



## *A Promise Kept*

*For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.  
~ 2 Corinthians 1:20 (NASB95)*

### Allison

*May 2011*

THIS WASN'T the life Allison Kavanagh had imagined for herself, but it was what her life had become. Like it or not, she had to get on with it.

She turned the key in the lock.

Hidden away in the mountains north of Boise, the two-story log house—built many decades before but completely remodeled on the inside—was open and airy with a state-of-the-art kitchen, modern efficiencies throughout, and spectacular views of the rugged Idaho mountains from every window. The place had been left to Allison four years before in her great aunt's will. Never in her wildest dreams had Allison imagined she would end up living in it one day. Perhaps Aunt Emma had seen the future a little more clearly than she had.

*Welcome to your new home.*

A lump formed in her throat, but she fought back the tears. She was weary of crying—it was all she'd done for months and months. Sometimes it felt like years and

years. Setting her mouth, she dropped her purse onto the small table inside the front door.

Some of her own furniture filled the living room. She was glad of it. Made the place feel a little less foreign to her. Not that it *was* foreign to her. She'd visited her aunt's home many times throughout her life, and after it had come into Allison's possession, it had served as an occasional getaway, a place of peace when life's storms became too much to handle.

Dear Aunt Emma. The sister of Allison's maternal grandmother, Emma Carter had been considered somewhat of a "rebel" in the family. Never married and financially independent because of her success as a nature photographer, added to sound investments and careful spending, she'd lived as she pleased. Oh, the stories Aunt Emma used to tell about World Wars I and II, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression. If ever a woman was born with the gift of storytelling, it had been Emma Carter. No wonder Allison had adored her.

"How do I get on with my life, Aunt Emma?" she whispered.

If Aunt Emma were still alive, she would have answered honestly and directly. No mincing words. Emma Carter had never sugarcoated anything for anybody. Not even for her favorite—as she'd always called Allison—and only—as Allison had pointed out in return—great niece. But Aunt Emma was gone. Allison would have to find the answers on her own or muddle along as best she could without them.

She passed through the living room and walked down the short hallway to the master bedroom. The new queen-sized four-poster she'd purchased sat against the opposite wall, bare of bedclothes other than a quilted mattress cover. Staring at the bed, she felt her aloneness afresh. It burned through her like salt in an open wound.

She looked away.

In a corner of the bedroom sat her large desk and credenza. It too was naked. Allison hadn't entrusted her MacBook, large external display, or printer to the movers. Those important items were still in her car in the driveway.

A design deadline loomed closer. She'd best get her office set up and make certain the Internet was turned on as promised by the cable provider. Her to-do list was too long to ignore, even for a few days. And besides, keeping busy took her mind off many less pleasant realities. Immersing herself in work had been her salvation. For years, really, but especially over the past eleven months. Ever since the day she'd uttered her ultimatum.

The lump in her throat returned. She swallowed again.

*Tough love* some would have called her take-it-or-leave-it demand, and she'd been certain tough love was required in the situation. But she'd believed what she said would be that last straw, that illusive bottom, those words that would change everything.

They *had* changed everything. Just not the way she'd hoped they would. Not the way she'd wanted. Not for the better. Not as promised.

*Why didn't You keep Your promise?*

It was the most she'd said to God in a while. The ability to pray seemed to have shriveled inside of her. One more loss added to so many others.

With a shake of her head, Allison retraced her footsteps to the living room, went out onto the wide redwood deck that circled three sides of the house, and down the steps to her pale gold SUV parked in the driveway. From behind the driver's seat, she released her dog from his crate and set him on the ground. Gizmo sniffed at his new surroundings.

"You stay close. I don't want an eagle or a bear having you for lunch." The tricolored papillon perked up his ears, and she couldn't keep from smiling. "You're such a good boy."

She'd bought Gizmo from a local breeder to help fill the vast emptiness that had surrounded her after her husband walked out the door, leaving her and her ultimatum in the dust. Having an active puppy around had helped ease the emptiness, too. There was always something she needed to do for the little guy—feed him, take him for a walk, give him a bath, let him out to do his business.

She'd read somewhere that owning a papillon meant never going to the bathroom alone, and it was true. Gizmo followed her everywhere. He slept on the unused right side of the bed. He sat near her feet when she ate, a hopeful expression on his face even though she never let him eat table scraps. He curled up beside her on the sofa while she watched television. He lay in his dog bed under her desk when she was on the computer. He was her constant and best companion, and she loved him for making her feel less alone.

Perhaps she would become that crazy old lady who lived in a log cabin in the mountains, talking only to her dog. Or dogs. She could get Gizmo a friend or two. Or maybe she should acquire a half-dozen cats. She could give herself a funky haircut and let it go all frizzy and kinky. She could dress in bright, baggy clothes. But then, who would know if she was crazy or not? Who would see her? A dense forest separated her from her nearest neighbors, and she was miles up a winding highway to the nearest town. Not to mention that her only child, Meredith, lived halfway across the country.

A crazy old lady. She closed her eyes and released a sigh. Forty-five wasn't old, but some days it seemed like it. Some days forty-five felt like ninety.

She went to the back of the Tribeca and opened the rear door. Her LED computer display was in its original box with a handle. She grabbed it along with her laptop case and headed into the house. And for the next several hours, while she hooked up

electronics in the bedroom and the living room and otherwise settled in, she managed to keep her thoughts from returning to the sad place they too often traveled to.

That was no small victory.

## Allison

IT WAS the silence that awakened her the next morning. She'd forgotten how quiet the forest could be, especially in the spring before vacationers found their way to the campgrounds that dotted the area and in the fall when the hunters were out in force. In Boise, the sun would already be full up. Here, it took longer before it topped the eastern ridge. But there was still enough light in the room to see Gizmo staring at her, silently asking out.

"All right," she grumbled. "All right. I'm getting up."

Gizmo barked and jumped off the bed.

Allison reached for her robe as she sat up. It might be May on the calendar, but there was a wintery chill in the morning air.

"I need coffee," she whispered as she headed toward the front door.

She stood on the deck, hugging herself to keep warm while she kept an eye on Gizmo. When he returned, they went straight to the kitchen. She grabbed her favorite mug, plopped a K-cup into her Cuisinart coffeemaker, and pressed the *Brew* button. When her coffee was ready, she carried the mug into the living room and settled onto her favorite chair. Watching sunlight kiss the tops of tall trees, she let her thoughts meander through time, at last settling on her parents.

Robert and Margaret Knight. Bob and Maggie to their close friends. If ever two people loved each other, it was her mom and dad. Growing up, when her dad's car pulled into the driveway at 5:40 each weekday, her mom's eyes had lit up. She acted as though she hadn't seen him in nine days instead of nine hours. Dad was the same way with her.

Allison and her brother, Chuck, had golden childhoods. They truly did. They were loved and encouraged and supported. They had everything they needed and plenty of what they wanted. Their mom had hauled them all over creation for their various activities—ballet, football, piano, track, Brownies, Cub Scouts—and she'd beamed with pride over their accomplishments. And their dad had been the rock at the center of their home. He still was.

Allison's extended family had never been huge, but all of them—"in-laws and outlaws," her dad used to call them—were close. They used to gather together for birthdays and Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter. They used to have summer barbecues and weekend card parties. They'd gone camping together, the whole lot of them, sometimes in the forest behind Aunt Emma's log house.

Good food and lots of laughter. Those had been two constants throughout Allison's growing up years. Foolishly, she'd thought that was how it was in every family. Naively, she'd thought that was how it would be after she married Tony and they had a family of their own.

It hadn't turned out quite that way.

Tony Kavanagh. Star quarterback and president of the high school debate team. Straight A student all the way through his schooling. Tall, dark, and handsome. A walking cliché. Whatever he'd touched in those early years had turned to gold. She'd loved him almost from the first moment she laid eyes on him as he walked across the Boise State campus.

Did she love him still? No. Although she still loved the memories of the good times they'd had as a family. Mostly, what she felt now was grief. The dream of a happy, lasting marriage had died a slow and painful death, and she'd buried it and mourned it. Mourned it even now.

She gave her head a shake, hoping to dislodge the sad thoughts. She should get off her fanny and get to work. She had a web site design to finish by the end of next week. The client had been patient, understanding when Allison needed an extra few weeks because of her move. But she didn't want to miss the new deadline. She prided herself on being on time.

And yet, even knowing this, when she rose from the chair, she didn't head for her desk nor did she walk to the bathroom so she could shower and dress. Instead, after brewing a second cup of coffee, she wandered up the stairs. She looked into the two bedrooms, empty except for boxes she needed to go through again and the treadmill she hadn't used in weeks. She'd given away and donated many possessions before the move, but there was still so much *stuff*. How had she accumulated it all? How had *they* accumulated it all? She needed to get rid of even more.

*But not today. I don't want to go through it today.*

She sighed and was about to retrace her steps but stopped when she noticed the trapdoor that led to the attic. Aunt Emma hadn't allowed Allison and Chuck to go up there when they were children. Allison had never asked to do so as an adult. And it hadn't occurred to her to explore the attic after the house came into her possession. To be honest,

she'd forgotten it was even accessible via the door in the hall ceiling. She hadn't looked up until now.

Did Aunt Emma keep anything in the attic? Had she emptied it before her death?

A short rope was strung from a handle, the opposite end looped around a hook screwed into the wall. Allison unwound the loop, took a breath, and pulled downward. The trapdoor opened with surprising ease and the wooden ladder slid to the floor. As she put her foot on the bottom rung, she halfway expected to hear Aunt Emma scold her from downstairs.

"Wait here, Gizmo."

Her dog lay down, resting his muzzle on his paws.

When Allison's head rose above the insulated opening, she discovered morning light streaming through windows on both the front and back ends of the attic room. A naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling told her the room was wired for electricity, should she ever want to be up here at night. She doubted that would happen, but a brief glance around located the light switch.

There were numerous cardboard boxes stacked at one end of the room. A dress form stood guard near one window, a measuring tape draped around its neck. Beside the dress form was an old treadle sewing machine. When Allison was a little girl, both of those items were in Aunt Emma's bedroom, where Allison's desk sat now. It must be a good twenty-five years since she'd last seen them.

She climbed the rest of the way up the ladder and stood in the center of the attic. To her left, against the sloped sides of the attic, were two battered steamer trunks and one cedar hope chest. Instinct told her the cardboard boxes would hold "things" while the trunks and chest would hold keepsakes. She was drawn in the latter's direction.

## Emma - 1917

THE United States declared war on Germany on Emma Isobel Carter's tenth birthday—April 6, 1917. Forever after, even when she was older and knew better, Emma would have the strange feeling she'd been the cause of one of her family's greatest sadnesses. But on that particular birthday, all she knew was that the adults wore grim expressions and her birthday party, complete with cake and ice cream, felt sad.

Although Emma had hoped for books for her tenth birthday, the gift from her parents was a doll, identical to the one her sister, Elizabeth, had received on her ninth

birthday two months earlier. Emma didn't play with dolls, but Mama never seemed to notice. Emma would much rather tuck herself in a corner somewhere and read a book about foreign places. Or climb a tree. Or skip rocks on the pond. Or ride her horse bareback in the pasture.

Emma knew, even at her tender age, she would never be as pretty as her sister. Elizabeth—younger by ten months—was more than pretty. She was beautiful. Everyone said so. Liza, as Emma called her sister, had golden ringlets and sky-blue eyes and a smile that melted hearts, Emma's included. Liza was sweet and charming without even trying; it came as natural to her as drawing breath.

That night, well after Liza had fallen asleep, Emma got out of bed and went downstairs to get a drink of water. That was when she overheard her parents talking in the parlor.

"Will you have to go, Roger?"

"I don't believe so. Not unless the war drags on."

"It's already dragged on. England's been fighting in Europe for years. So many men have died and still it goes on."

"Don't worry, Pearl. They'll call up unmarried men first. Younger men. I don't think I'll have to go."

"But my brother will. Won't he?"

"Yes, Stewart would be called up. If there's a conscription, they'll take the younger and single men first. But I imagine he'll volunteer before that could happen."

Her mother's voice fell to a whisper. "You don't really think he'll volunteer, do you?"

"I think he might, Pearl. Young men always seem eager to rush off to war, and your brother has a strong sense of patriotism."

Her mother started to cry.

Emma returned to her bedroom without getting a glass of water from the kitchen. She'd lost her thirst. She didn't understand everything her parents had said, but she understood Uncle Stewart was probably going away. Her uncle was the one adult who seemed to like Emma just the way she was, and now he would be leaving.

She stood at the window, looking out at the moonless night. A tomboy—that's what Mama called Emma sometimes—and she didn't make it sound like a good thing to be. But one time, when he'd heard what Mama said, Uncle Stewart winked at Emma and whispered, "You go right ahead and be a tomboy. Climb those trees. Ride those horses. Read all those books. Go as high as you can as fast as you can and learn as much as you can."

When she heard Uncle Stewart's voice saying those things in her head, she wasn't afraid to do anything, try anything, be anything. But when she couldn't hear his voice, when he wasn't around to encourage her with a grin and a wink, it was easier to just do what others, like Mama and Liza, wanted her to do and to be what they wanted her to be. Emma turned away from the window, crawled into bed, and buried her face in her pillow. Then, like her mother, she cried.

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