

Ally laughed. “Where else would I be on a Monday night?”

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t miss the new guy from Becker. Came in Saturday and we met him yesterday at Sunday dinner. He’s staying here with Wyatt and Harper until he finds a place. I thought you might’ve seen him at church.”

“I had a shift at Memorial, so I went to the early service.”

Another temp job she wouldn’t be making permanent, like the other three offers she’d turned down. Being back in the States and volunteering again with ConnectUP was a joy. The job front, not so much. If only she could find something here that brought the same satisfaction as working with the people in Central America last year.

“Great guy.” Jenny continued. “Very handsome. *Very* single.”

Ah. That's what Jenny was up to. "Then I hope he finds himself a nice Texas girl."

"You're a nice Texas girl."

Ally shook her head. "Jen, honestly, I'm in a really good place right now and not looking for a guy." Her fingers went to the pendants around her neck. "If God wants to bring a man into my life, great. If not, I'm content to plant my roots right here on my own." In her someday house, with her someday little dog and a flower garden, with Jesus in the middle of it all.

With a self-satisfied grin, Jenny gave her hand a squeeze. "I love hearing that. But when you're truly content, that's usually when you find someone. Trust me. I've had outstanding success putting folks together. I even got Steve and Yolanda together, as you know, after they'd been circling each other for months."

Ally shrugged. "I have to admit, that was a good one. But if I lose my roommate, Jen, I may have to move in with you."

Roommate, best friend. The sister of her heart. Although Yolanda was dark-haired with the soft, brown skin of her Guatemalan heritage, while Ally's ancestors were decidedly Scottish.

"We could do a lot worse than having a live-in pediatric nurse with our three hooligans."

Ally grinned as Reed called for everyone's attention. But she found it difficult to focus when cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring popped into her mind. And not for the first time in the past five weeks. What a rotten time to meet someone whose dimpled grin made her kind of squirmy-in-a-good-way inside.

But that night had also knocked some sense into her. The mortification she carried around for days after the poor guy found her in the throes of her own pity party had her chastising herself for continuing to wallow in the pit of broken dreams. It was past time to pick herself up, dust herself off, and recommit to being everything the Father already said she was. Loved, redeemed, treasured, forgiven. Everything they

worked to instill in their CU kids. Now she had to practice what she preached.

Twenty minutes into their meeting, Reed smiled at someone behind her. “Zane. Welcome. We’ll be finished here in a minute, and then we’ll introduce you to everybody.”

“No hurry,” the voice behind her said. “Happy to listen in.”

Tingles cascaded over her skin, from her scalp down to her toes. That voice. It couldn’t be. She must be remembering it wrong. She’d only spoken to cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring for a few minutes. No way could she know his voice so well, no matter how many times she’d heard it in her daydreams. Jenny smiled and waved at the man behind them over her shoulder, but Ally didn’t have the nerve to look.

Once they’d finished their topic prep for Wednesday’s conversation circles, Wyatt took his brother’s place in front of the fireplace. “As y’all know, without Becker Ministries coming alongside to sponsor ConnectUP, we wouldn’t be anywhere near where we are right now, with three new clubs launched in the past six months. But because things are happening so quickly, the Becker board decided we should have a representative here in Texas. Which brings me to Zane Carpenter.”

He looked over and smiled at the man still standing somewhere behind her.

Please, God. Let me be wrong.

“Harper and I met Zane last December at Becker Ministries’ headquarters in Atlanta, and over the last several months, he’s become a brother we’ve grown to love and respect. He’s picked up his life in Georgia to follow God’s leading, and we’re beyond blessed to have him.”

He held out his hand. “Zane, why don’t you come say a few words. Y’all, let’s give him a big Texas welcome.”

The leaders clapped and whooped as if George Strait himself had paid them a visit. *Please, God, don’t let it be—*

Ally’s heart dropped to her stomach and hands halted mid-

clap as the man rounded the end of the sectional and stopped beside Wyatt.

Oh. No.

Shannon looked at her with a bright smile and eyes open wide. "That's cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring!" she whispered.

He most certainly was.

Jenny leaned in on her other side as the clapping died down. "Told you he was handsome."

Yep, already aware. Up close and personal. Way too personal. He'd seen her at her most vulnerable. Yet she knew nothing else about him, other than he was apparently in the habit of carrying a handkerchief.

"Thanks, everybody, for that astounding welcome." The same voice that had asked her if she needed anything on the veranda spilled out into the room. His eyes passed her and darted back again, zeroing in and bringing a heated flush to her face.

Or maybe she picked up a bug working the pediatrics floor at the hospital.

His smile grew as he stared at her for another few seconds. A few seconds listening to her heart beat against her eardrums.

"I recognize a few familiar faces here." He looked away, and she began to breathe again. Passing out would definitely bring attention she didn't want. "I'm excited to jump in and see what we can accomplish together. We've been working on some strategies for new launches, fundraising, and volunteer recruitment, but I'm looking forward to seeing you all in action."

His eyes strayed to her again, and she wished the couch would swallow her whole. What must he be thinking, seeing her here oh so comfortable in Wyatt and Harper's home after finding her crying—*crying!*—at their wedding reception only weeks ago?

He offered a few more words she barely heard, turned the

floor over to Reed to finish up the meeting, then joined Harper at the breakfast bar.

Jenny angled her head toward Ally. “He totally noticed you.”

Shannon leaned in from her other side. “You should’ve asked him to dance at the wedding.”

Ally’s face heated up another alarming notch. Yes, he’d noticed her, but for all the wrong reasons, she was sure.

Keeping her focus throughout the event planning portion of the meeting proved a futile endeavor. They had the back-to-school barbecue and swim party to organize, as well as the annual Labor Day trip to Six Flags with all the other clubs. But her scattered thoughts had other priorities. Mostly trying to formulate a plan of escape.

Okay, seriously? Hadn’t she learned anything in all the time she’d spent in the Word the last few weeks and talking to God about how she desired to be authentic in the way she lived her life? To be broken and shaped and strengthened in her spirit to become all He wanted her to be, do all He wanted her to do?

And all she could think about doing in this moment was run. Which really hadn’t gotten her anywhere. Ever.

No, she would have to stick it out and put on a brave face if they should cross paths. At least they wouldn’t have to work together, since he was there to open the ministry office and launch new clubs, and she was firmly ensconced with the Arlington team. She might see him once a month. Twice at most.

Reed closed the notebook he’d been scribbling in. “Okay, that should wrap things up. Let’s pray and then get some food.”

Following his prayer, Ally took her time putting her Bible and electronic tablet back in her bag while the others hurried over to the kitchen.

Wyatt sat on the coffee table in front of her. "Hey, Al, have a minute?"

She sat up and looked over when Reed perched on the arm of the sofa, then back to his brother. "Sure."

Her mind scrambled. What could they possibly want with her that had them looking so serious? At least being cornered by the McCowan boys meant she wouldn't have to face cute-guy-with-no-wedding-ring-she-now-knew-as-Zane quite yet. A quick look around the room yielded no sight of the man, so perhaps he was as reluctant to meet up with her again as she was with him.

Shouldn't she feel better about that?

Wyatt cleared his throat. "Reed, Mason, and I were talking yesterday with Zane."

Yesterday. Right. Jenny said they'd met Zane at Sunday dinner. Mason and his wife Rhonda were Wyatt and Harper's best friends and always considered family. It made sense they would've been here for dinner, as well.

"He asked if there was anybody from the leadership team who could go with him when he visits the other clubs, introduce him to folks, keep him organized, generally be his right hand. And we all three said you with no hesitation, if you can work it around your job, that is. We don't want to pile more stuff on you."

Her heart skipped a beat. Maybe half a dozen. She couldn't be sure, but she was suddenly light-headed. Work alongside the man who must think her a pouty drama queen? That kind of awkward was right up there with catching the bouquet at her ex's wedding. She rarely let down her guard with anyone, except maybe Yolanda. It wasn't comfortable laying all of her personal baggage onto someone else. Even a supposedly safe stranger.

Thankfully, she hadn't told him what had sent her out onto the terrace that night. Finding her falling apart was embarrassing enough, not to mention his offer of a pity dance.

A sweet thought, but she hadn't been *that* desperate. So she ran.

A heap load of good that did.

Wyatt continued, clearly unaware of the hubbub going on inside her. "You were with us at the beginning and know everything about CU from the ground up. Would you be willing to step away from the Arlington club to help him out?"

Her mind whirled. "Ummm ..."

"Don't worry about us," Reed said, thankfully misinterpreting her hesitation. "Shannon's more than ready for her own circle, and we have three more volunteers who've just completed their training."

"Um ..." Words. Use. Words. "Sure." She swallowed when the answer barely made it past her throat. "Whatever you need."