

*someone like you*

VICTORIA BYLIN



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*For my husband . . . Always!*



*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*

*Ezekiel 36:26*

# *one*

Zeke Monroe appreciated a good joke, and this one was on him. Grinning, he crossed the plush charcoal carpet in his office to a desk the size of an aircraft carrier. A new Han Solo action figure guarded his pencil cup, and a handwritten sign was taped to the back of his massive leather chair.

“Starship Command,” he read out loud. “Captain Zeke Monroe to the rescue.”

Chuckling, he peeled off the sign. Everyone on the Caliente Springs management team knew he appreciated a silly prank now and then, and in the eight months he’d been general manager of the historic California resort, he had come to call them all friends.

Which made the task before him daunting at best: save Caliente Springs from bankruptcy, or allow two hundred people to lose their jobs.

People like Ashley, the CS marketing director, whose daughter suffered from severe asthma.

Or Javier, a college kid who helped support his family by working as a concierge.

And Mrs. Jenson, the gift shop clerk who joked—maybe—about living on cat food without her small paycheck.

Four months from now, the historic resort needed to be booked solid with guests, weddings, and conferences, or they'd all be out on the street. No way would Zeke let that happen.

His gaze shot to the window that faced the distant brown hills. The rolling landscape was lovely, especially at sunset, but he would have preferred a view of the entire resort. Caliente Springs was huge, a conglomeration of the five-story main hotel, three single-story buildings that offered garden rooms, a cluster of luxurious cottages behind a security gate, and top-notch recreation facilities: golf, tennis, three swimming pools, game rooms, a gym, restaurants, a fishing pond, hiking trails, and an equestrian center.

Zeke loved this place, but it was falling apart. The roads constantly needed repair, and the majority of the guest rooms screamed 1990, with dark green accent walls and dusty rose tile. Trendy? Definitely not. But he was working on modernizing everything from the décor to the business model.

He dropped onto the chair and tried to open his desk drawer to check his to-do list. Something caught inside, so he pried at it with a letter opener. When the jam sprang loose, the “Chicken Dance” song crowed from the birthday card he'd been given last week from the marketing department. A grin spread across his face. Who could *not* laugh at the “Chicken Dance”?

Irene, his executive assistant, hobbled around the corner. “If I wasn't having a hip replacement next week, I'd invite you to polka with me.”

Dancing wasn't his thing, but he'd do it for Irene. “Bring on the Oompah band.”

Irene patted her bad hip. “I'll leave the dancing to you. In the meantime, while I'm out, I've written instructions for whoever fills in.”

“Thanks.”

“About the business cards—” She arched a brow at him. “Have you decided which one to use?”

“No.”

Irene, silver-haired, with reading glasses on her nose, waited in that motherly way that mixed patience with silent urging. A week ago, she’d given him a sheet of paper with three versions of his name. It was still on his desk, front and center, face-up, with his doodling all over the page.

She peered at him over her wire-framed glasses. “Is there a problem?”

“A big one. I don’t know which one to use.” Being named after a biblical prophet was a problem for a man wrestling with his faith. Being named after two of them, as in Ezekiel Amos Monroe, was just plain inconvenient. Zeke couldn’t even hide behind a normal middle name. He lifted the sheet with the three versions and studied it.

Irene sat in the guest chair. “Try reading them out loud.”

He started with the card he was using now. “‘Zeke Monroe, General Manager.’” Simple. Unpretentious. Exactly who he was. But old nicknames slapped at him, like Zeke the Freak. Or worse, Zeke the Meek, the name he’d been handed back in college by a self-absorbed jerk named Hunter Adams.

Irene waited for the next one.

Zeke crossed it out while he read. “‘E. A. Monroe, General Manager.’ Forget it. People will think I’m Elizabeth or Emily and trying to hide it.”

Irene nodded. “Yes. Forget that one.”

Using his pep-talk voice, he read the last name on the list. “‘Ezekiel A. Monroe, General Manager.’” It was a preacher’s name, assigned to him before he even drew his first breath.

His gaze flicked to the edge of his desk and the photograph taken ten years ago with his dad at their mission church in

Chile. Arms linked, they grinned into the camera, father and son, preacher and protégé. But not anymore. Memories of his dad, and one quarrel in particular, still pricked his heart.

Thrusting those memories aside, he compared the names from a business perspective alone. Ezekiel A. Monroe would be a constant reminder of his dad, but it also made him sound older than thirty-one. He was a decade younger than most men in his position, so sounding older was an advantage.

He circled *Ezekiel A. Monroe*, slid the page to Irene, and leaned back in his chair. “That’s it.”

She peered down, tipping her head to see the paper. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

*Excruciating.* But Zeke just smiled. Becoming Ezekiel again, even on paper, struck him as a fitting way to end a morning spent emptying his parents’ storage locker. Seventeen boxes sat in the back of a U-Haul in his driveway, waiting to be unpacked and the contents sorted. Two of them belonged to Zeke and held mementos from his college days. The other fifteen belonged to his parents. He should have unpacked them two years ago after the memorial service, but he just couldn’t. Those boxes would still be in storage if the lease hadn’t expired.

Irene, lowering her chin, peered over her glasses again. “I have to tell you something else.”

“What is it?”

“Ashley called a few minutes ago.”

Ashley Tate. Attractive. Single. Ambitious but unreliable because of her asthma-afflicted daughter. “What happened?”

“She can’t make that three o’clock meeting with the event planner scouting us out for Carter Home Goods.”

Carter Home Goods, a newcomer in the home-based business industry, sold household gadgets and décor at home parties much like the company Thirty-One sold personalized canvas tote bags. The Carter catalogs showed up in the lunchroom

now and then, and Zeke had read about the growing company on a business blog. Larry Carter was a strong Christian who rewarded his employees with perks like vacations. An event planner from Dare to Dream Events was coming to scout Caliente Springs as a potential site for those vacations as well as for Carter's annual sales conference.

The Carter account alone wouldn't save Caliente Springs, but it was the kind of repeat business Zeke needed to land in order to pull the resort out of the red. He dragged his hand through his hair. He wasn't gray yet, but at this rate, he'd have streaks of silver before he knew it.

"What happened this time?" he asked.

"Her daughter's in the ER again. She's sorry, Zeke. But you know how it is for her."

*Single moms.* They gave him a headache when they missed work, but he loved kids and respected the women who raised them on their own.

Irene lowered her voice. "Ashley's worried you're going to fire her."

"No." Not even close. "Tell her I said she's too good to lose. I'll cover the meeting."

"You're a good man."

Hardly. At least not by his father's standards. Zeke had disappointed both God and his earthly father more times than he cared to admit, but he loved people and he loved his work. The CS employees were like family to him. He picked up a pen to make some notes. "Fill me in. Who's the contact?"

"Her name is Julia Dare."

The pen tumbled out of his hand. "Julia *Dare*?"

"That's right." Surprise leaked into Irene's voice, and nothing ever surprised Irene. "You must know her."

"I do. Or I did."

Irene waited for more, but Zeke wasn't about to explain Julia

Dare to Irene, or to anyone else for that matter. He picked up the pen and jotted her name on a turquoise Post-it Note—her favorite color. *Julia Dare*. Brunette hair that bounced when she walked. Stunning brown eyes that saw into his soul. A heart that cared about everyone who crossed her path. Even him, at least until she dumped him.

Irene arched a brow at him, then looked pointedly at the Post-it, where he'd written Julia's name three times.

He tossed the pen aside. "So where am I meeting her?"

"The concierge desk."

"Perfect. Which room is she in?"

"418."

Newly refurbished. Modern electronics. Spacious, with a view of the golf course and the mountains. "Good choice. Email me Ashley's proposal. I'll read through it before the meeting."

"It's already done."

"Thanks. Just one more thing. Did Ashley order a gift basket for the room?"

"Yes. I already checked."

The rattan baskets were filled with crackers, cheeses, a bottle of wine, and the hotel's famous chocolate chip cookies. "Add a bag of mini Milky Ways."

"The candy?"

"Exactly." Mini Milky Ways. Julia's favorite. She and Zeke had shared more than a few bags of them during their senior year at UC Berkeley.

"I'll take care of it."

"Anything else?"

"John Rossmore called." The resort's golf pro and Zeke's friend. "He wants to talk to you about more water for the fairways. The drought—"

"I know. It's killing business." It was killing a lot things—the landscaping by the front gate, the budget because of the

increased cost of water, even the local aquifer. As for the fire danger, it was high, and something Californians lived with like Midwesterners lived with tornados. “What else?”

“Kevin in maintenance received the third pool fence bid. You’re scheduled to meet with him tomorrow at 8:30. His office.”

“Good.”

“And Chet wants to know if you’re inspecting the trail loop tomorrow.”

Chet Smith, a wizened old cowboy, supervised trail rides and dude-ranch-style camping trips. Zeke loved the old man, but the stable ran at a big loss and was perpetually on the chopping block. “Reschedule the ride. I need to concentrate on the Carter meeting.”

“Will do.”

He glanced at the antique wall clock made from the stump of a California oak, symbolic because the tree had been cut down to make room for the original Caliente Springs lodge. If he hurried, he could unload the U-Haul sitting in his driveway before he cleaned up for the meeting. He pushed the chair away from his desk. “If that’s all—”

“One more thing.”

Ignoring Irene was always a mistake, so he shifted the pen back to the pad of Post-its. “What is it?”

“Ginger called this morning.” Irene sounded grim, a bad omen because Ginger and her twin brother, George Travers, co-owned Caliente Springs. “She wants the numbers for July.”

Zeke sighed. “They’re not due for another week.”

“I know.”

“Why do you think she’s asking?”

“Just to be difficult?”

Irene liked Ginger as much as Zeke did, which wasn’t much. He felt bad about his uncharitable attitude, but Ginger pestered

him about every little detail. George, on the other hand, was a close friend and the reason Zeke had been hired as GM. George loved Caliente Springs and wanted it to flourish. Ginger loved it too, but she wanted to sell the place and be done with the financial drain.

“She’ll get them,” Zeke said. “Any other surprises?”

“Not yet.”

“Good. I’m outta here.” He walked with Irene to her desk, then took the employee entrance to where he parked his hotel SUV and headed to the manager’s residence, a small bungalow on the backside of the CS property.

Six years had passed since he’d seen Julia Dare, or Jules, as he used to call her. He looked forward to seeing her again, catching up on old friends, and hearing about where life had taken her. She had hurt him, but she crossed his mind often. No surprise there. A man didn’t forget the first woman he had ever loved.



Julia Dare steered her eight-year-old Outback through the wide valley that led to Caliente Springs, her fingers light on the wheel as a Christian station played music through the speakers. She knew her four-year-old son, Max, was in good hands with her mother, Ellen Dare, at the Los Angeles home where Julia had grown up. The three of them had been living together since Julia left Max’s father six months ago.

Max was the light of Julia’s life, but his father, Hunter Adams, was the bane of her existence. Her son needed a father and Julia wanted a husband, but she had never married Hunter, and it was hard to believe she had ever loved him at all.

But that was over now, and she was starting again as a new Christian. All that mattered was living her faith, making Dare to Dream a success, and being a good mother to Max.

The surrounding hills, washed out by drought and bright

sun, were the color of the Cheerios she and Max had eaten for breakfast. She missed her son terribly, but owning a business required sacrifices. And risk. And good judgment. The Carter Home Goods account was her first big break, and she was determined to recommend the best possible location for their needs.

The owner of Carter Home Goods was an old golf buddy of her dad's. Benjamin Maxwell Dare had died during Julia's senior year of college, and since then, Mr. Carter and his wife had stayed in touch with Julia and her mom. She was touched—and grateful—that he'd come to her with this project, and she intended to earn his loyalty.

This was Julia's third resort visit this month, and she hoped it would be the last. Her mother loved Max as much as she did, but leaving him still cut a hole in Julia's heart. The time he spent with Hunter cut an even bigger hole, one lined with trepidation, because she didn't trust Hunter's judgment. At the last stop for gas, she had taken a moment to skim the multiple texts Hunter had sent while she was driving up Highway 101, each one choppy with impatience.

*Call me.*

*Need to talk re: the weekend.*

*R u driving? Pull over. Shouldn't take long.*

As soon as she reached her room at the resort, she needed to call him.

She steered onto a horseshoe driveway in front of the five-story white stucco building surrounded by palms and conifers. A low-peaked roof shaded both the cars and flowerbeds full of birds-of-paradise, ivy, elephant ears, and lilies of the Nile.

A parking valet helped her out of her car, another retrieved her suitcase from the trunk, and a bellhop escorted her to the lobby. She checked in at a polished oak counter manned by a sharp, friendly receptionist, and five minutes after arriving, she

walked into an air-conditioned room that smelled like vanilla. A gift basket on a table caught her eye, and she went to inspect it.

Healthy snacks and gourmet cheeses. Thumbs up.

A bottle of wine. Classy.

The hotel's famous chocolate chip cookies. Yum.

Miniature Milky Ways? Her mind shot back in time to a man with dark blond hair, startling blue eyes, and a natural confidence that put everyone around him at ease, including her. The years peeled away, leaving behind a host of bittersweet memories. *Zeke Monroe*. A strong Christian who had planned to enter the mission field with his parents. A man dedicated to feeding the poor and saving souls. He had tried to save her soul too, but it hadn't worked. Instead she had tarnished him. Julia stared at the bag of Milky Ways, her heart aching with regret. She was no longer in touch with Zeke, and that was for the best.

Very gently, she placed the bag back on top of the cookies. As tempting as Milky Ways were, she couldn't bear to taste the memories. Wherever Zeke was, she hoped he was happy.

She picked up her phone to call Hunter but paused to look at the photograph of Max on the screen. With his dark hair and brown eyes, he took after the Dare side of the family, but he had Hunter's chin. A sweet glow filled Julia's chest, but it faded when she pulled up Hunter's newest text.

*Hey babe*. Julia shook her head. How many times did she have to tell him not to call her that before he would respect her request? *Where are u? I'm free on Saturday. Let's get together. You me and Max*.

Julia typed back. *Can't. Will still be at Caliente Springs*. He knew her schedule; he just didn't respect her enough to remember it.

While waiting for a reply, she swiftly put on a tailored red dress with side belts and gold buttons. Her favorite. The red

made her dark hair almost black, and the gold matched her light brown eyes.

Hunter's text came through. *Ok. So just Max and me.*

She tapped in, *Plans?*

This time Hunter answered immediately. *TBD.*

"To be determined" could mean anything from McDonald's to a day at Castaic Lake racing around on Hunter's speedboat. An image flew through her mind of Hunter putting Max on water skis, even though Max could barely dog-paddle. There was also the bike in her mother's garage, far too big for Max and another gift from Hunter. In spite of the training wheels, Max had toppled hard while pedaling fast to impress his daddy. The scab on his elbow was still as thick as a nickel.

She couldn't let Hunter take Max for the day without knowing his plans, so she called him. It went to voice mail, but two minutes later, her phone meowed with the ringtone she had assigned to Hunter to amuse Max.

"So," she said, trying to sound friendly instead of controlling, one of his complaints about her, "what does TBD mean?"

Hunter chuckled. "Babe, you worry too much."

"I'm a mom. It's my job."

"And I'm a dad." Hunter's tone took on an edge. "I love Max as much as you do. He's my mini-me."

Coming from Hunter, Julia hated that expression. Max was a little boy, not a clone of his dad. There was no point in quarreling, so she kept her voice even. "What do you have in mind for Saturday?"

"How about the zoo?"

"It sounds fun." And far safer than the speedboat. "I won't be home until late afternoon. I'll tell my mom you're picking him up."

"I'll text her."

"All right." But Julia would call her mom too. She didn't trust

Hunter to stick to the plan, and she didn't want her mom to be caught in the middle. "What time will you bring him home?"

"Come on, babe. Relax."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Come with us. It'll be fun."

"I told you. I can't." Even if she were home, she'd say no. A family date would send the wrong message to Hunter, the master of the yo-yo relationship, and it would confuse Max, who was still adjusting to his parents being apart.

Hunter's gruffest voice came over the phone. "I know you love me, Julia. I love you too, and we both love Max. I want us to be a family. I want—"

"Hunter, stop."

"We should have gotten married when he was born."

As if the choice had been hers! She had brought up marriage and even made a fun little proposal when the pregnancy test came out positive, but Hunter put her off with a long engagement and plans for a big wedding. A year passed and they delayed the wedding two more times. When he wanted to delay it a third time, she finally saw the truth: He valued the show of a wedding more than he valued marriage. Or her.

"Babe, are you there?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"I love you, Julia. Just say the word, and we'll head to Vegas."

*In your dreams, pal.* "That's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"You know why." They were talking about her faith, something Hunter didn't respect. Knowing how he felt, she muttered good-bye and ended the call.

After six years, she knew Hunter well. The counselor she saw after leaving him thought he had narcissistic tendencies. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a man in love with himself and incapable of truly loving others. "*Narcissists feed on people,*"

the counselor had told Julia. “*They love you for what you give them. If you reflect Hunter back to Hunter, he’ll love you. If you don’t, he’ll lash out at you.*”

Julia could cope with Hunter’s demands, but how did she protect Max from a father who couldn’t love his son the way a boy needed to be loved?

She didn’t know, and she was running late for the meeting with Ashley. She dabbed on lipstick, picked up her portfolio, and rode the elevator to the lobby. Heels clacking on the marble floor, she walked to the concierge desk. She didn’t see Ashley anywhere. Not a good sign for a hotel that sold itself on customer service.

Wearing a slight frown, she approached the concierge, a young Hispanic man with the spit-shine polish of a U.S. Marine. He greeted her with a smile. “Good afternoon. How can I help you today?”

“I’m looking for Ashley Tate.”

“You must be Ms. Dare.”

“Yes, I am.”

Behind her, a mellow tenor voice rose above the dull hum of the lobby. “Hello, Jules.”

*Jules.* Only Zeke Monroe called her by that name. Slowly, her heart pounding, she turned and saw a man in a heather gray suit. A man with Zeke’s broad shoulders, those unforgettable blue eyes, and dark blond hair streaked gold from the sun. The Milky Ways suddenly made sense.

Somehow she unglued her tongue and managed a single word. “*Zeke?*”

His grin widened. “The same.”

“How—what—”

She gaped at him as he closed the space between them. The moment called for a handshake, but her body swayed toward his, as if her muscles remembered what her heart needed to

forget. His arms slipped around her and they hugged with a stiffness born of too many memories.

She broke away, but even as she started to pull back, their hands met and their fingers entwined.

“I can’t believe this,” she murmured.

“Neither could I when my assistant told me you were here.” He flashed the relaxed smile that used to put her at ease. “It’s great to see you.”

“Same here.”

Except acid burned in the back of her throat. Back in college she had betrayed Zeke with Hunter, and he didn’t know it. The three of them had worked together at St. John’s Refuge House. Zeke as a paid assistant manager; Julia as an intern for a sociology class; and Hunter, a law student, as a legal aid volunteer. There was no excuse for what she had done, only the pathetic explanation that she’d been dazzled by Hunter’s confidence and seduced by a cynicism that, at the time, had matched her own.

Zeke gave her hands a gentle squeeze and let go. “You’re here on business. Let’s go to my office and talk about Carter Home Goods. We can catch up on the personal stuff after that.”