

Chapter ONE

I Used to Think Doctors Knew Everything

September 20, 2011

I'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY your world can turn upside down in an instant, but I didn't realize the devastating truth of those words until the day it happened to me.

The phone rang at my desk on a regular old Tuesday afternoon as I sat trying to work out the terms of a new contract. I glanced through the glass panel of my office door and made eye contact with the receptionist at the front desk. It was unusual for her to send calls straight through to me when she knew I was working a deal. *Odd*, I thought as she frantically motioned for me to pick up, a look of concern etched across her face. Wondering who in the world it might be, I answered, "This is Alyssa."

"Love, I need you to come get me. Something's wrong."

My heart skipped at the panicked sound of my husband's voice.

“Your stomach?” It was my best guess.

“Yes! *Please hurry!*”

I grabbed my purse from under my desk and threw open the office door, not even stopping to save the contract or grab my jacket. I was never one to leave in the middle of the workday, but the desperation in my husband’s voice sent chills straight down my spine.

“I need to go. Nick needs help!” I called over my shoulder as I sprinted past my boss and through the lobby.

I practically fell down three flights of stairs, jumped into my car, and peeled out of the parking garage, cursing under my breath. Dialing Nick’s number, I demanded he stay on the phone with me as I made my way toward the dealership where he worked as a service advisor in Bellevue, just east of Seattle.

We’d gone to the doctor just three days before, only the second doctor’s visit Nick had been to in the four years since we’d met. He rarely even caught a common cold. After some questions and customary tests, the physician had assured us Nick was, without a doubt, 100 percent fine. My tall, dark, and handsome twenty-four-year-old hubby was “healthy as a horse.”

“The pain could be from a stomach virus,” the doctor said. “To be honest, it could even just be bad food or something. You wouldn’t believe how many patients come through with stomach problems and later on find it’s just . . . gas.”

Nick and I looked at each other and couldn’t help but burst out laughing, relieved to hear his discomfort might just be due to our diet, which was admittedly high in Mexican takeout.

But now on the phone with me, Nick’s voice sounded strained past the point of bad salsa. “I’ve never felt anything like this before. Something is wrong.” He said the dull ache from days before had never fully gone away and had instead turned into severe and constant agony. When

he described the sharp discomfort and location to his doctor over the phone, the doctor told Nick to come to his office immediately.

I punched the gas, willing our Scion TC to go as fast as possible. *Please, God, don't let me get pulled over. Not now.*

When I pulled up to Nick's work ten minutes later, I spotted him right away, limping out a back door, struggling to walk. I jumped out of the car and sprinted over to him, wishing I wasn't in heels. Bracing myself, I let him use my five-foot-three-inch body as a crutch.

After easing him into the passenger seat with quite a bit of effort, I threw the car into drive. I'd never seen him like this. Nick was the strong one. He was the happy, smiling, optimistic one. And he was always, without a doubt . . . the *healthy* one.



Ours had been a whirlwind romance, like one of those Hallmark movies complete with an early onset of seemingly insurmountable challenges. We met when we were practically babies. I was nineteen; Nick was twenty. Struggles aside, I thought I'd hit the jackpot when he proposed six months after we met.

Our wedding was small, but in all the ways that truly mattered, it was perfect. I was thrilled to be marrying the man of my dreams. Handsome as they come, Nick had an amazing smile and the magical ability to make everyone around him feel important, especially me. He was unfailingly kind and, as was necessary for my parents' approval, he loved God with his whole heart.

But not long after our incredible honeymoon, the novelty of our relationship faded right along with our tans. What had started out as a whirlwind romance and fantastical soulmate matchup quickly turned

into something else entirely. Eventually we found ourselves forcing down bites of the frozen top of our wedding cake, and before we knew it, it had been not just one but three years since we'd said, "I do."

We worked insane hours in those first several years of marriage. Nick started out moving cars around the lot at a local showroom; I began at the front desk of a personal training facility. Both of us were self-motivated and hard workers, and as we started climbing up our respective corporate ladders, our working hours climbed too.

The more I found myself focusing on my career goals, the more my appreciation for the small joys of life seemed to disappear. And after a couple of years, so did much of my appreciation for Nick.

To add to the mix, social media, the mother of all discontentment, arrived on the scene. I began comparing my life to what I saw while scrolling Pinterest boards and Facebook news feeds. I did it subconsciously, but I did it *a lot*, comparing *everything*.

Nothing was off limits in my mind: my ring, our jobs, our relationship, or our incredibly expensive but undeniably rundown city-living condo. Both Nick and I felt a little behind when we compared our achievements to those of our friends and the highlight reels online just made it worse. Social media, of course, is not all bad, but the way I used it was. We all know comparison can steal our joy, but it did worse to me—it made me miserable.

My own personal discontentment crept up on me so slowly I barely even noticed it was happening. Eventually it got so bad that I convinced Nick we should bundle together all of our savings and buy a house. We settled on one much too large for us and a whole commute away. I should have learned an expensive lesson when not even the big house made me happy. While my friends saw me as mostly optimistic, behind closed doors I had some serious issues to work on. Mastering contentment was *definitely* one of them.



About a month before I found myself speeding down the freeway toward my sick husband, our third wedding anniversary, August 16, 2011, had been right on the horizon. I'd perused Pinterest for weeks whenever I had free time, nailing the perfect gift for Nick with time to spare. Of course, I also came across all kinds of things that would have been perfect for *me*.

Much to my internet-loving dismay, when the morning of our anniversary finally came, all I got was a quick peck on the cheek. No jewelry. No breakfast in bed. No card next to my pillow. Not even a quick, "Happy Anniversary." Just like every other early morning, we'd rolled out of bed and slumped into our cars clutching our coffees for dear life, only to sit in an hour of bumper-to-bumper traffic. Our lives consisted of long commutes and even longer days working toward promotions and raises, all to pay for a house we were hardly ever at.

Though that morning had been rushed, I'd held on to hope for what could happen after work. I tried not to picture anything too spectacular. But, at the very least, I expected a nice card and reservations at a decent place.

As soon as I got home, after leaving the office on time for once, I set Nick's card and his carefully wrapped present on the counter. I'd discovered the traditional gift for a third-year anniversary was leather, so I'd ordered him a trendy leather wallet weeks in advance and tucked a sappy love note inside.

Maybe tonight will be our turning point, I thought. I could feel we'd been growing apart, but I hadn't stopped to identify the reasons why. In hindsight, I can see our insane work hours and my lack of appreciation for basically everything had pooped all over our relationship. We weren't making each other a priority. Our main concern, whether we wanted to admit it or not, was work. And our second? Also work. Whatever I might have thought my priorities were, the way I spent my time proved otherwise.

My phone buzzed with a text from Nick saying he'd be stopping by the store on his way home. *No big. He's probably picking up flowers! Or maybe champagne?* But when he got home a half an hour later, all I saw in his hand was a sagging plastic drugstore bag.

A few minutes later he handed me . . . a card. Below the generic preprinted sentiment was a bland two-sentence note he had scribbled in a hurry. No gift. No note about something in the mail or anything to look forward to. He'd just bought me a card on his way home . . . from the same place I got my birth control. *Oi.*

I did my best to keep my cool. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. I mean, this was my *Nick*. He was usually so thoughtful! He certainly had to have *something* planned to celebrate the three years we'd been married.

"Um . . . thanks, babe," I said, attempting not to look too disappointed as I tucked the card back into its envelope and pushed my gift his way. I didn't want to believe he had forgotten the day I'd spent weeks looking forward to.

Nick's smile was huge as he unwrapped his gift. "This is perfect, love! Thank you!" He immediately pulled his old, tattered wallet out of his back pocket and started switching all of his cards over to the new one. He even got all choked up when he found my note.

"You're welcome, babe!" I paused a moment, but when he didn't say anything else, I asked, "So . . . should I go get ready? What should I wear?"

"For what?" At first he looked genuinely confused and then a bit guilty.

I was probably starting to look really annoyed. I couldn't believe this was happening. My husband hadn't made any plans for our anniversary.

"We have to go *somewhere* or do *something!*" I told Nick, now completely frustrated. "I'm going upstairs to change. You just . . . pick a place!"

I stamped up the stairs, gritting my teeth, determined to salvage what was left of our anniversary. Twenty minutes later I was in a dress, and I'd even gone as far as to run a straightener over my hair, mainly to give myself a few more minutes to calm down. I was pretty upset, but there was *no way* we were calling this a night.

We left the house, but, oh, how I wished we would have just stayed home. When Nick pulled into the parking lot of a dinky restaurant five miles from our house on the bottom floor of an empty office building located on the edge of a stormwater retention pond, I burst into a legit ugly cry.

You know the kind. Snot. Tears. Probably a little drool. All the built-up hurt came out at once after years of ignoring the tough conversations, setting high expectations only to be let down again and again, and comparing what other husbands did for their wives to what my husband did for me. It felt like everything was pointing to one fact: Nick no longer loved me.

“Do you even care about me at all?” My lip quivered as I wiped my eyes, trying to get it together.

When he attempted an apology, I scoffed, brushing it aside. *I can't believe this!*

I felt incredibly hurt, but I was also incredibly hungry, which was rapidly gaining in importance, so despite my smeared mascara, we went in. Nick was still in his suit from work, and I was wearing a dress. But, kid you not, everyone else seemed to have just come in from working on the farm.

We didn't tell the waitress *why* we were there, and she didn't ask, which was weird considering our attire. It should have been an easy conversation starter, but she probably sensed our tension from a mile away. I ordered a bacon cheeseburger with extra-greasy fries because the night was already blown, and I figured I might as well eat what I wanted (aka my feelings).

It's safe to say the mood that night was anything but romantic or celebratory. And it definitely wasn't the new start I'd been hoping for in our relationship.

As I lay awake all that night, I wondered, *Did I make a mistake in marrying Nick?* Maybe I had married a man who didn't love or cherish me after all. Maybe we *were* too young. Maybe we weren't cut out for this.

We'd been fighting a lot, arguing over the most trivial things—like laundry, and bills, and things that hadn't even happened yet and probably never would. Plus, the spark between us was so dim I couldn't even have called it a flicker if I wanted to.

Everything about being married had been one thousand times harder than I imagined it would be, and I couldn't picture fifty more anniversaries like this one.

"Was this really your plan, God? It kind of sucks," I whispered into the dark.

I didn't hear a response.



We pulled into the parking lot of the doctor's office with a loud screech. Once inside, I pulled Nick's health insurance card out of his new leather wallet and handed it to the lady at the front desk.

A nurse whisked Nick away as I was talking to the receptionist about how to fill out the form for an abdominal CT scan. Nick turned to say, "I'll be right back" and tried to smile my way, but it turned into more of a grimace as he doubled over in pain. He looked up just in time to mouth "I love you" before disappearing behind a set of automatic doors. Suddenly I was all alone. The paperwork filled out, all I could do was wait.

Some twenty minutes later, not knowing what else to do, I found myself staring at the carpet and trying to find a pattern in the multicolored fibers to keep my sanity. When the door opened and I saw Nick, I breathed a massive sigh of relief. My brain had already worked out a couple of scenarios that really weren't good.

"I don't need a wheelchair," Nick said to the nurse as he limped his way back to me, breathing hard. He could be so darn stubborn. It used to bother me, but eventually I would be grateful for that same stubbornness that would keep him fighting against impossible odds.

When doors flew open again a few moments later, a doctor rushed into the waiting room waving what I'm assuming were CAT scan results. "You need to get to the ER right now! Your appendix ruptured," he said urgently, looking directly at Nick. And then more quietly, he muttered, "I don't understand it."

"He should be dead." The doctor was staring at me now. "You need to take him to the ER. *Immediately*. We're right across the street and you taking him will be quicker than us calling an ambulance. Don't stop for anything. Just go!"

But for a few seconds, I didn't go. I didn't move. I just sat there.

I played soccer my whole life and my coaches always commended my ability to pivot and make quick decisions out on the field. At work, I was often praised for operating at top performance under pressure. But in the waiting room of a doctor's office as my husband's life seemingly hung in the balance, my reaction time was definitely delayed.

When I finally got my mind and body to cooperate, I gripped Nick's hand and started moving. We inched toward the door, him moving slowly because of the pain. Nurses gathered around the exit to watch the drama unfold, but I was barely aware of them. Nick was smiling and kept refusing the wheelchair they kept offering. I felt like I was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I could almost hear the theme music playing as Nick and I moved in what felt like slow motion when I knew

we should have been sprinting. My brain was going a million miles an hour despite the heavy, sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Nick remained calm, cool, and collected the entire time. His face was a bit pale from the pain, but other than that, he looked like one of those perfectly chiseled statues you'd see in Italy. *How does he always manage to do that?* I wondered.

He tried to hold himself upright as we made our way back to the parking lot. He turned, smirking at me as I studied him hard. His dark-brown eyes crinkled a bit at the corners, his mouth turned upward in one of his infamous grins.

"I'm not dying, Alyssa. I don't know why the doctor was freaking out. It hurts, but it's not *that* bad. I'm going to be just fine."

Nick was pretty convincing. Always had been. I felt the tiniest bit relieved. If Nick thought he would be fine, then he would be. Life would go back to normal after this nightmare was over. Our recent normal hadn't exactly been a fairytale, but at least it was predictable. There was never a need to be brave. Even if it was a little boring, it was better than this mayhem.

When we were just ten feet from the car, Nick doubled over in pain again, erasing any doubts I held about the doctor's diagnosis.

Something was definitely wrong. This was *not* normal.

After pulling a "California stop" at every intersection I encountered, we arrived at Evergreen Hospital's Emergency Room just a few blocks away. Nick's doctor must have called ahead and told them we were coming because ER nurses were waiting just inside the door.

"Nicholas Magnotti?" a brunette with a clipboard asked. The second nurse, tall and blond, hurried over with yet another wheelchair.

"Yes, I'm Nick . . . but I don't need that," Nick said, refusing transportation yet again. "I prefer to walk." He flashed a defiant grin my way and winked.

My cheeks turned red as regret surged through me. His smile used to make me weak in the knees, but lately it barely made a dent in my hardened heart.

I tried to wink back, but I'd never really been great at winking. Plus, I was still trying not to cry. I'm not sure what was going on with my face in that moment, but I am certain it wasn't attractive. Nick was gazing at me with what seemed like complete adoration. *Has he looked at me like that at any point in the last month? What about the last two years of our marriage? Have I been missing something?*

Once Nick's vitals were checked, the concern in the nurses' eyes subsided, but only by a little.

"Let's get you into a room," the brunette said quickly.

"Finally! I was just starting to think you guys weren't taking me seriously!" Nick's smile rose right up to his eyes, and he let out a laugh.

I couldn't help but giggle in spite of my worry. He sure had a way of breaking the tension. *Man, I've forgotten how much I love him.*

The nurse led us through a swinging door, around a corner, and into a temporary "room" which consisted of floor-length curtains hung neatly around a hospital bed, a rolling cabinet of medical supplies, and some monitoring equipment.

A young male doctor showed up just as I was forcing my shaky fingers to tie the last bow on the back of Nick's hospital gown. He asked some questions mostly centered on Nick's gastrointestinal history. Of course, Nick made a few references to all the tacos we'd been eating, and I laughed harder than I meant to.

But the next words out of the ER doctor's mouth brought me back to reality and wiped the smile clean off my face.

"Nick, you should be sweating, screaming, vomiting, and passing out. Dying, to be honest. I've reviewed your scans and you have a burst appendix. But none of your symptoms support that theory. Your blood is

normal. You seem relatively fine, but you're not." He studied my husband as if he were a tricky calculus problem he was determined to solve.

"So that means . . ." I asked, urging him to get to the point.

"I have no idea."

Well, at least he's honest.

The entire ER staff seemed just as baffled as the physician was who sent us there. Doctor after doctor stepped behind the enclosure to ask questions and to poke and prod. At one point, we had five medical professionals in our curtained space all at once, discussing Nick's case, offering suggestions, and attempting to make a plan. During one such medical powwow, another wave of pain washed over Nick's face, and I watched helplessly as the nurses did what they could to reposition him. I held his hand but mostly just felt in the way.

The hospital didn't have a clue what to do with us. Nick's scans showed a ruptured appendix but other than the exploded organ and the constant ebb and flow of intense abdominal pain, nothing seemed out of place. After almost five hours, it was obvious we weren't getting any closer to answers.

A nurse came by to deliver the news. "You guys will need to spend the night. We're moving you to an extended stay room on the fifth floor. It's the oncology floor, just to warn you."

"Oncology? That's cancer, right?" I asked.

"Right. But it's just the floor where we have space for you guys right now. Don't worry!"

On the way up the elevator, Nick had the nurse chatting about her job, life, and dreams for her children. He always knew how to make other people feel seen. As I followed behind them down the long hallway, I couldn't help but peek in the rooms we passed. The beds were filled with patients missing their hair and hooked up to machines and monitors by tubes and cords. I saw partners and family members who looked absolutely exhausted.

What a miserable place to be, I thought. I couldn't imagine what it might be like to spend days on end in a hospital. I frowned, shooting up a quick prayer for the patients and their families before we settled into a room at the end of the hall. Luckily, we'd be out of here soon. This floor gave me the creeps.

As hours turned into the next day, my adrenaline still hadn't started to fade. I didn't sleep a wink, and my heart raced, yet there I sat with nothing I could do to fix the situation. My whole life I had always disliked having nothing to do. Even during my soccer years, I didn't often ride the bench. Our hospital stay reminded me of those few games when I wasn't well enough to participate and had to sit on the sidelines. I absolutely hated it. I wanted to be in the game, to help my team, to contribute, but I was forced to watch instead.

This felt much the same. It was as if Nick and I had just experienced the craziest, most adrenaline-pumping "first half" and now we were benched. I was tense and ready to fight, but there was nothing to fight against.

I was already a little anxious because of the circumstances, but even a normal person could go crazy in a room that small with all the machines, the medical equipment, and the horrible antiseptic smell. So we did whatever we could to keep our heads. In the first twenty-four hours, I felt pretty dang productive aside from the problem at hand. If we weren't going to get anywhere with the doctors, I would at least get stuff done for work. Nick prayed; I responded to emails. I read; Nick made up silly songs. When I ran out of menial tasks, we played games with visiting friends and family. I also ate as much chocolate pudding as I could sneak from the kitchen without anyone really noticing.

After all that, there was still time. Lots of it. And Nick and I used it to talk. Hours upon hours of sitting together on Nick's hospital bed finally gave us the therapy we'd been needing for almost two years. For the first time in what felt like forever, we got it all out in the open. We laughed.

We cried. We talked about our marriage. About our jobs. About what mattered. We came clean about how we were feeling. Most importantly, we apologized and forgave each other for all the miscommunication over the years. As we talked, I was relieved to find Nick wanted a new beginning for us too.

We should have gotten real with each other and talked like that sooner. I had spent way too much time thinking about the lack of romance in our lives and then blaming Nick for not making the effort, instead of talking about it and telling him what I wanted. I assumed his actions, or lack thereof, meant he didn't love me. As it turned out, he had *no* idea I felt so bad—because I never told him.

By the end of the second night, we were emotionally drained but there was a new spark in the room, a glimmer of hope. Being stuck in the hospital, we decided, didn't have to be just a bad thing after all. This could be the start of something new. Our second chance. Even in the midst of all the uncertainty, for the first time in a long time, I felt excited about our relationship.

"I love you. I'm going to work on things. We *will* do better." Nick leaned down to kiss me on the forehead. We were snuggled up in his hospital bed, his pain pretty well managed at that point. I was feeling a little more like myself after brushing my teeth and changing into the pajamas my mom had brought over from our house the day before. "We'll always keep getting better together, love," he said. "I promise I won't ever stop trying. Forever and a day, right?"

"Forever and a day." I whispered back the sentiment we'd used so often early in our relationship when we had sworn over and over again that eternity wasn't long enough, so we would always add a day. Cuddling in closer, I rested my head on Nick's chest as he dozed off.

But every time I closed my eyes, questions raced and wouldn't stop. *What in the world is wrong with Nick? And what is wrong with me that it took me this long to remember how incredible he is?*

Alone with my thoughts, I couldn't help myself from questioning God over and over again. *How long will You keep this up?* I'd believed in Him wholeheartedly since I was a kid. I'd grown up in church. I'd even accepted Jesus as my Savior and gotten baptized at age nine. My parents were both believers: Dad since forever and Mom since she converted from being Catholic. But, over the last couple of years, everything had started to feel different. Anything to do with God, rubbed me raw. How could the God who "loved me" let things like *this* keep happening?

First, I'd gotten sick. Then, the thing with my parents. More recently, my own marriage had been falling apart. Now when it felt like our relationship was finally coming back together, something was definitely still wrong with my husband.

I whispered my prayers that night, tears streaming down my cheeks, believing God was listening but starting to wonder if He really cared. "God . . . heal Nick. You know what's wrong. Fix him. Please! I've been so focused on the wrong things. God, I'm begging You . . . I need another chance."