

CHAPTER TWO

Drugging her suitcases, Alana Somers opened the door with her key and pulled her luggage inside. She shut the door, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and released it slowly.

Home!

Her sister, Ellie, and brother-in-law, Ben, wanted to pick her up at the airport late last night, but she insisted on getting a room at the airport motel and hiring a ride-share to bring her home this morning. With their new baby, Ian, and their jobs, they needed sleep.

The apartment, with a bouquet of sweet, mild-scented flowers in the middle of the table, smelled clean and fragrant. Ellie's work for sure.

She found a note wedged under the bouquet.

Dear Alana,

Welcome home! Kate and I decided you needed home-cooked food, so she made the soup, and I made the stew. Your favorite cookies are in the cookie jar.

You'll have to let us know more about what your stomach can tolerate.

Ben, Ian, and I want you to have dinner with us tonight. I'll be home just after five. See you then. Please call me to let me know when you arrive.

Love,

Ellie

Alana's stomach growled, reminding her she ate an early breakfast at the airport motel and needed to eat again. Not that she was particularly hungry. Even though she'd had the malaria shot, she contracted the disease anyway. It had taken away her appetite and drained her strength. She yawned.

Like Old Mother Hubbard, her cupboards were bare. Clearly Ellie had been shopping for her and filled the refrigerator. The drawers contained some fresh fruits and vegetables, and eggs and milk sat on the top shelf. On the second shelf, a container labeled "beef stew" sat beside another container labeled "chicken soup."

Alana's stomach growled again. She poured the chicken soup into a pan and set it on the stove to heat. While she waited, she called Ellie to let her sister know she'd arrived home.



ALANA AWOKE and blinked her eyes several times at the painted walls and curtained windows. She squeezed the soft pillow under her head, inhaling its fresh sweetness.

She was in her apartment in the basement of her parents' home in Millvale, not the International Aid Society refugee camp. Bright sunlight shone on the green grass outside her window. She checked her watch. Three o'clock. She'd intended to rest for a few minutes, but she'd slept for two hours. Although in no hurry to get up, she wanted to unpack before going to

Ellie's. She snuggled against her pillow. She still had a couple of hours.

In the refugee camps, noise and activity seldom ceased, and she had little time to relax and think. Her heart broke for the refugees, although she loved what she did. While ill, she'd had little activity and much time to think about the future. When her contract with the IAS came up for renewal in less than a year, would she sign on for another five years? Or was there something else for her? She turned to lie on her back.

How would Mark Chambers react when he learned she was home? The last time they corresponded via email, she was still in Africa. They'd been friends for a long time, but when they talked at Mark's brother's wedding last fall, a spark of hope for more than friendship ignited within her.

Wide awake now, she grabbed her bag of toiletries and headed for the bathroom. After washing her face and brushing her teeth, she transferred her bathroom items to the medicine cabinet and drawers. Returning to the bedroom, she emptied her suitcases of clothes and pushed her luggage to the back of the closet.

Someone knocked on her front door. Who could that be? Hurrying from her bedroom into the living room, she fluffed her hair and smoothed wrinkles from her white T-shirt imprinted with the IAS logo. She peered through the peephole in her front door and threw it open. "Ellie!"

Ellie walked in with a sleeping infant in a carrier and set down the carrier.

Alana stepped into her sister's embrace. "I missed you so much." Alana had seen Ellie six months ago when she came home briefly for Jack and Kate Chambers's wedding. But as she lay ill with malaria on the other side of the world, she longed to be with her sister and family.

Ellie held her in a tight hug. "I'm so glad you're home. Kate's working today, and she insisted she'd take care of the

shop and lock up later. She almost pushed Ian and me out the door because I kept talking about you.” Ellie released her. “I also have a floral delivery to make.”

Alana looked down at the sleeping baby, and the desire to enfold him in her arms became irresistible. “May I hold him?”

“Of course.” Ellie unbuckled Ian and lifted him into Alana’s embrace.

Alana savored his baby softness and sweetness. She’d held many babies, and she even helped birth a few. But Ian, her six-week-old nephew, was special.

“When I was lying on the cot in the infirmary, I thought I’d never see your baby on this side of heaven. And now I’m holding him.” She drew in a deep breath, and tears pooled in her eyes.

“Thank God.” Ellie pulled her into a side hug and rested her head against Alana’s.

Alana followed her sister to the sofa and sat beside her. Ian snuggled against her shoulder.

“Ian couldn’t wait to meet his Aunt Lanie.” Ellie rubbed her arm.

“I could hardly wait to meet him.” Alana laid the sleeping baby on her lap with her arms on either side of him. “Oh, Ellie, he’s beautiful! You and Ben must be so proud.” Would she ever have one of her own? She laughed when he pursed his lips, then frowned and smiled in his sleep.

“Ben loves his little boy. He spends all the time he can with him. He’s a great daddy.”

Ian stretched, and his eyes fluttered open.

“Hi, Ian. I’m your Aunt Lanie. I’m so glad to meet you.” Brown eyes focused on her face. “Thank you for sending the pictures of Grammy holding him.”

“Mama and Daddy brought Grammy to see him the day after we came home from the hospital.”

Ian turned his head toward Ellie when she spoke. She smiled and touched his cheek. “Hi, baby.”

“Mama felt bad she couldn’t be here for his birth and stay and help me at home, but they brought some casseroles for the freezer, and Grammy baked cookies for us on one of her good days. Ben’s parents helped a lot, and our church family supplied meals for us for a week.”

“How is Grammy?” Her dear grandmother’s dementia lay heavy on Alana’s heart.

Ian looked at Alana again. She chuckled at his puzzled expression, a tiny frown on his brow, as if he was trying to figure out her identity.

Ellie shrugged and shook her head. “She has good days and bad. The bad ones are becoming more frequent. They’ve had to remove the knobs from the stove at night, and Mama and Daddy must be especially careful she doesn’t get out and wander away. She still enjoys going to church and cooking, although Mama supervises closely.”

Alana’s heart clutched. This was so unlike the grandmother she knew. “What about her physical health?”

“She sleeps more and is losing weight. Mama takes her out for a walk nearly every day and fixes food Grammy likes. She doesn’t eat every meal. It’s like she forgets to eat, even though Mama coaxes her.”

Grammy had always had a hearty appetite that maintained her active body. Maybe Alana could encourage her to eat. Maybe her time home wouldn’t be wasted.

“It was a good day when they brought her to see Ian. She talked with us and laughed. She loved holding her great-grandson. We had a good time.”

“Mama and Daddy must be getting tired. Being a caregiver isn’t easy.” A lesson she’d learned in refugee camps. If she became a nurse, a onetime dream she had set aside when she

joined the IAS, she could help people like her grandmother even more.

“I think it’s like having a baby—be ready for the unexpected and many nights of interrupted sleep.” Ellie yawned.

“I suppose. It’s like that at work too.” Ian smiled at Alana and cooed. “Look, Ellie, he smiled at me. I’m smitten.” She lifted the baby and kissed his cheek, her arms trembling. Then she held him to her shoulder and rubbed his back. “I’ll have to give him to you, though. Fatigue is catching up with me.” She placed Ian in his mother’s outstretched arms and leaned back on the sofa.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m getting better. The aches and fever are mostly gone, but I still get tired quickly. I’ve lost fifteen pounds, and I have little appetite.” She could sympathize with Grammy, but starvation wasn’t a healthy option, especially if she wanted to return to work.

“I’m glad the IAS sent you home so we can take care of you.” Ellie cuddled her son. “I got to thinking that you didn’t have a car and would have to walk to our house. Then I remembered Daddy had Grammy’s car serviced, so if your license is up to date, you have a car to drive while you’re home. He left it in the garage for you.”

“I thought about borrowing or renting a car, then Mama mentioned Grammy’s car on the phone.”

She wouldn’t play the helpless invalid and make people wait on her, although there would probably be times she’d need help. Having a car would allow her to drive to doctor’s appointments and go other places without having to depend on others. With careful spending during her time out of work, she’d have enough money to live on, and her IAS health care plan would take care of her medical expenses. In six months, she’d be back at work.

Ian fell asleep. Ellie placed him in his carrier and fastened the harness. “I have a quick flower delivery to make. I promised

the arrangement by supper time. Do you want to come with me? It won't take long."

"I still have a few things I'd like to get done here." She looked down at her sleeping nephew, then waved her hand. "I guess the rest can wait. I'll have plenty of time to do it tomorrow. Sure, I'll ride along."

She grabbed her purse and a sweater from her bedroom and rejoined her sister in the living room. "I'll have to go grocery shopping soon."

She held open the door for Ellie to go out with the baby carrier.

"Will you be all right shopping by yourself? Do you want me to go with you?"

Ellie would always be her big sister and want to take care of her.

"I think I'll be fine by myself, but let's see how I feel tomorrow."