

CHAPTER THREE

*A*bout halfway back to Millvale, dark clouds released their moisture. Mark turned the wipers on high and peered through streams of water as rain pounded the windshield. The wind pushed his car sideways, and he gripped the steering wheel tighter, slowing to keep from hydroplaning on the slick highway. Tension radiated through his neck, shoulders, back, and arms and down to his feet.

Vehicles ahead of him disappeared in the veil of rain. Emergency signals blinked through the haze from several cars that had pulled to the shoulder of the road. He prayed and continued driving.

The rain and wind stopped. Blue sky appeared as the dark clouds rolled away. Mark released the tension from his body and flexed, stretching his fingers.

“Thank you, God.”

The sun peeked through the opening in the clouds and spread its rays across the fields and hills, like God’s smile on the day. And with the sun came hope.

The company offered a generous severance package, including several months of health insurance. With that and his

savings, financially, he'd be all right, barring an emergency. He wouldn't have as much to give to the church or to support the homeless shelter in Break-a-Bean. He'd try to continue sending support to the children's home in Peru that had been dear to Rachael's heart.

Taking the exit toward Millvale, he turned onto a less-traveled, shorter route into town. A few miles from Millvale, the front right wheel of a red SUV disappeared into a water-filled ditch, sending the rest of the vehicle leaning sharply after it.

Mark gasped, and his right foot jerked to the brake pedal.

Skid marks streaked the road where the driver had applied brakes and still ended in the ditch slumped forward over the steering wheel.

He drove past, pulled over, and turned on his emergency flashers.

As he approached the SUV on foot, he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Taking a deep, calming breath, he peered in the window. A woman's head was turned away from him, blonde hair splayed against a deflated airbag. Was she breathing? He jerked on the door, and the vehicle rocked in response, but the door wouldn't open. Locked or maybe jammed. He tapped on the window. The woman didn't respond.

She needed help he couldn't give her. He called 911.

He craned his neck until he could see her profile. The wedding band and diamond on her left hand teased his memory. There was something familiar about the woman. Did he know her?

Movement from the back seat drew his attention. A frightened little boy stared at him through the back window from a child's car seat. His face crumpled, and he began to cry.

Mark smiled. "It's okay, buddy. We'll get you out."

The back door refused to open. The vehicle rocked again. Mark feared the moist soil beneath the wheels might break away, then the SUV would slide farther into the ditch.

The boy stopped crying, but his little body still shook with sobs.

The water in the ditch wasn't deep enough to seep into the vehicle. The child seemed in no immediate danger, but concern for the woman gripped Mark. Although he didn't see blood or detect an injury, she hadn't moved or responded to his knocking or the boy's crying.

Let her be all right, God!

"Damaris Cook." She'd been a member of Mark's grief group. Her husband had died suddenly from an undetected heart problem, if he remembered correctly, leaving behind a wife and infant son.

Mark had met the boy once at a grief group social event.

What was his name?

He snapped his fingers. "Harrison, and she calls him Harry." When he tapped on the back window, Harry stared at him, his thumb in his mouth.

"Hi, Harry. I'm Mark. Do you remember me?" Could the boy hear him?

Harry shook his head.

"Someone is coming to help you and your mommy get out of your car. Do you hurt?"

He shook his head.

"I'll stay right here and talk to you, okay?"

He shook his head.

Mark chuckled. Either the boy couldn't understand him or couldn't hear him.

"Who is that you're holding?" He raised his voice and pointed to the purple and green stuffed toy Harry cuddled in his arms.

Harry held it up, dangling it by one leg.

"Is that your dinosaur?"

The boy nodded and smiled.

"He's a handsome fellow."



AFTER DELIVERING THE FLOWERS, Ellie took the back road into Millvale.

“I think there’s an accident up ahead.” Ellie slowed her van.

In the back seat where she conversed with Ian in his car seat, Alana’s head snapped up. “I hope no one’s hurt. It looks like that red SUV is stuck in the ditch. Do they need help?”

The sun had been shining when they left Millvale, but the wet road and water flowing in the ditch indicated it had rained here.

As they passed by, Alana turned to gaze out the window. A man peered into the back window of the SUV. *Is that Mark Chambers?* The driver appeared to be slumped over behind the steering wheel, but Alana couldn’t see into the back. *Please let them be all right, Lord.*

“That looks like Mark Chambers’s car parked ahead. I’ll pull over to see if they need help.” Ellie parked along the road in front of Mark’s vehicle.

“Let me go, Ellie.” Alana opened the door. With her experience in crisis situations, she might be able to help. “You stay in the car with Ian.” Cold moisture seeped into her shoes when she stepped on the grass.

“Be careful,” Ellie called after her.

“I will.” She shut the door and made her way to the shoulder of the road.

Alana’s heart rate accelerated when familiar dark hair and blue eyes met hers as she approached. Surely the flutters in her stomach could be solely a response to the emergency.

“Alana, what are you doing here?” Mark’s eyes widened, and he took a step toward her.

This wasn’t how Alana imagined her first meeting with Mark after returning to Millvale.

“Is anyone hurt? Do you know them?” There would be time later to answer his question. “Is there anything I can do?”

“The woman is Damaris Cook. And this is her son, Harry.” He bent and regarded the boy through the window. “How are you doing, Harry?”

Alana leaned in to see Harry. As her shoulder brushed Mark’s, she caught the scent of his aftershave, and a tingle zipped down her arm. Trying to ignore the sudden warmth, she finger-waved to the small, blond boy cuddling a green and purple dinosaur.

“Hi, Harry.”

He stared back at her, his little face streaked with tears. She longed to gather him in her arms. “Is he all right?”

“He doesn’t appear to be hurt, only scared. I’ve been trying to distract him until the emergency responders get here.”

“So, you’ve called 911.” *Of course, he has.*

“Yes.” He gazed at her for a moment, his forehead creased between his brows.

She should probably explain why she stood here on the road outside Millvale rather than in an IAS camp overseas.

“Mama!” Harry stretched his hand toward the front seat and sobbed. “Mama!”

Mark tapped on the window. “Harry, I’m right here.” Mark made faces at him, and giggles replaced sobs. She admired the way Mark interacted with Harry and distracted him. But then, he’d been a good father to Blythe.

A cool breeze blew, and Alana folded her arms across her body and shivered. The familiar weakness invaded her body. She couldn’t offer much help here and should probably go before she needed medical assistance. But she didn’t want to leave yet. Mark knew the woman and the boy. How close were they?

“What about her?” Alana peered at the woman in the front seat. “You said her name is Damaris Cook. How long has she been unconscious?”

“She hasn’t awakened since I arrived, although she’s breathing. I believe I found them soon after the accident happened. I can’t tell about injuries. The doors are locked, and I can’t get in.”

Two sirens sounded from the direction of Millvale. A third came from the opposite direction.

Mark tapped on the window again. “Okay, Harry, the police and ambulance are almost here. Have you ever met a policeman or someone who works in an ambulance?”

Harry looked at him and blinked.

“I don’t think he understands you, Mark.” Even so, Mark’s chatter kept the little boy occupied so he didn’t think about his mother.

“It’s a little hard talking through the window.” Mark pointed to the flashing lights as a sheriff’s car pulled up behind them, and a fire truck and an ambulance stopped across the road.

Harry’s eyes widened, and he squeezed his dinosaur in his arms.

A sheriff’s deputy approached. Alana moved to the shoulder of the road a few feet away and stood behind Mark’s car.

Her phone pinged. She pulled it out of her pocket. Ellie texted.

What’s going on?

A woman and a boy are locked inside the SUV. I want to make sure they’re all right. Give me just a few more minutes.

Mark stepped back from the SUV. The deputy peered in the windows and tried to open the doors. The vehicle rocked. Alana held her breath, willing it not to tip.

The deputy turned to Mark. “Are you the person who called 911?”

“Yes, I am.”

While Mark talked to the deputy, two firemen jumped from

the fire truck. They examined the position of the vehicle and moved a couple of large rocks to prop the wheel in the ditch. When the SUV no longer rocked, they broke the window and unlocked the door. Alana released the breath she didn't know she was holding.

The EMT and ambulance driver helped Damaris, now conscious and able to stand after smelling salts had been administered, from the car to the gurney they had ready. Damaris talked with the EMT while he examined her.

One of the firemen unlocked and opened Harry's door. The other fireman leaned in and came out with the little boy in his arms.

"Thank you, Lord," Alana whispered.

Harry stared at the man holding him but didn't cry. He twisted to see his mother.

Alana's heart did a little gallop when Mark walked over and stood beside her.

His eyes remained fixed on the accident scene. "They're safe."

He sounded relieved, yet the lines around his eyes revealed stress or fatigue. Her hand reached for him, then dropped to her side. "I'm glad they didn't get hurt. Ellie and I were passing by and saw you here. We stopped to help, but you have it all under control."

Mark nodded and glanced over his shoulder at Ellie's van. "Thank you for stopping." His attention then locked on the scene unfolding before them.

Clutching his dinosaur, Harry reached for the woman. "Mama!" The EMT allowed him to be placed in her arms and checked him for injuries. The mother cuddled him as she talked to the deputy.

The ambulance driver approached. "Ms. Cook wants to speak with you, Mark."

"Thanks, Vinney."

Once Mark spoke Vinney's name, she remembered him. He and his family lived in Millvale.

Before Mark headed over to Ms. Cook, the deputy strode up to them. "If I have any more questions, I'll contact you, Mr. Chambers."

"All right." With a nod to Alana, Mark walked with Vinney toward Damaris.

"Did you witness the accident?" the deputy asked Alana.

"No, sir." Her insides quivered, whether from nervousness or fatigue she didn't know. Or maybe it was disappointment that Mark had left.

She explained her presence, and the deputy wrote down her name, address, and telephone number and returned to his vehicle. Ellie was probably worried about her, and Ian might be getting antsy. She'd better go. She glanced in Mark's direction, and her stomach took a dive.

Mark held Damaris's hand between his two.

Alana frowned. Mark must know Damaris well. Was she just a friend? Were they a couple? In his email correspondence, Mark hadn't even hinted he was dating anyone. Not that it was her business. She had no claim on Mark's affections. Just hoped she might one day.



DAMARIS HELD OUT A TREMBLING HAND, and Mark gently clasped it between his. He didn't know Damaris well, their acquaintance was based on their loss of loved ones. But he was glad he'd been here to help her and her son.

"How are you, Damaris?" Her hand was cold.

She grimaced, drawing attention to a bruise coloring her left cheek. "Oh, a few bumps and bruises and a lot of embarrassment. Thank you for your help, Mark."

Letting go of her hand, he dropped his to his sides. “Of course. Did you skid during the downpour?”

“Just as it stopped. I saw movement in the trees, a deer, and I put on my brakes, a little too hard, I’m afraid. We were on our way to visit some friends. Going through Millvale is the shortest route.”

He smiled at Harry. “How about you, little buddy? Are you happy now that you have your mama?”

Harry held out his dinosaur. “Purple.”

“Is Purple your name?” Mark shook the dinosaur’s right front foot. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Harry’s giggle reached Mark’s heart. “Do you have someone you can call, Damaris, someone who can help you and look after Harry?” He’d volunteer if she needed his help.

She nodded. “Our friends will watch Harry until my parents get here. They’ll meet us at the hospital. So, we’re all set.” She must have made calls while he talked to the deputy.

He could follow the ambulance to the hospital, but Damaris had people to look after her. Hospitals weren’t his favorite place, with Blythe’s death still too fresh.

He wanted to do one more thing before leaving, if she’d let him. “Damaris, may I pray with you and Harry?” He didn’t know her views on God, faith, and prayer.

Damaris glanced at Harry, who was talking quietly to Purple. Her eyes met Mark’s. “I’d like that.”

He nodded and bowed his head. “Father in heaven, thank you for protecting Damaris and Harry and keeping them from serious injury. We’re thankful for these first responders who came and for family and friends who are on their way to help. We ask for Damaris’s quick and complete healing, and we ask that Harry won’t have bad memories of this time. And we pray that Damaris’s parents will arrive safely. In Jesus’s name, Amen.”

“Amen!” Harry said.

Mark and Damaris laughed.

“Thank you, Mark,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He grasped Harry’s hand and shook it.

“Bye, buddy.”

As he headed for his car, Mark pulled his key from his pocket. Harry reminded him how much he missed Blythe—how much he wanted a family of his own.

He paused before opening his car door. Oh, no. He’d left Alana standing by the road when he went to talk to Damaris, but now she was gone. Why was she home? She didn’t tell him she was coming. Her last email came from the IAS camp in Africa.

He got in his car and started it. Checking for traffic, he turned on his blinker and pulled out onto the road. His friendship with Alana had meant a lot in the months since they’d talked at Jack’s wedding. They stayed connected through emails about twice a month. She’d prayed for him in his grief for Blythe, and he’d prayed for her work with the refugees.

He hoped she didn’t leave the country before he could see her again.