



BEST FRIENDS *and* *Second Chances*

ALEXA VERDE

BEST FRIENDS AND SECOND CHANCES

**A sweet & clean small-town reunion
romance**



by

Alexa Verde

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by Alexa Verde

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ABOUT BEST FRIENDS AND SECOND CHANCES



Is a modern marriage of convenience the second chance they need or a road to heartache?

Left widowed, destitute, and emotionally hurt, Mercy Grant doesn't intend to remarry, much less to a known player like Ethan Echeverría. Never mind that he's her one-time teenage crush and a longtime friend. But when her son, Stevie, needs an expensive surgery, risking her heart is a small price to pay for her little boy's happiness.

Ethan Echeverría leaves women before they have a chance to leave him the way his mother once abandoned him. Then his dad gives him an ultimatum: get married and become the owner of the family auto shop chain or stay single and lose it.

Considering Ethan has always cared for Mercy, getting married might result in more than ownership of the shops and a loving father for Stevie. It could be the second chance they need. Their feelings toward each other grow, but so does Mercy's jealousy. When Ethan's past crashes into his future, will she end up heartbroken and alone again?

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CHAPTER ONE



MERCY GRANT'S EARDRUMS SEEMED TO split, and so probably did the eardrums of everybody else in the church. Maybe in the neighboring buildings, too.

“Shhhh, Stevie, it’s going to be okay.” She scooped up her five-year-old son and shot outside, sending apologetic glances around.

Once outside, she wiped his tears. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

But Stevie only shook his head and seemed to turn up the volume. She had no clue what was happening to her son. Was she a bad mother?

Stevie wiggled in her hands, obviously wanting to leave, and Mercy placed him on the ground. She stayed close to make sure he wouldn’t bolt.

Mercy didn’t think Stevie could scream any louder, but after he ended up on the asphalt, looked around, and took a deep breath, he proved her wrong.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder, and she whirled around.

Ethan Echeverría, her best friend and ladies’ man extraordinaire.

Their friendship had started in junior high and survived Ethan’s tumultuous high school and college years and her marriage and widowhood. She’d even had a crush on him when she’d been a teenager. But he’d started changing girlfriends depending on the season by then already, so she’d kept it a secret.

“What’s going on?” She read his lips rather than heard him.

Stevie stopped screaming, probably taking a breath to get more air into his lungs.

“I was unloading groceries when I thought I heard Stevie scream.” Ethan leaned to her son. “What happened, buddy?”

Mercy cringed. The nearest grocery store was a block away. She hoped that Ethan meant that store and not the one halfway across Rios Azules.

Just great.

Instead of answering Ethan’s question, Stevie let out such a loud scream she was surprised that windows in the cars in the parking lot didn’t shatter.

“I don’t know. Stevie is upset about something.” Leave it to her to state the obvious.

“How about we go get some ice cream? Stevie can wait for us here.” Ethan winked at her.

Mercy gasped. She’d never leave her son. Then she realized the reason Ethan said it.

The screaming stopped.

“Ice cream?” Her son zeroed in on Ethan, his eyes full of surprise, curiosity, and hurt.

“Yes, buddy. I think I’ll go for chocolate. Which one do you prefer, Mercy?” Ethan turned to her.

“Peach. Or maybe chocolate with caramel. We’ll see.” The sweet, cold, refreshing concoction sounded appealing, especially considering it was already in the high eighties in south Texas in the middle of spring. But even more than the idea of having an ice cream, she enjoyed the silence. She’d never realized how much she loved the soft whisper of trees, the light breeze on her skin, the encouraging smile on Ethan’s lips...

Whoa.

Where did that come from?

Anyway, Stevie was her priority, not Ethan.

Ethan extended his hand to her son. “What about you, buddy? Wanna tag along? What kind of ice cream do you like?”

Stevie took Ethan’s hand, and the wide grin on her boy’s face tugged at Mercy’s heart. “Strawberry.”

“Good choice. If your mom approves, of course.” Ethan turned that irresistible smile at her.

Stevie looked up, his eyes hopeful. “Mommy?”

“Just one. Let’s go.” She took Stevie’s other hand.

Thankfully, the ice cream parlor was next door to the church, so they just walked there. To the passersby, they probably looked like a small family.

Mercy’s throat constricted. Once upon a time, she did have a small family, marrying the man she fell head over heels for, Cole Grant. But that happiness hadn’t lasted long. She’d learned the hard way that people who professed to love you the most were the ones who could hurt you the most, too.

She glanced at Ethan, who was showing Stevie different cars that passed on the road and explaining their makes and models. She doubted Stevie would remember any of them, but the boy listened with an open mouth.

Ethan had always liked cars, had spent his childhood and adolescence tinkering with them in one of the auto shops his father owned. Now, there were seven auto shops, and Ethan managed them all.

How much did Stevie miss having a father figure in his life? Judging by the way he leaned to Ethan, a lot. And the older Stevie got, the more he’d miss it. Her heart squeezed in her chest.

Stevie obviously needed a dad. But after the way Cole had left a hole in her heart, she couldn’t imagine ever remarrying.

They entered the ice cream parlor, met by the cool wave of the air conditioner. Ethan ordered ice cream: chocolate, peach, strawberry, and chocolate with caramel. They settled at a table near the window, and immediately a large glob of pink

sweetness ended up on Stevie's T-shirt. She held back a groan. She needed to do laundry, anyway.

"I missed you, Mercy." Ethan gently wiped the gooey stuff from Stevie's green T-shirt with napkins. For a confirmed bachelor, he was surprisingly good with kids. "I haven't seen you in two weeks. You said you'd call me when you had a chance."

Mercy felt a sting of guilt. But it wasn't like he lacked company. He was rumored to date every night. And she was sure taking care of seven auto shops didn't leave time for being bored.

"Sorry. I didn't have a chance." She adjusted the cone with the ice cream in her little boy's hand, and Stevie started consuming the ice cream with surprising speed. "My son is my world. You know that."

"I do. That's why I don't call you much. But... it's nice to see you and Stevie again." Ethan handed her the cones.

She could see why he was so popular with women. It wasn't just because he took them to popular restaurants or gave them flowers, or because he drove an expensive car, or because he was so well-built and handsome, though there was that.

The man had tons of charisma. His smile was open, his compliments sincere, and his gifts generous. She knew him well enough to realize he had a good heart, too.

Before she'd met Cole, she'd wished badly Ethan wouldn't share that heart with a new girl every month. Those times were gone, of course. It was none of her business who he shared his heart with now. According to the Rios Azules grapevine, he dated a gorgeous redhead named Leah these days. News traveled fast in a small town.

"Mommy, your ice cream is melting!" Her son's voice interrupted her musings.

"Right. Thank you, sweetie." She took a small bite of the peach cone.

Mercy closed her eyes for a moment. The ice cream was smooth, sweet, and oh so delicious.

When she opened her eyes, Stevie was almost done with his ice cream, and Ethan had a strange expression in his eyes. Some kind of longing.

That expression made his dark, expressive eyes even more gorgeous, if that was possible. He looked at her as if he... was attracted to her. She had a strange movement in her chest, similar to the one she'd had when she'd been fifteen and met Ethan for the first time.

She needed to snap out of it.

“Sweetie, how do you like your ice cream? We should thank Mr. Ethan for treating us, right?” She wiped Stevie’s chin and cringed inwardly at the ruined T-shirt.

Nearly done with his strawberry ice cream, the boy nodded enthusiastically. “Thank you for treating us, Mr. Ethan.”

Ethan leaned to her son. “Buddy, how about you ride on my shoulders? We’ll go check out what the bathroom here is like, okay? They might have some of that funny soap we can make bubbles with.”

“Yay!” Stevie jumped from his seat. “Mommy, can I? *Pretty please?*”

“Pretty please?” Ethan grinned.

How could she resist the attack of two smiles? “Sure. I’ll be here, Stevie.”

Soon Ethan and Stevie were on the way to the bathroom, where presumably Ethan would clean the boy’s T-shirt while entertaining him with soap bubbles.

Mercy took bites of her ice cream, alternating between peach and chocolate with caramel. But the taste turned bitter in her mouth as she thought about the bad news her boss had given her yesterday. The company had switched to a different health insurance plan with much higher premiums and way less coverage. Mercy’s heart squeezed painfully.

After paying off Cole's gambling debts that had kept popping up last year, she couldn't afford to pay medical bills if anything happened to her or Stevie. Mercy took several more bites of chocolate with caramel ice cream and rubbed her forehead in thought. She could find a job as an accountant somewhere else, but it would take time in a small town. Besides, despite Mercy being a good employee, her boss had said she wouldn't give Mercy good references if she tried to leave.

Mercy hushed down resentment against her supervisor and her late husband and hurried to finish her ice cream, though she could hardly discern the taste now. But no matter how disastrous her marriage had been, she was grateful to God for giving her Stevie.

Judging by the laughter and giggles, Ethan and her son were on the way back. Her boy was on Ethan's shoulders again. She wouldn't mind leaning on those broad shoulders...

Mercy winced.

What am I thinking?

Must be a sugar kick from too much ice cream.

"I need to talk to you," Ethan mouthed.

She tensed. Nothing good ever came out of that sentence.

"It's about me getting married, and it's serious." He settled Stevie in a chair.

Her heart sank. She'd never thought she'd see the day when Ethan would marry.

She should be happy for him. She really should. Moisture sprang to her eyes. Must be tears of happiness.

"Congratulations. Who's the girl?" She pushed the words past the lump in her throat. Was it that redhead, Leah?

Ethan's eyes widened. "Oh, you didn't understand."

They looked at Stevie, who was squirming in his seat by now, then glanced out the window at a small playground.

They'd known each other for so many years, sometimes they could read each other's thoughts.

"How about we go to the playground?" Ethan placed Stevie on his shoulders again while the boy let out an enthusiastic yelp.

They all headed outside. There was a kid already running through the maze there, his mom relaxing on a nearby bench, so Stevie found an immediate playmate.

Ethan and Mercy hung close to the playground. Mercy felt she'd burst from curiosity if she didn't hear exactly what Ethan had meant.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "So are you or are you not getting married?"

Ethan sighed, not looking like the happiest man alive she imagined the groom was supposed to be. "Yes and no."

Mercy couldn't imagine a woman in their small town saying no to Ethan's proposal. Everybody here adored him. But for some reason, it became easier to breathe. "She didn't return your feelings? Or you didn't ask her yet?"

"No." Ethan shifted from one leg to the other.

She decided to chalk up her initial reaction to her disappointment at his keeping something as big as this from her. "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about this? I thought we were better friends than that. As soon as I realized I fell in love with Cole, I told you right away."

"You sure did." A shadow passed over Ethan's face.

"When are you going to ask her?" Mercy kept Stevie in her view and blinked rapidly.

Those happy tears were coming back again. There was no way it could be tears of disappointment because Ethan was getting married.

"Now."

"You mean, after you talk to me?" Mercy tapped her foot against the asphalt impatiently. Why did she have to drag

everything out of him?

“No, I mean, I’m asking *you* now.”

“What?” She must be hearing things. What had they put in that ice cream?

“It’s not me. It’s my dad.”

“Your dad wants to marry me?” She must have gone too many nights with too little sleep. She was definitely hearing things.

“No.” Ethan grimaced, glanced Stevie’s way, and lowered his voice. “My dad wants me to marry. I turned thirty, and he said he’s waited long enough.”

Mercy’s jaw dropped. “I’m supposed to make your dad happy by marrying you? Do you realize what you’re saying?”

A muscle moved in Ethan’s cheek. “You make it sound so cold-hearted. And like marrying me is such a hardship. You know me well.”

“Yes, exactly. I know you well.” Mercy groaned. “You have a new girlfriend every month or more often. Sorry, but you’re not husband material. And after my disastrous marriage, I’m not wife material, either.”

“My dad gave me an ultimatum. If I don’t marry, he’ll give the auto shops to my younger brother. He’ll run them into the ground.” There were pleading notes in Ethan’s voice.

She’d never heard pleading notes in Ethan’s voice. Until now. The auto shops meant a lot to him.

Her anger dissipated. “I’m sure there will be plenty of willing candidates.” Was it the sting of jealousy? It couldn’t be, of course. “Why would you ask me?”

“Because I know you. I trust you. My parents adore you. Because I want to give you and Stevie the home and stability you deserve. And I think you’re beautiful and amazing and... Because...” He shielded his eyes. “Never mind. I only have to stay married for a year. Dad isn’t cruel. He said if it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out.”

“Are you kidding me?” This time Mercy groaned so loudly birds flew up from the trees. She kept her eye on Stevie, but her thoughts were tumultuous. “When I married Cole, I did it for life. I don’t intend to remarry.”

“I’d never treat you the way Cole did.” Ethan’s voice dipped.

Doubt wormed inside her. Marrying Ethan would solve many of her problems, including the recent one, a health insurance policy that was worse than having none. Then she shook her head. “If I truly fell in love and married again, it would be for life. Not for a year. When I give my vow to cherish my husband forever, I mean it. Let’s forget this conversation ever happened.”

Something filtered through the fog of indignation.

Hold on a second.

Ethan thinks I’m beautiful?

He’d never told her that before. They’d just been friends.

Her heart did a strange tumble in her chest.

No, it must be a ploy to get what he wanted, and that was the auto shops.

Ethan reached for her hand. “You don’t like me?”

Tingles from his touch surprised her. It wasn’t the reaction she wanted to have to her best friend. Her pulse spiked. Not liking him wasn’t an issue. Liking him was. She wasn’t the naïve and trusting girl she once had been. Cole had taken care of that.

“It’s not that.” Mercy sighed.

Call her old-fashioned, but she had her own ideas about happily ever after, and a modern marriage of convenience wasn’t for her.

“Mr. Ethan, look!” Stevie ran faster.

“Good job, buddy!” Ethan yelled back.

Her heart skipped a beat. Ever since Stevie had been born, she'd done what was best for her son, even if it meant she had to sleep less or eat less. Ethan would make a great father for her son, but for how long? The track record of Ethan's relationships spoke for itself. They never lasted.

Was her son already getting attached to Ethan? If she was crazy enough to agree to his weird proposal... After a year, Ethan would hold on to the chain of auto shops. He deserved it; he really did.

But if he decided that his relationship with Mercy wasn't working out, like so many others, she and her son might be left with crushed hearts.

For the second time.



THE NEXT DAY, ETHAN drove to Mercy's place. It was a weekend, so he hoped she'd be home.

The ruined proposal weighed heavily on his mind. Maybe he should've invited her to some expensive restaurant, given her a ring with a huge diamond.

Ethan frowned as he made a turn onto the familiar street. No, that wouldn't have worked, either. He'd known Mercy since they'd been teens. An open approach was the best one with her. And huge diamonds never impressed her, anyway.

Well, she was right. He could find a different candidate without much effort. But when he thought about meeting his bride at the altar, Mercy's lovely image appeared in front of his eyes, her long blonde hair cascading down her shoulders, her blue eyes sparkling...

Ethan slowed down over the speed bump.

He'd done a good job hiding his feelings for her for years. How come he'd only realized he'd been falling for her when she'd confessed she'd been in love with Cole?

Another speed bump jerked him out of his memories. This wasn't a neighborhood he desired for Mercy and her child. She'd had to sell the house to pay off debts Cole had left. Still,

she'd refused Ethan's help. He'd kept his distance the last years out of respect to her marriage then widowhood, or he'd have tried to help earlier. He hated the permanent imprint of despair Cole had left in Mercy's eyes.

Ethan gritted his teeth. He could do nothing about that now.

But if she married him, he could provide for her and her little boy. The thought gave him a warm feeling.

His hands-free phone announced that Leah was calling. He grimaced and ignored it. He'd broken up with Leah the day before yesterday, but the woman obviously didn't want to take no for an answer.

Ethan made another turn, feeling a small sting of guilt at leaving Leah. But he'd made it clear to her from the get-go that he hadn't been looking for a relationship.

Maybe it was because his mother had left him when he'd been five years old, taking Ethan's younger brother with her and leaving Ethan with his father. She'd come back half a year later, but Ethan had never forgotten the pain of being lonely and unwanted, the crushing fear that his mother would never return.

His heart squeezed in his chest. These days, Ethan preferred to leave women before they had a chance to leave him.

The phone stopped ringing.

He'd encountered many beautiful women over the years, some of them more wonderful than others. But every time he met with one of them, he found himself missing Mercy, her kind smile, her easy laughter, the tiny dots in her blue eyes, the funny way she crinkled her nose when she was deep in thought. He missed the way his heart tumbled and the world seemed to stop when she'd hugged him when they'd been in high school and she hadn't met Cole yet. Or when she'd fleetingly touched his hand when he'd walked her home from school.

Ethan entered the gate of the apartment complex. He could easily imagine Mercy by his side every day. There was an aura of compassion and optimism about her, despite all the bad things that had happened to her. He didn't want to be married for just a year. No, not at all. But his dad had given him that option, and he'd passed it on to Mercy to make it easier for her.

Ethan parked near her apartment. Mercy's car was parked nearby, so she must be home.

He didn't come to reinstate his offer, unless he had a good opportunity to do so. He'd come to hopefully take Mercy and Stevie to a water park. Granted, they'd have to drive several hours to get there, but he could just see the wide grin on Stevie's face. Ethan would insist on paying for the tickets, whether Mercy wanted him to or not.

Ethan locked his car and headed toward her apartment. Scratched walls, fast-food wrappers discarded on the sidewalk, and the pungent smell of stale food didn't sit well with him. Mercy and Stevie deserved a better life than this.

The loud screeching announced the opening of a door that was in dire need of oiling. The sound of hurried steps made him look in that direction.

Mercy carried Stevie, his body still, his face pale.

Chills ran down Ethan's spine as he rushed to her. "What happened?"

"I don't know what's wrong with him. I need to get him to the hospital." Mercy's eyes were frantic.



CHAPTER TWO



TWO HOURS IN THE ER, and Mercy still didn't know what was wrong with her son. She leaned to him, so small in the big hospital bed, and took his hand.

A knife seemed to turn in her chest.

The mere sight of the ER, the scent of antiseptics and medicine, the murmur of patients, the atmosphere of worry and pain that hung heavily in the air brought back memories. From the ER, Cole had been taken into surgery. That had been the last time she'd seen him alive.

Mercy's skin crawled, and she shivered. She couldn't let anything like that happen to her son.

Ethan peeled himself from the wall, shrugged out of his jacket, and draped it over her shoulders. She allowed herself to welcome its warmth, the spicy scent of Ethan's cologne.

"Stevie will be all right." Ethan's whisper was soft, reassuring.

She held onto those words.

Dear Lord, please help my son. Amen.

She'd prayed a lot during the last two hours.

"Would you like to get some rest? I can stay with Stevie." Ethan touched her shoulder.

Mercy shook her head. "I'm not leaving."

Ethan nodded. "I kind of knew you'd say that. But I figured I'd ask anyway."

How had she missed the signs of sickness? She must be a horrible mother. What was happening to her boy? "Shouldn't they know something by now?" She was desperate for information, for something that would help her son feel better.

“They said they needed to run more tests.” Ethan’s voice was full of concern.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” she whispered.

“Ditto.”

With the exception of the time of her marriage, when he’d stepped back, Ethan had always been there for her. When she’d scratched her knees after falling from a bike. When she’d received bad grades. Ethan had stood by her side at Cole’s funeral. Ethan had brought soup and medicine when Stevie had the flu. Ethan had stayed with her son when Mercy’s boss had made her work long hours.

Somehow, with Ethan’s incredibly busy work schedule and social life, he’d always managed to be by her side when she’d needed it the most.

Like now.

Half an hour later, they finally got the news.

Stevie needed an expensive heart surgery for a defect that somehow had been missed at birth. The surgery had to be done in a Houston hospital. Mercy gasped as her heart dropped to the floor. Her new health insurance wouldn’t cover the surgery; she knew that much. Even if she sold all her meager possessions, it wouldn’t cover the cost.

Cole’s parents had written off her and Stevie, blaming her for Cole’s death. They wouldn’t help. Anyway, neither they nor her parents had the money needed. If she applied for a loan at the bank, it wouldn’t get approved, due to Cole destroying their credit.

“There’s going to be a long recovery period, too,” the doctor continued. “At least a month. His incisions will need to be taken care of, and he’ll need therapy.”

Mercy felt as if the floor moved under her feet and she nearly collapsed to the ground. Ethan wrapped his arm around her shoulder, as if to keep her steady.

Her boss had already made it clear that Mercy couldn’t miss any more days, never mind a full month.

What am I to do?

She said a silent prayer.

“I’m sorry. But this needs to be done soon.” The doctor’s gaze was compassionate.

“Of course, Doctor. Please do everything you can to help my son.” She squeezed Stevie’s tiny fingers.

The doctor nodded and left.

Mercy’s mind whirled. She’d have to find a way out. She had to!

“I’d be happy to pay for everything. I can hire a nurse to stay with Stevie during the recuperation period.” Ethan’s voice was low. “But I know you wouldn’t take a handout.”

She shook her head. “I want to stay with my son myself and take care of him.”

Mercy felt cornered. She’d never compromise her Christian beliefs.

She leaned over her son, smoothed his ruffled hair, and kissed his forehead. “I love you, sweetie. It’s going to be all right.”

Then she sank into the chair.

Ethan stepped to her, squatted in front of her, and took her hands in his. “You won’t have to live in the same house with me if we’re married. You can stay in the guesthouse and take care of Stevie.”

“Really?” She looked into his eyes, wanting to lean into him. But instead she moved one hand and wrapped her fingers around Stevie’s.

“Really. C’mon, how many years have we known each other? You won’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You can quit the job where you’re not appreciated and find a better one. You deserve it. And Stevie deserves to be happy and healthy.”

She was drawn to Ethan. Much more than she should have been. When her world was falling apart, he was someone to

lean on. But could she commit herself to being married to someone who didn't love her? A lifetime of a loveless marriage, and that was if Ethan didn't leave her in a year or less.

"Of course, there's a catch." Ethan's eyes narrowed.

Sure enough. "What's that?"

"You won't be able to date and/or marry anyone while we're together."

Mercy heaved a sigh of relief. "I wasn't going to do that anyway. But it means you won't be able to date, either."

Something flickered in his eyes. "Not a problem. I don't want you to agree because you have to. The offer to pay for everything is still standing."

"But you can't put me on your health insurance if I'm not your wife." She had to make the decision and make it fast.

Dear Heavenly Father, please guide me. Amen.

Mercy squeezed her little boy's hand.

Stevie opened his eyes. "Mommy?"

The love for her boy was so overwhelming that her breath caught in her throat. She had to do what was best for her son. "Sweetie, what do you think if we go live in Mr. Ethan's guesthouse?"

"There will be lots of toys, a swing, and a tree house." Ethan winked at the child.

"That's a bribe," Mercy mouthed to him.

"Yay! Can we, Mommy?" A weak smile appeared on the boy's face. "Pretty please?"

Please forgive me, Lord.

"I meant what I said. I don't want to be married just for a year. I want to be married for the rest of my life," Mercy whispered.

Ethan's face lit up. "Then let's make it work."

Hope entered her heart. Hope that her son would be okay and that she'd have a family once again. And hope that, unbelievably, Ethan would be happy with one woman. Because when she looked in his eyes, she found herself on the road from attraction to something much stronger.

Was she too naïve to believe that?

But after all, her heartache was a small price to pay for her son's well-being.



MERCY NEVER IMAGINED she'd be married like that. The ceremony in the hospital room in Houston was small and rushed, with barely any guests in attendance, besides Ethan's parents and brother. And the person whom she'd wanted to see at her wedding the most, her son, was still in the hospital room.

She'd skipped the bouquet. Instead of the flowers' scent, she inhaled the smell of medicine and antiseptics.

Mercy would've skipped the white gown, too. But Ethan's mother had insisted on Mercy wearing hers, which fitted well enough. There was no veil, and Mercy was fine with that.

Her parents didn't have a chance to fly from Colorado, where they'd moved after retirement, in time for the wedding. They hadn't been too enthusiastic of her marrying a known player to start with.

Mercy's mother's voice rang in her ears as she struggled not to bolt.

We told you not to marry Cole, and you didn't listen to us. Look how that turned out. Why would you want to marry a womanizer? He'll leave you in a month or two.

Mercy plastered a smile on her face for appearances' sake. She didn't want to show her doubts to Ethan's parents and brother. She'd insisted on no reception while Stevie was in the hospital. Maybe it was unfair to Ethan, but she just couldn't celebrate, at least not yet.

After the ceremony, she, Ethan, and his parents and brother walked outside to a small park near the hospital.

“Are you okay?” Ethan whispered as he kissed her on the cheek.

She closed her eyes so nobody would guess her true feelings and forced a brighter smile than before. She opened her eyes, touched by the concerned look in his. He squeezed her fingers, as if to show his silent support.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. A real smile tugged at her lips when she peered at his handsome face, at his pink tie skewed to the side, and her hand in his.

Falling in love with Ethan wouldn't be such a hardship. But loving him without having her feelings returned, seeing him close and knowing his heart didn't belong to her would be much more difficult to bear. She'd learned the hard way that sometimes her love just wasn't enough.

“You're the most beautiful bride in the world.” Ethan's voice sounded sincere. “I'll do everything to make this marriage work.”

Instead of calming her doubts, his words made her tense. Cole had said something similar on the day of their wedding. He'd probably meant it, too. But his addiction to gambling had been stronger than his love for her. Could she make this marriage better than her first one?

She found herself praying again and again. She asked God for Stevie's complete healing.

And she prayed to God to make the marriage work because she didn't know how.



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Mercy entered the huge mansion in the most prestigious neighborhood in Rios Azules.

She looked around at the high ceilings, chandeliers, a huge-screen TV, and leather furniture. If the guesthouse was furnished like that, it would take some adjustment to get used to.

“How do you like it?” Ethan stepped behind her, carrying a sleeping Stevie.

“It looks... expensive.” She shrugged.

Tenderness made her heart swell as she looked at her sweet boy. They weren't out of the woods yet. But the surgery was a success, according to the doctor, and hopefully, the worst was behind them.

Her boy had fallen asleep on the way home. No, this wasn't *home*. She'd be better off to remember that.

“*Expensive*. Huh. I was striving for *modern*. Unless you'd like to have a tour of the house, let's go to the guesthouse then. I hope you'll like it more,” Ethan said.

When Mercy entered the guesthouse, her jaw slackened. Though the house only had two bedrooms and obviously was much smaller than the mansion, it was much cozier, too. The latte-colored sofa with bright throw pillows looked comfortable. The rug on the floor matched the pillows in color. Paintings of sparrows on the walls gave her a warm feeling. And hyacinths decorated an antique carved table. Her favorite flowers...

She loved the color of the walls, too. Salad green.

“Wow. This is amazing.” An unwelcome thought made her pause. Had one of his girlfriends decorated this place? But then how could so many things appeal exactly to her, Mercy?

“My male cousins who live out of state stayed here sometimes. No one else.” Ethan seemed to read her thoughts.

“But how? This doesn't look like you. This place looks like... me.”

“That's because I decorated it for you. Well, for you and Stevie. Let me show you his room. By the way, I got that table at the thrift store. Got a really good deal.” He headed to one of the bedrooms.

And she thought she knew Ethan well. He still managed to surprise her. “You shop at thrift stores?”

“No, but you would.” He entered the room. “Painted the walls your favorite color, too.”

“You paint?”

“I used to repair and paint cars, remember? Don’t sound so surprised.” Ethan placed Stevie on the bed.

Mercy looked around. Rows of toy cars were lined up near the corner, as well as a train station. Cars were painted on the wall, too, and a little blanket had a pattern with fire trucks, police cars, and taxis. Stars were shining on the ceiling.

She covered her son with a blanket. Her son would love it here. So much that he’d be heartbroken to leave in a year. A vise squeezed her heart.

Stevie stirred. “Mommy?”

“Yes, sweetie. How do you feel?”

“Good.” His eyelids drooped, but he seemed to make an effort to keep his eyes open. “Bedtime prayers?”

Mercy smiled. “Let’s pray, sweetie.”

“Dear Lord, please keep Mommy, Grandma, Grandpa, and Mr. Ethan safe in Your care. Please help Mommy be happy again. I love You, Lord. Amen.”

As Mercy tucked her little boy in bed, his prayer tugged at her heartstrings. She was grateful he was growing up a God-loving Christian.

And even in prayer, Stevie didn’t ask anything for himself but for others. For *her* to be happy.

Stevie had included Ethan in his prayer...

Mercy placed a kiss on her son’s forehead and tiptoed out of the room. She didn’t want to think what would happen if, in a year or two, Ethan got tired of the arrangement and left. After all, wasn’t he addicted to female attention? And she knew too well what addiction could do to a person.



FIVE DAYS LATER, MERCY hummed a tune as she moved around the kitchen. Stevie was watching cartoons, and Ethan was still at work. Stevie had been extra cranky after yesterday's therapy session and today's care of the incisions. So she'd allowed him to watch cartoons more than she usually would have and decided to make one of his favorite dishes, chicken mole and Mexican rice. Stevie deserved it after being on a liquid diet after the surgery and then days of mild, tasteless dishes.

And let's face it, she wanted to give Ethan a pleasant surprise. He deserved a reward, too, for eating baked fish, steamed rice, and steamed vegetables, as well as vegetable soups, with no complaints. Overall, Ethan had been polite and attentive, as if giving her space, though she wished he hadn't given her this much space. So far, they'd spent evenings taking turns reading books to Stevie.

Ethan hadn't gone out even once. Her heart made a tumble in her chest as every time she thought about her husband.

Husband.

She still couldn't get used to that.

Mercy turned the chicken in the large skillet, making sure the pieces were cooked well on all sides. The scent of almonds, sesame seeds, cinnamon, toasted chilies, and vegetables she'd used to make the mole sauce still hung in the air, making her smile. Her mother had always added chocolate while making mole, but this time most of the chocolate had ended up in Mercy's stomach instead of the blender. The chocolate that Ethan had brought for her...

She'd used less spices than her mother had taught her, skipping the oregano and thyme because of Stevie.

The sight of the chicken and the scents reminded her of those rare moments in her childhood when her mother had found time for cooking and teaching her how to make Mexican food. As they lived in south Texas, loving Mexican food was a must. Knowing how to cook it came in handy, considering Ethan's heritage.

Mercy frowned for a moment. She'd have none of that restaurant takeout and home delivery thing that Ethan apparently had been accustomed to nearly daily.

Now, the chicken looked golden-brown from all sides.

"Beautiful!" Mercy muttered to herself as she turned off the fire on the stove.

She fished out her brand-new phone—Ethan's gift—from her pocket and pulled up the app that showed Stevie's room. Having cameras in the rooms was an unexpected luxury. This kitchen, equipped with stainless-steel appliances, granite countertops, and a brand-new stove, was beyond luxury.

In her previous apartment, she was grateful if her faucet didn't leak or the stove wasn't super rusty.

Really, cooking in this kitchen was a delight. Mercy carefully removed the hot chicken from the skillet and put the pieces into a large bowl. Then she poured mole sauce into the same skillet and turned on the stove again. She glanced at the clock above the stove. She needed to let it simmer for about five minutes or so.

It was about time to start on the rice. She'd cook it the way Stevie liked it. She poured olive oil in another large saucepan and let it heat up. Then she added rice and stirred it.

After moving to the guest house, Mercy had rediscovered her passion for cooking, now that she didn't have to choose between working long hours and taking care of family. There was something soothing in making dinner from scratch, breathing in the mouth watering scents, and anticipating the delicious first bites and smiles on the faces of the people dear to her. And thankfully, she knew Ethan's and Stevie's tastes rather well.

Just a little more time, and Ethan would be home.

Or... would he?

What if he stayed working late, or...

A chill ran down her spine, reminding her of all the nights she'd waited for Cole.

Waited in vain.

Mercy dismissed the memories with effort as she kept stirring. So far, Ethan had come home every day at a quarter after five. She could trust Ethan.

Just like I trusted Cole.

Stirring the rice with her left hand, Mercy took out her phone from her jeans pocket with her right one and checked on Stevie again. Her little boy was still watching cartoons. He was pale and not his vivacious self yet. But he was recovering well, according to the doctor, and her heart filled with contentment.

She put her phone back inside her pocket. Five minutes was up, so she left the rice to its own affairs. Mercy transferred the pieces of chicken back into the skillet and covered it with a transparent lid. She set the alarm twenty minutes ahead and let chicken simmer together with the mole sauce. Then she stirred the rice again, just as it was starting to turn a golden color.

So far, so good.

Now, it was time to add the vegetables to the rice. Oh, how she loved the scents of freshly cut vegetables!

But first, she needed to check on Stevie. She dashed into his room. “Are you okay, honey?”

“Yes, Mommy. So many cartoons!” Stevie smiled at her, making her heart warm.

Ethan’s cable had way more channels than her meager subscription ever had. Mercy kissed Stevie on the cheek. “Dinner will be ready soon. Chicken mole and rice.”

“Thank you, Mommy!” That was a very enthusiastic reply, especially considering what the poor boy had to eat for days after the hospital. “I’m hungry!”

Happy her son’s appetite had returned, Mercy dashed back into the kitchen and stirred the rice again. Thankfully, it hadn’t burned. Swiftly, she chopped garlic and added it to the rice. Another couple of stirs. Then she cut an onion, a pepper, and a couple of large tomatoes into small pieces. She added chicken

broth, vegetables, tomato paste, and spices into the saucepan. Then she stirred it with passion.

Looking good.

Mercy lowered the fire underneath the rice and covered it. The alarm sounded, announcing the chicken mole was ready, so she turned the heat off under that skillet. She set a new alarm for another twenty minutes for the rice.

She placed a can of beans on the counter and opened a pack of tortillas, her few concessions to making everything from scratch today. She put a small skillet on the stove, lit fire under it, and started warming up the tortillas one by one. While transferring a tortilla from the skillet into a plastic container, she glanced at the clock.

Mercy grinned. She still had time to make guacamole while the rice was cooking.

Ethan loved guacamole.

A strange anticipation built in the pit of her stomach as she placed avocados, tomatoes, and mayonnaise on the counter and started working on the guacamole.

Frankly, so much food was an unexpected luxury, as well. All the money Cole had made he'd lost due to gambling. Living hand to mouth had made her creative about what to make for dinner. It had also forced her to go half-hungry most days, giving whatever food she could to Stevie.

“It smells great!” Ethan’s voice made her turn around.

Mercy nearly dropped the knife. It wasn’t even five yet. “You’re home already? I mean, visiting me. I mean...” She was babbling. Why was she babbling? This was Ethan, the friend she’d known forever.

The man who now was her *husband*.

He was already dressed in comfortable slacks and a T-shirt, so he’d probably stopped at the mansion to change.

“Yes, I’m *home*.” Ethan stepped forward and hugged her.

The hug was gentle, non-intrusive, and still she felt it all the way to her toes. A wave of joy spread through her.

Huh. She shouldn't be this excited that her husband simply came home.

Ethan gave her a long look that stopped at her lips, and her heart started beating faster.

"Mercy..." His voice sounded hoarse.

Her pulse went into overdrive. Was he about to kiss her?

The alarm sounded.

Ethan stepped back, and she fought the sting of disappointment.

Wait a minute.

Did she *want* him to kiss her?

"Rice is ready." She turned off the heat underneath the skillet.

She should've set the alarm for thirty minutes instead of twenty. It would've made for fluffier rice.

Ethan sniffed the air. "You know I love chicken mole." He glanced at the counter. "Guacamole, too. And yes, I prefer flour tortillas to corn tortillas."

Mercy tensed. She knew him well enough to know what kind of tortillas he preferred. But she also knew him well enough to know that he liked the company of a different female each month or even more often.

"Thank you for making it." He washed his hands and dried them on the kitchen towel.

"No need to thank me. I'm your wife, and I love cooking. Especially when I have ingredients to cook." Her hand flew to her mouth. She shouldn't have said the last part.

Ethan's eyes narrowed for a moment. Then he headed to the stove.

Mercy intercepted him. "Oh, no, sir, you don't. Wait until I set the table."

“Sure. Let me help you.” Ethan grabbed a stack of plates.

As they placed plates then utensils on the table together, a new feeling entered Mercy’s heart. Cole had never helped her around the kitchen. Well, one of the reasons had been that he’d often been absent from family dinners to start with.

Ethan transferred chicken from the saucepan into a large dish and brought it to the table. “I’ll go get Stevie.”

Mercy nodded as she did the same with the rice. “Please make sure he washes his hands.”

Ethan headed in the direction of Stevie’s room, and moments later she heard her son’s excited voice, “Mr. Ethan!”

Whether her son was getting attached to Ethan wasn’t a question any longer. It was a statement. With Cole being gone from home a lot of the time, Stevie wasn’t spoiled by attention from a father figure. Mercy sighed as she placed the container of tortillas on the table. Was she a bad mother for introducing a ladies’ man into her little boy’s life?

There was a skip in Stevie’s step when he came to the table. “Great, Mommy! So much food!”

Mercy swallowed hard as she put a pitcher with iced tea on the table. Her son wasn’t spoiled by the abundance of food, either. She’d done her best to provide for Stevie, but after all the damage Cole had incurred, her best wasn’t enough.

With chicken covered in chocolate-brown sauce, orange-golden rice, and bright green guacamole, the table looked colorful.

She sat down and waited for everyone else to sit down, too. Ethan reached for the tortilla, but Stevie tugged on his sleeve. “Mr. Ethan, wait. Mommy will say grace.”

Mercy bowed her head. “Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for this food, and please bless it and make it nutritious to us. Please keep our family safe in Your care. Please help my son recover completely after the surgery. And please help those people who need help right now. We love You, Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Stevie said.

Ethan's gaze was thoughtful.

Something changed inside Mercy.

Was there hope for them, after all?



CHAPTER THREE



AFTER STEVIE HAD BEEN TUCKED in bed, Ethan touched Mercy's hand. "How about watching a movie? I'll make popcorn."

He didn't want the evening to end. Somehow, this small guesthouse had become more attractive to him than the mansion with big-screen TVs and loud speakers. And he sensed by the look in her eyes that she was ready for a step forward in their marriage.

He'd been ready for many steps forward from day one, and it had taken every ounce of his patience to force himself not to do it.

Mercy's eyes softened. "Really?"

"Well, popcorn is about the only thing I know how to cook."

She smiled. "Not that. I just never knew you for a homebody."

Maybe because he'd never had Mercy at home before. Ethan held his tongue.

He brought a bowl of popcorn into the living room, its buttery scent spreading through the house. After a small, playful fight over the remote control, he surrendered it, and they settled on a sitcom they both liked.

When the sitcom was over, her eyes dimmed. "I forgot to tell you something. Thank you for getting me a credit card, but I can't use it. Except for groceries."

He shook his head. "You're my wife now. It's your direct obligation to spend my money."

She chuckled. "Maybe just for the things Stevie needs. I can finally..." She stopped without finishing the sentence.

“Why haven’t you let me help you?” Ethan blurted out. Well, he’d paid some of Cole’s debts behind her back and had treated Mercy and Stevie to dinners after she’d become a widow. But he wished he’d done much more than that.

Mercy sighed. “Because I didn’t want to owe you, too. I had to stand on my own two feet. I didn’t want your pity. And... I guess I didn’t want you to tell me *I told you so.*”

For the second time that evening, Ethan held his tongue. He’d warned Mercy that Cole had been up to no good, but the warning had been based more on Ethan’s instincts rather than on facts. And he could’ve been biased because a large dosage of jealousy had been added to those instincts.

“I wouldn’t have pitied you. I always admired you. And you’d never owe me anything,” he said quietly.

Mercy reached for his hand, making his heartbeat speed up. “You’ve already done enough for me and Stevie. You took us out to dinner. You fixed my car for free. You bought Stevie gifts. And now you paid all his medical bills.”

“I don’t want you to suffer. I never wanted you to suffer.” He squeezed her fingers slightly.

She looked so pretty in the dim light of the lamp, her blonde curly hair slightly disheveled, her blue eyes having a spark he hadn’t noticed in them before. Even better, the imprint of despair was no longer in her eyes.

“You’re not going to ask how Cole racked up such huge debts?” She leaned closer to him. Her scent was a mixture of tomatoes, avocado, spices, and some flowers. Oh, yes, hyacinths.

Mercy’s scent, her closeness wreaked havoc on his senses. He longed to run his fingers through her long hair, to feel its silkiness.

Her eyes widened. “You know, right? You already knew he had a gambling issue.”

Ethan shrugged. “It’s a small town. And let’s say I made some inquiries.” He hoped she wouldn’t guess what he’d done after he’d learned the truth about Cole.

Mercy slid her hand out of his and pinned him with a stare. “You knew... And...” Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no! You paid some of his debts.”

Ethan figured, as far as they’d already started this difficult conversation, he might as well ask. “Cole spent all the money he and you earned, was rarely at home, and wasn’t a good father to Stevie. Why didn’t you divorce him?”

Her eyes misted.

Ethan’s heart sank. Had he pushed her too far? Or... “Did you love him that much?” A shiver of fear ran down his back. “Do you... still?” He should’ve asked those questions before proposing to her.

“I loved Cole very much when we married. But that love took a heavy hit when he learned I was pregnant with Stevie. I thought he’d be as ecstatic as I was. Instead, he wanted me to have an abortion.”

“Oh, Mercy... That’s horrible.” Indignation at Cole warred with compassion for Mercy inside Ethan. He couldn’t even imagine Stevie not existing.

“Then Cole’s disappearances started, as well as angry outbursts, and my love was dying little by little.” Mercy sighed again. “See, love wasn’t the reason I stayed by his side all this time. First, it was hope Cole would change when he’d hold his son in his arms, or he’d see Stevie’s first smile, watch our child take the first step.” She paused.

That was Mercy, all right. An eternal optimist.

Admiration for her spread inside Ethan. He wanted to hug her, bring her close. But he was afraid to spook her and ruin the fragile connection between them.

She looked up at him, her eyes sparkling from unshed tears. “When Cole didn’t change and refused to get help, I wanted to leave many times. But I gave my vow. I believe in marriage until the very end.”

It took all Ethan’s willpower not to take her in his arms right then and there.

She reached for his hand and laced her fingers through his. “Thank you for being patient with me.”

“You’re worth it.” His heart shifted in his chest.

For several moments, they sat in silence, neither one saying a word. But even simply being in Mercy’s presence, her hand in his, was precious to him.

Her words gave Ethan hope she wouldn’t divorce him once the year was over. But he was a demanding man. He didn’t just want Mercy’s hand in marriage. He wanted her heart. And apparently, that heart hadn’t healed yet after Cole had stomped on it again and again.

In their teenage years, Ethan had been so used to always having Mercy by his side that he’d taken her for granted. He hadn’t noticed how an ugly duckling had become a swan, an awkward teenager had turned into an attractive young woman, until somebody else had.

Then it had been too late to change anything. He’d had to endure Mercy talking about dates with Cole, about their first embrace, first kiss when all Ethan had wanted was to be in the other man’s place. At least, thankfully, he’d known that Mercy wanted to wait until marriage.

Still, the fire of jealousy had consumed Ethan then. The only way to douse that fire had been to date other girls. But he couldn’t find another Mercy.

Her lower lip trembled. “Sometimes I felt it was my fault somehow.”

His jaw dropped. “How could it be your fault?”

“I wasn’t enough, so Cole had to seek something outside our marriage.”

“You’re more than enough.” Ethan’s heart nearly broke for her.

Mercy shook her head. “I was never enough for you, either. I’ll tell you a little secret. At fifteen, when I met you, I had a crush on you. But you dated a different girl every week,

and I was just a buddy for you. And let's face it, I was a late bloomer." She withdrew her hand.

He missed the warmth of her fingers immediately.

They had never been on the same page.

Ethan could've kicked himself.

"On the other hand, if I hadn't married Cole, I wouldn't have had Stevie. And I wouldn't trade my little boy for the world." Mercy smiled.

A man could have only so much patience.

Ethan leaned to her and cupped her face. "I'm glad we got this chance to start anew. In case you haven't figured it out, I like you. I like you a lot." He much more than liked her, but he didn't want to scare her off.

She'd changed a lot during the years he'd forced himself to stay away from her. The new Mercy was much more cautious and careful than the Mercy he'd once known.

Her eyes darkened. "You don't need to use your techniques on me. I'm already your wife, and I know the rules of the arrangement."

Ethan tensed. Apparently, the new Mercy was even more cautious than he'd thought.

"I mean it. Don't you know how lovely, kind, and sweet you are?" He moved his thumb over her smooth skin slowly.

With a soft sigh, she shifted closer, and his pulse went into overdrive. Several more inches, and he'd be able to kiss her. His breath caught in his throat just at the thought.

Really kiss her.

The kiss at the wedding had been so fast, as Mercy had withdrawn much sooner than he would've liked.

Her lips opened.

Yes, a man could have only so much patience.

Ethan brushed his lips against hers tentatively, half expecting her to pull away. When she didn't, he deepened the

kiss ever so slightly, and the world became vibrant with colors. His heart was beating wildly against his rib cage. A wave of elation swept him up and carried him away, somewhere where only the two of them existed.

When Mercy pulled away, the expression in her eyes was dazed.

She touched her mouth with her fingertips. “That was incredible. But it doesn’t change the truth.”

The elation he’d felt a moment ago evaporated. “And the truth is...?”

Her expression hardened. “Cole couldn’t wait to find diversion away from me. Besides, I’m sure you’ve met plenty of lovely, kind, sweet women. You didn’t stay with any of them.” She rose to her feet. “I need to check on Stevie.”

As Mercy disappeared down the hall, Ethan whispered to nobody in particular, “I didn’t stay with any of them because none of them was Mercy.”

But was that the only reason?



A WEEK LATER, MERCY glanced at a little hill of cornhusks and masa on the table. Making tamales from scratch was a time-consuming task. It was best when several people made them, like when she’d made them with her mother.

No matter.

She had time, another luxury she hadn’t had before her marriage to Ethan. She could surprise her husband and son with homemade tamales. From dinners at Ethan’s parents’ place, she knew he loved them.

Okay, she had the corn masa dough ready, as well as cooked and shredded chicken.

Mercy covered the first corn husk with the masa, careful not to reach the ages. Then she spread soft cooked chicken over the masa. Next, she just rolled the tamale, her movements fast. First tamale, second one, third one...

While her hands were occupied, her mind kept wandering to Ethan. Today was Saturday, and Ethan was spending it with Stevie, first playing with toy cars and now reading him a book.

Ethan had also taken time off to go with her and Stevie to her son's therapy and learned to care for his incisions better than she had. Her heart warmed. Ethan said he couldn't wait to take Stevie to a park, but she and Ethan had agreed that Stevie might not be strong enough yet. They hadn't even dared to brave the tree house Ethan had built in the yard behind the guesthouse.

Okay, about a dozen tamales were done.

As much as Mercy strained her memory, she couldn't recall Cole spending much time with Stevie. Having a child had obviously been a burden to Cole.

She'd tried so hard to give her little boy love for both parents, but now it was as if a heavy mountain weighing on her chest had been removed. She felt light with relief that she wasn't alone anymore in her struggle to keep her son healthy and happy.

The large bowl in front of her was filling up with tamales, ready to be steamed, and the hill of cornhusks was diminishing.

Ethan obviously adored Stevie with the love of a caring father, and Stevie responded in the same way. And she couldn't deny there was an invisible connection between her and Ethan, which grew stronger with each evening spent together. She'd felt safe snuggled up to her husband while they watched a movie or a cartoon with Stevie, or read a book to her son.

Something shifted in her chest. She finally felt cared for. And the kisses she and Ethan had shared had made her deliciously dizzy.

But what would happen in a year, when Ethan would be able to leave her and still keep the auto shop chain? The thought was like a stab to her heart.

She needed to concentrate on something else. Oh, yes, right, tamales. She finished another dozen and checked on the peach cobbler in the oven, Stevie's favorite dessert. The delicious aroma made her mouth water. She put on mitts and removed the cobbler from the spacious oven.

Ethan had offered to let her use the kitchen in the mansion, and she'd agreed. Everything was bigger there than in the guesthouse. But the main thing, the dining room had a much larger and more convenient table than the tiny table in the guesthouse that was located in the living room. Besides, the mansion provided space for Stevie to drive his new little car Ethan had bought for him today.

Mercy grinned. Ethan was spoiling her son rotten.

Now all the masa, cornhusks, and chicken were used up. She needed to start steaming the tamales in the brand-new steamer Ethan had bought for her, together with tons of other kitchen equipment.

The sound of the doorbell made her wince. Ethan had a key, and somehow she didn't think it was a neighborly visit to borrow some bread or coffee, the way she used to.

Mercy froze. Should she answer? Most likely, this would be one of Ethan's female *friends*.

The doorbell rang again, nonstop this time. The guest was an impatient one. Would she eventually go away? The splitting noise in Mercy's eardrums told her that was highly unlikely.

Mercy dragged herself to the door and opened it.

"Finally!" A beautiful redheaded woman in a beige designer suit tapped at the asphalt with her foot. She grimaced when she saw Mercy. "You're not Ethan."

I wonder how you figured that out.

Mercy pushed sarcasm out of her voice. "Good evening. I'm..."

The woman moved past Mercy inside the house, barely sparing her a glance, and even that one was at Mercy's apron. "It's about time Ethan hires a cook. Though I'd go with a man."

Make sure you answer the door faster next time. Or you might be out of a job like that.” The woman snapped her fingers.

Mercy hiked her chin. “Let me introduce myself.”

The woman waved her off like an annoying gnat. “I don’t care for your name. Go tell Ethan that Leah is here. His girlfriend,” she added, as if for emphasis.

Girlfriend?

A wave of anger burned Mercy’s insides, and she made an effort to push it away. “Ma’am, Mr. Echeverría is not here at the moment.” She was about to say that she was *Mrs.* Echeverría and could go get him from the guesthouse.

The woman interrupted her again, “So I see. Make sure you tell him Leah stopped by. I need him to call me. It’s important.” Leah headed to the door, muttering something about how difficult it was to find good help these days.

Mercy lifted her hand to stop Leah. Then Mercy’s hand dropped to her side. How was it possible that Ethan still had a girlfriend?

How could I be so wrong about him?

Mercy closed the door and stood speechless. Her heart dropped to the floor. For her, marriage vows were sacred, even if this was a modern marriage of convenience. But apparently, Ethan didn’t have the same opinion.

Her fingers fisted as she headed to the guest house. She was going to give him a piece of her mind. If he thought he could see other women behind her back, he thought wrong!

She opened the door with the key Ethan had given her and marched into the living room. Then she stopped in her tracks.

Ethan had his arm wrapped around her son’s shoulder as he was reading a book to Stevie. They both smiled, and her little boy had a look of wonder on his face. It tugged on her heartstrings. Her anger coiled deep inside her, not entirely gone, but not blindingly hot, either.

What am I to do?

She'd already had a marriage filled with lies. She wasn't going down that road again.

Mercy squared her shoulders. "Dinner is ready. Stevie, please go wash your hands."

"Just one more page, Mommy. Pretty please?" Her son lifted his pleading eyes to her.

She needed to start getting firmer with Stevie. *Soon*. She nodded. "But just one."

"Thanks, Mommy. *Gracias*." Stevie grinned from ear to ear.

"Thank you, Mercy." Ethan sent her a half-apologetic glance.

Was he silently apologizing for being late to dinner, or could he guess his girlfriend could've paid a visit?

Mercy leaned against the wall as she listened to the adventures of a puppy. Unexpectedly, a wave of tenderness swept her whole. She resisted the urge to snuggle next to Ethan.

This could be happiness. Cozy evenings at home with freshly made dinners with mouthwatering scents, a children's book, and a happy smile on Stevie's face... Maybe add a fire in the fireplace and a cup of hot cocoa in her hand. She could easily imagine being close to Ethan, his arm wrapped around her shoulder, breathing in the spicy scent of his cologne and feeling more content than she'd ever been in her life.

It wasn't about the opulence or not worrying anymore how she was going to put food on her son's plate the next day. It was about being there for each other, no matter what, and loving each other.

So simple.

Yet so complicated.

One page quickly turned to two, but Mercy kept quiet. She wanted to hold this moment in her heart, store it for later...

She'd forgiven Cole many times, but then she hadn't known about his gambling issue before she'd married him. She'd known about Ethan's philandering ways before she'd accepted his proposal.

Have I made the biggest mistake of my life? And what now?

"Buddy, go wash your hands, please. We don't want your mother's dinner to go cold." Ethan's voice interrupted her musings.

Interestingly enough, Stevie obeyed Ethan without a word of protest.

When the sound of little footsteps died down in the hall, Ethan walked to her. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

Mercy's eyes widened. "How did you guess?"

He brushed his fingertips along her jawline, making her heart flutter. "Come on. We've known each other long enough. I could read it in your face. You're upset about something."

Mercy took a deep breath for courage. She only had a few moments until Stevie would come back from the bathroom. "I have a reason to be upset. Your *girlfriend* stopped by." She watched closely for his reaction, for the expression of guilt.

Ethan frowned. "I don't have a girlfriend. I only have a wife. You."

"Oh, please. Don't try to deceive me. She said she was your girlfriend. Leah." Mercy wondered if Ethan might've had several girlfriends with this name, so she hurried to refresh his memory. Anger uncoiled, getting stronger. "Long red hair, perfectly styled. Gold rings with diamonds. Designer suit. Shoes that probably cost more than my monthly salary was."

Ethan folded his hands on his broad chest. "You don't need to elaborate. I know Leah. She *used* to be my girlfriend. I broke up with her before proposing to you."

Mercy's eyes narrowed. "But you keep seeing her, don't you?"

Ethan shook his head. "Of course not."

Stevie ran to them at that moment, so she couldn't say anything else. He slipped his right hand into hers, and her heart overflowed again with love for her little boy. She wanted so badly for him to have a happy childhood, to have a good father. Stevie slipped his left hand into Ethan's large palm, and they headed to the mansion.

Doubt crawled inside her. Could she believe Ethan? She'd confronted Cole about his gambling many times, and every time Cole had denied it. So was it any surprise that Ethan denied seeing Leah?

And yet, when she walked close to Ethan, she couldn't help being drawn to him. She was so desperate to believe him. While Cole had lied to her many times, Ethan had never lied to her before.

A deep longing to be loved, to have a family and a home stirred inside her, the feeling so strong it made her anger disappear.

She was losing her heart to her husband, which wouldn't be so bad. But her marriage might have an expiration date, and her husband was a known womanizer.

"I'm so happy I can come home to you and Stevie," Ethan whispered.

Something shifted inside her.

Stevie tugged at her hand when they reached the mansion. "Mommy, Mr. Ethan is my new daddy, right?"

Ethan glanced at her, his gaze half-excited, half-inquiring. Then he leaned to Stevie. "Nothing would make me happier, buddy."

A lump formed in Mercy's throat. She'd better figure out her marriage soon because her son already believed Ethan with all his little, trusting heart.



CHAPTER FOUR



THREE DAYS LATER, MERCY WAS in the middle of doing laundry, while Stevie was drawing, when the doorbell rang. She nearly bit into her lip. It had better not be Leah again. Of all household chores, Mercy liked laundry the least, so her mood wasn't the best to start with.

But then, Leah wouldn't come to the guesthouse. Mercy marched to the door, opened it, and stared at a guy with a huge bouquet of hyacinths in his hands.

Huh.

Must be the wrong address.

"Good morning. Mercy Echeverría?" the man asked.

"Um, yes." She still hadn't gotten accustomed to her new last name.

"Please sign for the delivery." As soon as the man got her signature, he handed her the bouquet and left.

Mercy peered at the flowers in her hands. There was only one man she could think of who'd send her flowers.

Hmm.

Did Ethan feel guilty for something? And she knew exactly what he could feel guilty about.

Pushing doubt out of her head, she walked inside. If she let jealousy consume her, she'd ruin her marriage before the one-year mark, even if Ethan had done nothing wrong.

She didn't own a vase, so she poured water in a tall glass, placed the flowers there, and searched for a card.

Yay! There was one. She hurried to open it.

To my beautiful wife. I hope these flowers will brighten your day as you always brighten mine.

Mercy smiled. Ethan was a smooth-talker, but she hoped he meant it.

“You always brighten mine,” she whispered.

The flowers were a nice touch. It was like they’d skipped the period of courtship, and Ethan was making up for it now.

I know it’s short notice, but I’d love it if you could join me for dinner tonight at Mamá Rosa’s.

Mercy frowned. Was Ethan tired of her cooking? Oh, no. Why was she finding negative in everything? She didn’t use to be like that.

She continued reading.

I love your cooking, but I want you to have some rest. I also want you to meet someone. Dress code is casual.

Mercy stopped reading. What about Stevie? She wasn’t going to leave her son by himself. But knowing Ethan, he’d probably thought of that, too.

My parents would love to babysit Stevie. They are eager to spend more time with him. And they have a large dog I’m sure Stevie would love to play with. Please do me the honor of being my date tonight. I can’t wait to see you.

Her heart beating fast, Mercy read the note several times and rushed to check on her son. It was ridiculous to get so nervous about a date with her husband.

Stevie ran to her, a sheet of paper half of his size in his hands. “Mommy, look what I drew for Daddy. Will he like it?”

Mercy froze. Her son was already calling Ethan Daddy. Ugly scenes appeared in her mind, of Cole threatening to leave, of her asking him to hush his voice so Stevie wouldn’t hear, begging him to stay for his son’s sake.

She hiked her chin. She wasn’t going to beg now. But deep inside she already knew Stevie would miss Ethan way more than he missed Cole. While Cole had been Stevie’s biological dad, Ethan was his real, loving one.

“I’m sure he’ll like it.” She plastered a smile on her face as she studied the drawing.

Sure enough, there were three people there, holding hands and standing near a large house. A man, a woman, and a little boy.

Her heart made a painful move in her chest. “I think Mr. Etha... Daddy would love to have another drawing. And... how do you feel about spending an evening with Daddy’s parents? They have a dog.”

“My new grandpa and grandma? And a puppy? Good! But later you and Daddy will get me, right?”

“Of course we’ll get you.” Mercy swallowed hard.

Was she wrong to introduce more people into her son’s life he could get attached to and then lose?

“Really?” Stevie hugged the painting as if it was something precious to him.

Mercy had a stab of guilt.

Cole had sometimes dropped Stevie at his parents’ when she’d had to work late. And then he’d disappear, so poor Stevie would have to wait until she got there and picked him up. Until one day she’d broken her leg, ended up in the emergency room, and had been unable to get him until the next day. She’d never forget her son’s tear-stricken face...

Her nose prickled, and tears burned at the backs of her own eyes. She squatted and hugged her little boy. “Really. Daddy and I are going on a date. And then we’ll come and get you. Because we love you very much.” She let him go and looked him in the eye.

“Okay.” Stevie nodded.

Her phone rang. She got it out of the pocket in her jeans and glanced at the screen.

Ethan.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Sweetie, I’m going to talk to Daddy.”

Stevie nodded again and occupied himself with another drawing.

“Hello.” Her voice was low.

“How is my beautiful wife doing?” Ethan’s voice flowed like honey.

She steeled herself against the warmth spreading inside her. Giving compliments was probably second nature to him. “Great. Got the flowers and the note. You know you don’t have to go to that extent. I’m already your wife.”

What was she saying? She loved it that he’d sent her flowers, was giddy with excitement that he’d asked her out.

“I thought it would make you glad.” His voice took on a sharp edge and then softened again. “I want to put that wonderful smile on your face. I want to share a meal in your company at the restaurant. I also have an even more selfish reason to do so.” He paused.

Mercy tensed. She knew it! Ethan had a secret agenda. “Yes?”

“Mamá Rosa threatened to do me bodily harm if I don’t bring you to her restaurant.” Ethan sounded dead serious.

Mercy heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s the selfish reason?” Just the thought of sitting opposite Ethan at the restaurant, looking into his eyes, seeing him smile only for her filled her with anticipation.

“Yep. By the way, if you’re okay with my parents babysitting Stevie, they’ll be on the way to our home soon.”

“Sounds good.” Mercy glanced around the guesthouse. She wouldn’t call it *our home* yet. Was she stubborn for not moving to the mansion? She and Ethan had gotten it all backwards— first marriage, then dating.

Was God giving them a second chance?

“Thank you.” Ethan’s voice sobered. “And thank you for accepting my invitation. I do my best not to look at the past, so I only have one regret in life. I should’ve seen how incredible you are before Cole did. I should’ve asked you out when we

were teenagers. You have no idea how much I look forward to seeing you tonight. See you soon, *cariño*.”

Mercy’s jaw slackened. It took her several moments to recover after the line went dead. Could it mean that Ethan had married her not just because of the auto shop chain but also because he truly liked her? But would that attraction last? Because from what she knew about Ethan, he’d been genuinely attracted to all his girlfriends. But it had never lasted more than a month.

Mercy pushed the thought out of her mind and headed to get Stevie ready.

Would Ethan reach out to her and hold her hand? Would he touch her face, ever so slightly, the way he’d done before? Would he even... kiss her again? Butterflies fluttered wings in her stomach.

She was falling for Ethan and didn’t know how to stop it.

Then her eyes widened in panic.

What am I going to wear?

Mercy chuckled to herself. If that was her biggest crisis right now, her life must be getting pretty good.

The question was, for how long?



ETHAN PULLED A CHAIR out for Mercy as he couldn’t tear his eyes off his gorgeous date.

“I’ll be back with your drinks.” The waitress left menus on the table and headed away.

“Thank you.” Mercy smoothed out her silky knee-length dress and licked her lips as she sat down. Was she nervous? If so, why? The azure color of her dress made her eyes stand out even more.

He could lose himself in her eyes. “That’s a beautiful dress. You look radiant tonight.”

Mercy blushed as she buried her face in the menu. “The dress is a thrift store find. I already told you, you don’t need to use your skills on me.”

Ethan frowned. His reputation worked against him. “It’s not that. You fascinate me.”

She looked up and hid behind the menu again.

He meant every word.

The last few years, he was used to seeing her in T-shirts and worn-out jeans. Though Mercy was pretty no matter what she wore, he was mesmerized by her new look. Her curly hair was swept up, with several curls framing her lovely face. Long, oval earrings sparkled in the dim light. And yes, the dress showcased her long, shapely legs usually hidden by baggy jeans. But the main thing, there was a new glow about her as if something wonderful had happened in her life.

The way she’d glanced at him several times from lowered eyelashes... He knew that look. Mercy was developing feelings for him, and it filled him with more elation than he’d felt in years.

But after being deceived by Cole so many times, would she ever *trust* a man again?

The waitress appeared near the table with drinks, soda for him and iced tea for Mercy, plus a basket of tortilla chips and a bowl of salsa. “Are you ready to order?”

“Whatever they order is on the house!” Mamá Rosa’s voice loomed from the direction of the kitchen. Even though technically she was his aunt, he’d gotten used to calling her Mamá Rosa because everybody else called her that.

Ethan braced himself. Moments later, he was crushed in a bear hug.

Mamá Rosa gave hugs like she meant it. “*Mi hijo!* It’s about time I get introduced to this girl I heard you married.”

In the same way, he got used to his aunt calling him *mi hijo* (my son) though he wasn’t her son. Sometime later he’d explain it all to Mercy.

Mercy lifted herself from the chair, a puzzled look on her face. Maybe he should've prepared her for his aunt, who was large, loud, and bursting with hospitality.

He started, "Mamá Rosa, this is Mercy, my wife. Mercy, this is my aunt..."

"*Mi hija*, just call me Mamá." She grabbed Mercy in a hug and, after releasing her, turned to Ethan. "*Es hermosa*. You need to put some meat on those bones, *mi hija*. But you're in the right place for that. *La comida es sabrosa aqui*."

Mercy sank back into a chair. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Ethan's aunt placed her hands on her ample hips. "Not *ma'am*. *Mamá*. You're part of the family now."

"My aunt says you're beautiful. And the food here is delicious," Ethan hurried to translate before his aunt said anything else.

"We need to give you a proper wedding. My seven sons are scattered around the U.S. and the world, but they'll get here for such an occasion. They can't wait to meet you, too." Mamá Rosa smiled.

"Seven?" Mercy squeaked.

"*Sí*. I had a *small* family. How many children are you going to have?" His aunt pinned Mercy with her gaze.

Ethan did what he hadn't done in years. He squirmed in his chair. "We haven't thought that far."

Mercy visibly swallowed. "I have a little boy from a previous marriage. And I haven't thought about more children yet. Definitely not seven."

"Eight, then?" His aunt turned to him and whispered loud enough for three tables away to hear her, not to mention Mercy. "I like her. Good choice, *mi hijo*. Much better than the girls you dated before. Especially that stuck-up Leah. Talk about—"

Ethan winced. "Um, you said something about food."

“Oh, yeah.” His aunt perked up. “I recommend *menudo* and *taquitos con bistec*. Though menudo is an acquired taste...”

“I like *menudo*. I’ll order that and *taquitos con bistec*.” Mercy handed the menu to the waitress.

“Me, too.” He gave the menu to the girl.

The waitress hurried away.

He leaned to her. “Do you know what menudo is made from?”

“Yep. Not only do I know what it’s made from, I can cook it, too. I love Tex-Mex food, especially chicken mole and menudo.” Mercy’s lips widened in a smile. She had slightly plump lips, with a touch of pink lipstick tonight. Very kissable lips...

Ethan made a mental headshake. He needed to snap out of it.

Mamá Rosa snapped her fingers. “Yes! Ethan told me you make better chicken mole than his mom. *Por supuesto*, we’re not going to tell that to my sister-in-law. We’ll keep it a secret.”

“*Por supuesto*.” Ethan nodded. He felt it wise not to point out that due to his aunt’s loud voice, half of the restaurant now knew that secret.

“Holler if you need anything. *Bienvenida a la familia*.” Mamá Rosa grinned at Mercy and stomped away.

“She said, welcome to the family. Are you okay?” He pushed the plate with chips toward Mercy.

“Yes. Your aunt is...” Mercy seemed to try to find an appropriate word and gave up. “Wow.”

“Yep. Wait till you meet *all* my cousins.”

Mercy’s eyes became round. “Seven of them.”

“Well, not exactly. Eat.” He moved a bowl of salsa in her direction.

Mercy bowed her head and said grace.

He admired how she'd kept her faith despite all that had happened to her. His faith, on the other hand, had weakened during his adult years.

She munched on chips, the crunching sound filling the air. "I never asked how many cousins you had. So it's more than seven?"

"Twenty-five. I have two more aunts who had nine children each." Mamá Rosa wasn't kidding when she'd said she had a small family.

Mercy coughed a little and hurried to drink her iced tea. "Are all of your aunts as impressive as Mamá Rosa?"

"If by impressive you mean loud, no." He chuckled as he took a chip and scooped up salsa with it. "One of my aunts is *louder*. Several of my cousins are married by now and have children. It gets pretty crowded during holidays. It's a good thing my father has a spacious yard."

She glanced up at him. "I'm rather shy around people I don't know."

He glimpsed a flash of worry in her eyes. "I'll be there. And you know my parents, who adore you. And now Mamá Rosa, too. Everybody will love you."

Her lips tugged up a little. "You think so?"

"I know so."

A mouthwatering scent announced the arrival of their food before the footsteps of the waitress did.

Mercy seemed to relax and chatted about Stevie over the spoonfuls of *menudo* and bites of *taquitos con bistec*. Ethan's heart swelled as she told him about the drawing Stevie had made. It meant a lot to him that the boy included Ethan in the drawing.

True to his aunt's word, the food was delicious.

Ethan leaned against the back of his chair after finishing his dinner. He'd never thought much about having children, to

his parents' chagrin. So how did it happen that he felt this overwhelming, caring love for Mercy's son? No, Stevie wasn't only Mercy's son.

Ethan leaned forward. "I want to adopt Stevie. Would you be okay with that?"

Mercy's mouth formed a perfect *o*. "Are you sure?"

"I already think of him like my own son. Adopting him would just make it official."

She took a sip of iced tea. "Stevie thinks of you as his daddy. But... at his young age, he already has a fear of abandonment. His biological father walked out on him too many times."

Ethan's heart squeezed from that confession. He remembered all too well how it felt when a parent walked out on you. Ethan had been about Stevie's age when his mother left him.

Fear of abandonment.

Mercy's words echoed inside him, touching something hidden very, very deep.

He looked her in the eyes. "I'm not going to walk out on Stevie."

The doubt in Mercy's eyes was like a stab in the gut. Granted, he didn't have the best track record of staying with one woman, but he was married now.

And very much fascinated by his wife. "When Stevie gets stronger, I'd like to take him out to eat, too. And to a park."

Mercy brightened. "I'm sure Stevie would love that. Or to the zoo? You read him a book about a giraffe, and now he wants to see them."

The zoo...

The memory came back, unbidden.

When Ethan had been seven, his parents had taken him and his younger brother to the zoo. By then, he'd stopped wondering whether his mother would leave again. His brother

had thrown a tantrum, and his parents had been trying to calm him down. Ethan had wandered off, to get away from the noise, and to go look at the chimpanzees. They'd had to look at all the animals his brother had wanted to look at first, and the chimpanzees hadn't been on his brother's list. Ethan had watched the chimpanzees until he'd realized he didn't know where his parents were.

The feeling of loneliness struck him in the chest as if it had been yesterday. The fear of being abandoned in a huge zoo by *both* of his parents this time, instead of just his mother, had crushed his little heart then. By the time his parents had found him, he'd nearly gone numb with panic.

Ethan pushed the memory away. He was grown up, successful, and with his own family now. And the zoo was just that, a distant memory.

He nodded. "I'll take you and Stevie to the zoo when he's well enough for the trip."

Mercy beamed. "Thank you."

Her smile made his heart expand in his chest.

Ethan reached for her hand, enjoying every minute in her presence. "I hope it's okay that I ordered dessert for you."

Mercy raised an eyebrow. "Depends if I like it."

Mamá Rosa brought the dessert herself, a slice of a chocolate cake topped with homemade whipped cream and raspberries. Ethan was grateful that he'd known Mercy for many years, because he could guess exactly what kind of dessert she liked. A warm wave rushed through him as he watched Mercy dig in.

A smile spread on Mercy's face. "This is scrumptious. Thank you." She turned to Mamá Rosa and thanked her, "*Muchas gracias.*"

"She's learning Spanish. *Que bueno.*" His aunt gave him a friendly pat on the back that almost made him double over, though he was no weakling, and winked at him. "*La sorpresa está lista.*"

Then with an expression of a person who'd done her job well, she walked away.

The surprise is ready.

Ethan straightened his back. He'd wanted to take Mercy out days ago, but he'd had to wait until he'd made necessary arrangements for the *surprise*.

He'd chosen to sit with his face to the small stage, so Mercy had ended up with her back to it. That way, she wouldn't see the surprise too early. He glanced toward the stage, where the preparations had been going.

When the leader of the band stepped into the light and took the mike, all the conversation in the restaurant hushed except for several astonished gasps.

"Can it be... for real?" somebody whispered.

Mercy seemed to be oblivious to all as she finished the last bite of the cake. Then at the first sounds of music, her eyes widened.

Ethan had asked to start with this song.

Her eyes lit up. "This is a recording of my favorite song."

Ethan shook his head. "It's not a recording."

"What?" She whirled around together with her chair. Her jaw dropped.

She leaned forward and listened hungrily, as if afraid to miss a single moment, a single sound.

Ethan leaned back as a feeling of joy spread inside him. Getting Mercy's favorite gospel band to come to Rios Azules had taken a lot of effort and the promise of a huge favor to his cousin. But seeing that expression of awe on Mercy's face was worth it. Her lips moved, as if she was singing along with the band in her mind.

Ethan shifted his chair closer to hers and took her hand. He wanted to share this experience with her.

When the song was over, Mercy's clapping was the loudest in the round of applause. Then for three more songs, she

listened to them, completely mesmerized.

“What a coincidence that my favorite gospel band is performing here tonight when we decided to come to this restaurant.” Mercy turned happy eyes on him when the band took a small break.

“Would you like to meet Tom Marks?” Ethan squeezed her fingers.

“What? How?” Then understanding flashed in her eyes. “It wasn’t a coincidence. It was you.” She flung her arms around him.

Ethan’s heart moved somewhere into his throat. A simple hug from Mercy affected him so much.

Mercy shifted back. “Thank you.”

When he found his voice, Ethan waved off the praise. “You give me too much credit. I thank God I was able to bring your favorite band here. And I’m grateful to God that Tom Marks is my cousin.”

“Who is now very happy to meet you.” Tom Marks’s baritone made Mercy literally jump in her chair.

Then she just stared at the singer.

Tom cleared his throat, his hand still extended.

“Hi, Tom. Thanks for being here tonight. My wife is very happy to meet you, too,” Ethan said finally.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Having a total fangirl moment here.” Mercy leaped to her feet and grabbed Tom’s hand with both of hers. She shook it so vigorously the man might’ve regretted he’d extended it in the first place. “I’m your biggest fan.”

It was a good thing that Ethan wasn’t the jealous type, so he just nodded when his cousin offered to take a picture with Mercy. Mercy looked like she was about to faint, so Ethan hung nearby, in case he had to catch her before she hit the floor.

“His songs, the way he sings about God, just touch my soul.” Mercy sank into a chair after Tom left, leaving her an

autographed CD.

Ethan felt a little stab of guilt for his *not entirely jealous* moment earlier. And it was true, Tom's songs had touched Ethan's soul, too, filled it with an incredible feeling he'd never experienced before. They had made him think about God's love, grace, and the gift of salvation.

And to think, Ethan had had his cousin's CD for years but hadn't bothered to listen to the songs.

Judging by the expressions on the people's faces during the small concert, Tom had done the same to everybody else. Nobody had eaten a bite during the performance but listened, yearning for every word and every note.

Ethan felt that something changed inside him, something very important. In that moment, he truly believed that God would never abandon him.

By giving Mercy a gift, in reality he'd given a precious gift to himself.

"This evening is incredible, but we need to get back to Stevie." She touched his fingers.

It reached all the way to his heart. "Sure." He gestured for the check with his free hand.

When her fingers wrapped around his and his pulse skyrocketed, Ethan knew he was falling for her. But would she ever love him?

He knew Mercy well. She'd never leave him of her own volition. Even if she met another Cole and fell in love with him, she'd never break her vows, never ask for a divorce. Ethan would have to be the one to let her go.

On the way home, Ethan found himself praying, again and again.



CHAPTER FIVE



TWO WEEKS LATER, MERCY ENJOYED a quiet Saturday morning with Ethan and her boy.

It had warmed her heart that Ethan had volunteered to say grace before breakfast. He'd said he'd wanted to go to church on Sunday together. She'd tried to lead Cole to the Lord to no avail. And here, she hadn't done much but could already see signs of changing in Ethan.

Thank You, Lord.

The scents of cinnamon and bread spread in the air as their small family munched on French toast she'd cooked.

"What do you all think about going to a seafood restaurant next week? One right on the ocean?" Ethan smiled as he cut the French toast into smaller pieces for Stevie. "Or would you rather have Italian? Or Chinese?"

"Seafood!" Stevie took a deep sip of his orange juice.

Ethan glanced at her, and she nodded. "Sounds great to me."

During the last two weeks, he'd taken her to an Italian restaurant twice in the neighboring McAllen and a Mexican one in Rios Azules while his parents babysat. Mercy's heart warmed as she thought about those wonderful evenings.

Still, she liked it that Ethan would include Stevie this time. During the follow-up visit two days ago, the doctor had said that Stevie was recovering surprisingly fast and okayed the restaurant and even the zoo visit, provided they used the stroller and that they took Stevie home at the first sign of tiredness.

"How is the job hunt going?" Ethan took several bites of his French toast. "I'm fine with you staying at home, and I

love home-made dinners. But I want you to do what makes *you* happy.”

Mercy perked up. “Oh, you’re not going to believe this. One of your neighbors has her own business, and she said that her accountant is retiring in two months. She needs a part-time accountant. I’ll be working only several hours a week.”

Ethan grinned. “I take it you got the job? Congratulations!” He walked around the table and placed a kiss on her cheek, then returned to his seat.

His smile and his kiss made her swoon.

Mercy took a moment to recover. “What’s more surprising, she said that a bad reference from my boss is the best reference to her and that other people I worked with gave me stellar recommendations. Apparently, everyone does know everyone in small towns.”

“*Cariño*, your reputation precedes you. You totally deserve it.” His eyes showed admiration for her.

“Thank you.” Deep inside, she was glad the job wasn’t a full-time one. She wanted to spend more time with Stevie and she enjoyed cooking for him and Ethan. She started working in the yard, and it brought her a serenity she hadn’t expected. And she finally had time for friends, including new ones, her neighbors, two of them turning out to be moms, too.

Her life was so different from her previous one with Cole, which was filled with fear and anxiety. She should be happy.

She *was* happy.

But a nagging feeling of worry, of things being *too good* had appeared from time to time. Something was bound to happen. She was content with a quiet, simple family life. But was Ethan? And if so, for how long?

Mercy hushed the feeling and winked at Ethan, hinting it was time to make the announcement to Stevie, the trip they’d discussed yesterday.

Ethan leaned to her little boy—no, *their* little boy. “What do you think about a zoo trip today?”

Stevie put the glass on the table so fast the water sloshed.
“Really?”

Ethan nodded. “Of course. We’ll see giraffes, gorillas, lions, bears, sharks, crocodiles, chimpanzees, kangaroos...”
Ethan paused. “Mercy, help me out here. Who else do they have there?”

Mercy smiled. “I don’t think you need to sell the zoo trip to Stevie. I’m sure you had him at *zoo*.”

“Oh, and you’ll be able to touch a stingray if you want to.”
Ethan grinned at Stevie.

The boy’s clapping was confirmation of her words. “Let’s go.” He jumped from his chair.

“No, mister. Not before you finish your breakfast.” She pinned Stevie with a stare.

“Oh, Mommy.” Stevie climbed on the chair dejectedly. He turned his gaze to Ethan. “Daddy?”

“This French toast is delicious. I bet I can finish it before you do.” Ethan started working his way through the remains of the breakfast. “Let’s see who’s faster.”

“I can beat you, Daddy!” Stevie finished the pieces Ethan had cut for him in no time.

About two hours later, which included a long drive, they entered the zoo.

Her pulse increased in excitement. Feeling like a kid again, Mercy glanced around. “Who should we see first?”

“Giraffes!” Stevie jumped up and down in his stroller.

“Then it’s decided.” Ethan looked at the map in his hand and pointed in the direction of the area where African flora and fauna was displayed. Then he rolled the stroller there.

“Have you been here before?” Ethan asked Mercy while Stevie was watching the staff of the zoo giving treats to two giraffes.

“When I was seven. But I barely remember anything. Besides, many things have changed since then. New areas and

pavilions added.” Mercy searched her memory. “My parents were busy working most of the time, so I was grateful to have that trip.”

“I can relate.” Ethan took Stevie’s hand, and they moved to watch the lions behind a tall glass wall and, what was scarier, hear them roar.

Mercy nodded as she held Stevie’s hand and did her best not to step back at the sound of another roar. “Your father was busy advancing his business, and your mother tried to help him as much as she could.”

“And my brother was sickly, so he took all their attention not already taken by work.” There were notes of bitterness in Ethan’s voice.

“Daddy, Mommy, I wanna see kangaroos!” Stevie tugged on her hand.

Mercy smiled. “Let’s go to the area with Australian animals, then.”

Once there, Stevie pointed at the animals. “Look at that bag!”

Mercy nodded. “That’s a pouch where kangaroo mamas carry their kangaroo babies. If I were a kangaroo, that’s where I’d carry you.”

“Wow!” Stevie’s eyes widened. “But I wouldn’t wanna stay in the pouch. No zipper to keep babies in.”

Ethan chuckled. “They don’t stay in the pouch forever. Eventually, they stick their heads out and then jump from the pouch when they feel secure enough. I think after two hundred thirty-five days, they leave the pouch forever.”

“Forever? Don’t they miss their mommy?” Stevie’s eyes grew large.

“I’m sure their mommy misses them.” Mercy felt like hugging Stevie tight.

Ethan continued, “I believe the largest species in the family are called kangaroos, and the intermediate size are called wallaroos. The smallest ones are wallabies. Kangaroos

are included in the Australian coat of arms. They are featured in many books and movies.”

Mercy nudged him in the side and mouthed, “How do you know all these things?”

“Read on the internet,” Ethan mouthed back.

Huh.

She hadn’t thought of reading up on the animals before heading to the zoo.

“Daddy, can you read me a book about a kangaroo?” Stevie watched the animals jump around with obvious fascination.

“Already bought it.” Ethan fished his phone out of his pocket and took several pictures of the kangaroos and helped Stevie take pictures.

Just as Ethan was about to take a picture of her and Stevie with the animals in the background, a blonde woman of about forty years old volunteered, “Would you like me to take a picture of all of you?”

“That would be great.” Ethan handed her his phone.

Mercy’s heart did a flip-flop as his arm slid around her waist. She put her hand on Stevie’s shoulder and leaned into Ethan. She shouldn’t get used to this, to his closeness, his caring ways, his smile. But she couldn’t help herself.

After snapping several pictures, the woman returned the phone to Ethan and walked away with the words, “Such a beautiful family.”

A deep longing entered Mercy’s heart again. Even though they hadn’t started this way, she, Ethan, and Stevie were a family. Would they stay that way? She chased her doubts away.

“Let’s go see the chimpanzees!” Stevie interrupted her thoughts. “Bye, kangaroo!”

“That way.” Ethan pointed in the direction.

“Daddy, up.” Stevie tugged on his hand.

“Sure.” Ethan lifted him.

Stevie tucked his face into Ethan’s shoulder. “I love you, Daddy.”

The expression on Ethan’s face was priceless. “I love you, too, buddy.”

Mercy’s heart nearly melted.

She gave silent thanks to the Lord.

“Are you feeling okay, sweetie? Not tired?” She touched her son’s shoulder.

Stevie shook his head vigorously. “Not tired! I’m okay.”

She rolled the empty stroller, and the three of them marched toward the area with the chimpanzees. Things were so easy when Ethan was around. She’d learned early in her marriage to Cole she couldn’t rely on him. She could rely on Ethan.

Once they made it to the area, Stevie stirred. “Down.”

Ethan placed him in the stroller. “If you start feeling tired, let us know, and we’ll go home.”

“Okay.” Her son watched the chimpanzees with obvious fascination.

She shifted closer to Ethan. “Why are you so nice to us?”

He could be spending the weekend with his buddies like Cole had done, or working, like her father or Ethan’s dad had done for years. Instead, Ethan was spending his spare time with the boy who, in reality, wasn’t his son.

“Tell me honestly, are you happy right now?” The gaze of Ethan’s dark eyes was thoughtful, inquiring.

“Of course.” Especially if she stayed in the moment, not thinking about the past or the future.

“Making you and Stevie happy makes *me* happy. You and Stevie mean so much to me.” He smiled at her.

How could she resist losing her heart to this man?
“Really?”

“I have feelings for you. Strong feelings that are growing stronger every day. I know we’re not doing this in the right order. First, we got married and now we’re dating. But it doesn’t change the way I feel about you.”

“I have strong feelings for you, too,” Mercy said when she was finally able to utter a single word. She lowered her voice to make sure her son wouldn’t overhear her. So far, he seemed to be taken by the chimpanzees. “But I don’t know if you can change your ways. And... I come with emotional baggage. It’s difficult for me to trust someone.”

“I can be very patient.” Ethan’s eyes darkened.

“You should know something. The night Cole died... we had an argument. I begged him to stop gambling and to get help for his addiction. He yelled that he’d had enough of my nagging. That Stevie and I took away his freedom.” She paused. It was difficult for her to talk about this.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“I asked Cole to lower his voice so as not to wake up Stevie. Cole screamed that he should’ve walked out a long time ago, that I held him back and he hated me for that. He stormed out, got drunk at a bar, and crashed his car into a tree.” She glanced in Stevie’s direction to check on him while her eyes prickled with tears.

“It wasn’t your fault Cole died.” Compassion flashed in Ethan’s eyes.

“I surrendered my guilt to the Lord. I don’t blame myself for Cole’s death anymore.” Mercy took a deep breath.

“I wouldn’t do to you what Cole did.” Ethan’s voice was sincere.

“I know that.” Her heart bled at the memory. She checked on Stevie again. “But if you decide you’ve had enough of our marriage, I don’t know how to stop you.”

“You’ve got it all wrong.” Ethan stepped closer to her.

“I’m hungry! Like a bear!” Stevie’s voice brought her back from memory lane.

Ethan gave her a long look as if he wanted to say something else and then ruffled Stevie's hair. "I'll go get some snacks. I'll be back soon."

"Let's go look at the ostriches." She rolled Stevie's stroller.

"Oh, yeah. They hide their heads in the sand when they are afraid, right, Mommy?"

Mercy nodded.

Am I hiding my head in the sand about my marriage?

Minutes later, Stevie peered at the large birds. "I want out of the stroller."

She moved him out of the stroller and placed him on the ground. Then she squatted and studied Stevie. "Do you still feel okay?"

"Yes." He nodded several times, as if for emphasis. "Let's look at the ostriches."

She took his hand. While he watched the huge birds, her thoughts wandered.

Ethan probably meant what he'd said about having strong feelings for her. But this was when she wished she didn't know him so well or that he hadn't told her so much about his relationships in their friendship years.

He'd developed feelings for some of his girlfriends sometimes, but those feelings evaporated about a month later after dating them. Ethan's feelings could change fast.

Then something felt wrong.

Her hand was empty!

"Stevie?" Her heart sinking, Mercy looked around.

There was a family nearby with small twin boys, but her son was nowhere to be seen. Mercy did her best to push down the panic.

How could he have slipped away?

"Stevie, where are you?" She raised her voice.

The ostriches looked at her but of course didn't answer.

Mercy frantically searched around but came up empty. She couldn't push down the panic any longer. Her little boy was lost in a place with a lot of wild animals. Granted, they were secured, but one never knew. And Stevie hadn't fully recovered after the surgery.

Her world crashed around her.



CHAPTER SIX



ETHAN KNEW SOMETHING WAS TERRIBLY wrong the moment he saw Mercy's paper-white face and her eyes full of horror.

Stevie wasn't in his stroller.

Oh, no!

Ethan rushed to her.

"Stevie is lost!" Mercy's lower lip trembled. "He asked to be out of the stroller. So I took him out of it. One minute he was here, and the next one he was gone."

"We'll find him. Soon." Ethan pushed away the memory of feeling lost and abandoned in the zoo when he was seven.

The memory surfaced unexpectedly. How he could still feel fear tightening his gut all these years later was beyond comprehension. Only now his gut tightened also because of the worry for Stevie. He could only imagine how Mercy felt.

Her body shook. "The zoo is huge. What if he managed to get close to a lion... or a crocodile...?"

"The zoo is built not to let people close to the animals." Ethan wrapped his arm around her shoulder, trying to stop her from shaking. "We'll ask to make an announcement and give Stevie's description. But first let's check the animals he'd most likely see next. He couldn't have gotten too far."

"Bears? He said he was hungry like a bear. Maybe he was thinking of bears." A shiver racked her body.

"Let's go." They headed toward the bear grotto.

"What if Stevie somehow fell inside? And the bears..." Her body shook again as she slowed for a moment.

He was ready to scoop her up, but then she increased her pace again.

Ethan leaned to her. “*Cariño*, listen to me. The grotto has a high railing around it. Stevie has no way to climb over it. And even if he somehow did, there’s no way he could’ve swum through the water that separates the grotto from the visitors’ area.”

Mercy’s eyes became huge. “You’re right. What if he drowned there?”

Ethan groaned. His words that were supposed to calm her down only made things worse.

“Remember, the railing is too high for him to climb over?” He could see the grotto already.

Ethan prayed like he’d never prayed in his life.

They approached the bear grotto. Ethan scanned the area. “The good news, he’s not here. The bad news, he’s not here.”

Mercy looked up at him, and he hated to see the misery in her eyes. “What if the bears mauled him already!” She slumped against him.

He held her up. “No! It’s not possible. Remember what I told you. It’s truly safe for children here. No hungry bears could get close to him, and Stevie had no way of getting close to them. The Lord will keep Stevie safe.” A thought flashed in his mind. “Hold on. Remember I said that Stevie would be able to touch a stingray?”

Mercy perked up. “Yes!”

They ran toward the aquatic area. Worry seemed to spur Mercy on.

Ethan hoped with all his heart his guess was right because otherwise they were losing valuable time. If anything happened to Stevie, he knew Mercy wouldn’t forgive herself. He wouldn’t forgive himself, either.

Even if Stevie was safe, Ethan could only imagine how much the boy was hurting inside, scared of being left by the very people who were supposed to care for him the most.

Alone.

Unwanted.

The unwelcome memory of being lost in the zoo resurfaced in the back of his mind.

Ethan prayed for Stevie, and by the way Mercy's lips were moving, he could guess she was praying, too.

They reached the area with the huge aquariums quickly.

Ethan consulted with the map. "That way!" He pointed to the right.

He spotted Stevie's small figure, his salad-green T-shirt and blue dungarees, from far away. Such a strong wave of relief covered Ethan that he could barely breathe.

Mercy dashed to their son. "Sweetie! I was so scared."

She hugged the boy tightly, tears running down her face. She let him go, looked at him, then hugged him again, as if afraid he'd disappear if she let him go even for a second.

"We're so glad we found you." Now that the scare was gone, Ethan felt fatigued and elated at the same time.

"I wasn't lost, Daddy. Why scared, Mommy? I went to touch the stingrays. Look!" The boy eased out of Mercy's embrace, reached into the water, and stroked the top of a large ray. "Wanna touch it, Daddy? Mommy?"

Mercy shook her head, but Ethan obliged. The stingray's surface felt like glue under his fingertips.

She grabbed Stevie in a hug again. "Don't ever walk away like that. Please. I was scared out of my wits when I couldn't see you. I love you so much."

"Okay, Mommy." Stevie shrugged out of her embrace. "I love you and you, Daddy. Can we go see the sharks now? Oh, and where are the snacks?"

"I dropped them somewhere." Ethan smiled sheepishly. He'd left the stroller behind, too. No matter. He'd buy a new one. The main thing was that Stevie was all right.

Stevie's lower lip stuck out. "No snacks?"

Ethan leaned to him. “How about we see the sharks and whatever other animals you want to see and then have a late lunch at Mamá Rosa’s? Today’s special is chicken mole. And I’m sure she can find some strawberry ice cream for you.”

“Yay! Chicken mole! Ice cream! But sharks first.”

“Aren’t you tired, sweetie?” Mercy leaned to Stevie.

The boy sighed. “A little. But I wanna see sharks.”

Ethan scooped him up. “Okay, let’s see sharks and then eat chicken mole and ice cream.”

Mercy’s lips tugged up, her smile warming his heart. “Sounds good to me.”

As they moved along a huge glass wall behind which sharks swam peacefully, Ethan realized something.

After the incident in the zoo when he’d been a kid, he’d always been afraid his parents would leave him. It was probably ridiculous, and he’d never allowed himself to think about it.

Just like he didn’t allow himself to think how much he was afraid to lose Mercy and Stevie.



CHAPTER SEVEN



A WEEK LATER, AS ETHAN drove to visit his father on Saturday, he sang along to the radio. Usually, he preferred Tejano music, but ever since hearing Tom Marks in person, Ethan had started listening to his CDs and the gospel radio station. He found each song encouraging and uplifting. Granted, he was no Tom Marks, but nobody could hear him in the car.

Ethan made a turn and drummed his fingers against the steering wheel in rhythm to the song's beat.

With each day, he was drawn more and more to his wife, and spending time with Mercy and Stevie filled Ethan with joy. Stevie felt much better. The three of them had gone to a seafood restaurant, a pizzeria where kids could also play games, children's movies, and Stevie's favorite, a petting farm.

Ethan pulled into the neighborhood where he'd grown up. Maybe they should get a puppy for Stevie. Or two. Stevie had been asking for one ever since spending time with Ethan's parents' rescue, a large and friendly chow-chow.

Ethan grinned as he parked at the curb near his childhood home. Yes, that little boy had him wrapped around his tiny finger, and Ethan was totally fine with that.

And he was totally crazy about his wife. He couldn't imagine his life without Mercy and Stevie now. But there was a restlessness inside him that wouldn't go away along with a fear that the person dearest to him could abandon him when he least expected it.

Was that fear the reason he'd walked out of every relationship before?

His wife's name, the word so familiar to his lips, nearly as familiar as the sound of his own name to his ears, had a totally different meaning now.

A new season, new time had started for him when he realized how much she'd meant for him. His life was filled with faith, love, and hope ever since he put a ring on her finger.

Over the years, he'd probably broken a few hearts, if he wanted it or not. He deserved punishment. Instead, ever since he'd married Mercy, he'd received happiness beyond his comprehension.

He'd received forgiveness and *mercy*.

Thank You, Lord.

Pondering over the wonderful gift that his marriage was, Ethan threw a duffel bag with auto parts for his father's car over his shoulder. Balancing a covered dish with home-cooked enchiladas and rice and beans in his hands, he closed his vehicle's door. Then he marched to the house, a Spanish Colonial Ethan and his younger brother had grown up in. He knew he'd always be welcome in that house with stucco walls the color of coffee with a lot of milk, reddish-orange ceramic tile roof, and terracotta ornaments.

As Ethan walked through decorative black iron gates, his gaze flicked to one of the semicircular windows, behind which was his childhood room. A warm feeling swept over him. He was glad his father had never sold this house, never moved into something much bigger, like Ethan had.

The front door opened, and Ethan's father waved him in, and Ethan obliged. There was more salt in his father's salt-and-pepper hair and whiskers, and he looked a little more stooped than before. But the spark in his dad's brown eyes was still the same.

"I couldn't wait for you to get here." The older man gave him a hug, careful not to damage the covered dish.

"Happy to see you, too." Ethan put the duffel bag on the floor.

"I meant the enchiladas. You can't seem to stop talking about your wife's cooking skills. Among other things." His dad winked at him.

“You prefer enchiladas to your own son. I should feel offended.” Ethan followed his dad to the kitchen, knowing his father was joking.

As he passed near the living room, his gaze washed over the sombreros he and his brother had tried on as children. Sombreros still hung on the wall in the living room, right near a landscape oil painting his father had brought from Mexico many years ago. Some things never changed.

His dad could’ve hired a high-class personal chef easily, with the kind of income he’d received throughout the years from the auto shop chain, but preferred to live modestly.

Ethan placed the covered dish on the large wooden table in the kitchen. The ceramic tile on the floor was a bit more worn out but would probably last hundreds of years. Amazingly, the oak cabinets were the ones from his childhood, solid and well built. Just like his father.

The thought gave Ethan a feeling of stability that was especially needed after the zoo incident and a reminder how his mother had abandoned him and his father.

“Let’s go, *mi hijo*. You can help me wash my car.” His father patted him on the back and led him in the direction of his garage.

Ethan shook his head in disbelief but followed. This was beyond living modestly. But he knew his dad wouldn’t trust just anybody to wash his prized convertible.

Once there, his father handed him a bucket with water and washrags. Just like in childhood, before Ethan had graduated to car repairs and business lessons.

Ethan wetted the rag in the bucket, rinsed it out, and slowly moved it along the car’s right side.

“I need to talk to you about something.” His dad’s voice sounded low, so unlike his usual confident, looming voice. “It’s about me and your mother.”

Uh-oh.

Ethan stilled. “What happened? Did she decide to leave again?” Ethan tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice and failed.

“I should’ve told you about this a long time ago.” The older man’s voice was laced with guilt. “But you were small, and I thought you’d forget about it. And... I felt ashamed of myself. It was easier to sweep it under the rug. But the way you talked about that zoo incident with Stevie, about the memory of being lost in the zoo, your fear of abandonment, showed me I was wrong.”

Ethan took a dry rag and ran it along the car’s surface far too many times. “What are you talking about? Wrong about what?”

“The reason your mother left you with me and took your younger brother with her all those years ago was because I asked her to leave you with me when we separated. Not because she didn’t love you.”

“She shouldn’t have left at all.” Ethan’s jaw set in a stubborn line. He took the wet rag again and started wiping off invisible spots from the car’s hood.

“She had a good reason. I cheated on her.” His father’s voice was barely audible.

Ethan dropped the rag. Several seconds passed before he picked it up. All these years, he had this wonderful image of his father and not so wonderful of his mother, and it turned out...

“I made a huge mistake. I’m human. Thankfully, your mother forgave me. There’s another reason I’m telling you this.” The older man ran the rag along the left side for several long moments.

Ethan waited patiently, knowing he couldn’t hurry his father.

His dad straightened. “Don’t make the same mistake with Mercy. Don’t step out on her. You might lose both her and Stevie, and it’s just not worth it.”

A hot wave of anger swept through Ethan. “I’d never do that!”

“Well, it’s a small town, and there are rumors about you and Leah...” His dad’s voice trailed off.

Spread by Leah, no doubt.

Ethan resisted the urge to grind his teeth. “There’s nothing between me and Leah. Honest. Being with Mercy makes me so happy. Why would I want to ruin that?”

Fear of abandonment.

Was that what his father called it?

It hit Ethan like a brick.

That was where this anxiety, this restlessness came from.

Dear Lord, I’m surrendering this fear of abandonment to You. Please help me be the best husband to Mercy I can be and the best father to Stevie. Thank You, Lord. Amen.

His dad threw the dirty rag in a trash can and studied his son. “Glad to hear that. And I’m not just saying it because I love Mercy’s cooking.”

Ethan chuckled as he wiped his hands on a paper towel. “But that’s part of it, right?”

His father sighed as he wiped his hands, as well. “A *little* part. Makes you happy, huh? Well, I’ve never seen this shine in your eyes before, so I believe you.”

“Marrying Mercy was the best thing I ever did. There was never anything fake about her, be it eyelashes, smile, or words. She liked me before I had money, popularity, or an expensive house. Her kindness shines through in her every gesture. She’s the real deal.” Ethan’s heart warmed up.

“But she gets insecure sometimes because of your past, doesn’t she?”

“I get that feeling. But since I married her, I don’t notice other women. I know well the treasure I have at home.”

His father's face brightened. "I raised you well. Because, you know, I started having doubts." His dad gestured in the kitchen's direction.

Ethan shook his head. "I dated enough to know that there are many Leahs in this world. There's only one Mercy."

His dad nodded thoughtfully. "There's only one *mercy*."

"Frankly, I was upset with you at first when you gave me that ultimatum, either to marry or lose the chance to own the auto shops. But now I think that's the best thing you ever did for me."

"How about that." His dad grinned as he led Ethan back to the kitchen. "You didn't think I was serious about that ultimatum, did you?"

Ethan stopped in his tracks. "You weren't?"

"Keep moving, *mi hijo*. I saw the way you looked at Mercy when she had dinners with us, the way you talked about her." His father walked into the kitchen.

Ethan followed him, trying to process the news.

"But I also knew that for years you stayed away from her out of respect for her marriage, then widowhood. You weren't making your move now, either. I figured you could use a little push in the right direction." His dad dropped himself into a chair.

Ethan did the same because his knees suddenly felt weak. "You call it a *little push*?"

"Or a big one. The main thing, it worked. Now, don't mess it up." The older man pinned him with a stare. "You love her, don't you?"

Ethan knew the response in his heart. "I do. But I don't know whether she'll ever love me back."

"Maybe she does already. If not, be patient. And invite me and your mother tomorrow for dinner."

Ethan quirked an eyebrow. "Doesn't Mom make your favorite fajitas for dinner tomorrow?"

His father sighed. “It’s my favorite, all right. But your mother never learned to cook them well, and I don’t have the heart to tell her. My stomach, however, can’t take it anymore.”

Something changed inside Ethan. He saw things more clearly now. “You don’t want to hurt her feelings. You really do love her.”

“Very much so. And she loves me. That, *mi hijo*, is happiness.” The older man hesitated. “Listen, what did you tell me about hiring a personal chef? To free your mother from cooking, of course.”

Ethan chuckled. “*Of course*. I can find you a great chef who specializes in Tex-Mex.”

A feeling of longing made Ethan pause. As much as he loved his dad’s company, he looked forward to going home.

A stab of worry inside him told Ethan his father’s comment about the rumors of Ethan and Leah getting back together bothered him. He hoped Mercy didn’t hear the rumors, but the chances of that in a tiny town were small to none.



AFTER LUNCH WITH HIS parents, Ethan drove downtown for a quick stop at his office. While he didn’t work on the weekends since marrying Mercy, he needed to pick up a gift for her. He’d mailed it to his work mailing address so the gift would remain a surprise. And then, sure enough, he’d forgotten to bring it home.

Home.

Ethan smiled as he made a turn.

The word *home* had a totally different meaning than before. He used to come to the mansion to sleep, change, shower, and watch a football game on Sunday. Now spending time with Mercy and Stevie was something he looked forward to every day. Ethan parked in an empty parking lot, fished his cell phone out of his jeans pocket, and called Mercy.

“Dad was happy to get your enchiladas,” he said when Mercy picked up. “And Dad sort of invited himself and Mom for dinner at our house tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“I’d love to have them.” Mercy laughed.

Her laughter was music to his ears. “How is Stevie?” Ethan climbed out of his car and clicked on the key fob to lock it.

“Still at the playdate with his friend at the neighbors’.” She paused. “I know you’ve only been gone for several hours, but... I miss you.”

His heart swelled as he strode to the building. “I miss both of you. I’ll be home soon. I just need to pick up something from the office.” A warm wave of anticipation covered him, of giving her the gift, of telling her how much he loved her.

“Ethan... I was thinking...” Mercy sounded hesitant. “Maybe we should consider living together. Especially if we could share something smaller and less intimidating than the mansion. I like Spanish Colonial style.”

“Me, too. I don’t know why I bought the mansion. I guess I was trying to show off, to live according to my social status when I should’ve lived according to my heart.” Joy filled Ethan as he opened his office. “I can’t wait to go house hunting with you.”

“See you soon.” Her voice had softened.

“See you soon.” He picked up the small box as if in a mental fog, the wonderful news affecting him.

Mercy wouldn’t have suggested moving in together if she didn’t realize she had strong feelings for him *and* she could trust him, would she? Her little jealousy streak before had grated on his nerves sometimes. But he had to admit his history with women and her history with Cole had given her reasons to be weary.

The sound of the door opening behind Ethan made him whirl around. Nobody was supposed to be here on the weekend!

Ethan's jaw dropped. Thankfully, the box didn't. "Leah! What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you. Everybody knows you work even on your days off." Leah sauntered toward him.

Ethan frowned as he placed the small box on the table. "Not since I got married. Leah, we're over. We have nothing to talk about."

"We were good together. How could you forget about it so easily?" Leah stepped closer.

Compassion stirred in Ethan's heart, but his mind searched frantically to resolve the situation. "It didn't work out between us. Please accept that. I have to leave." He tried to walk around her.

"No!" Leah moved with him, not letting him pass. "I won't let you discard me like some piece of trash."

Ethan would never physically hurt a woman. He needed to somehow persuade Leah to leave. "Please respect my marriage. I love my wife."

"Oh, really?" Leah laughed as she got dangerously close to him, the strong scent of her perfume attacking his nostrils. "Your feelings never last. And I know she lives in your *guesthouse*. What kind of wife is that?"

"One I'm crazy about. This conversation is over." Ethan enunciated every word.

Before he could step back, Leah wrapped her arms around him and planted a kiss on his lips. Of all the audacity! The sound of the door opening told him there was another visitor.

He jumped back, anger at Leah boiling his insides.

Then Ethan realized who the second visitor was.

Mercy stood inside his office with her mouth twisted, a shocked and hurt expression in her eyes. "I can't believe it!"

His heart sinking to the floor, he hurried to his wife. "It's not what it looks like. I can explain."

Her hurt expression deepened, knifing his heart.

Mercy shook her head and stormed out.



CHAPTER EIGHT



MERCY FORCED HERSELF TO PRESS on the brake pedal to slow down. She couldn't drive like a maniac, because she had to think about Stevie.

Hot tears ran down her cheeks as she navigated her car along the downtown streets. At first, she hadn't wanted to believe the anonymous text she'd received.

Your husband is cheating on you behind your back. He's meeting her at his office right now.

But after several minutes of pacing the living room floor, jealousy had gotten the best of her. She'd climbed inside her car and had floored the gas pedal to the office.

When she'd seen two vehicles in the parking lot, one of them Ethan's, her heart had dropped.

Mercy wiped her tears, but a new flood came right after. It wasn't any easier when one's heart was breaking the second time around. Anger and pain warred inside her.

How could Ethan do this to me?

Granted, he used to be a womanizer, but he was an honorable man, too. And they seemed to be so happy together.

She parked near the guesthouse that couldn't be her home any longer and wiped her face again. She'd have to find an apartment.

Stevie would be heartbroken to leave Ethan. What had she done? Why had she hoped that Ethan would change and stay faithful to her? She wasn't even living with the man.

Mercy charged inside the guesthouse and started gathering her belongings into her old, trusty suitcase. Because of her son, she couldn't allow herself to fall apart, no matter how much she wanted to.

"Mercy!" Ethan's voice made her flinch.

She turned around slowly. “Don’t make it more difficult than it already is. Oh, you’re worried about the auto shop chain, right? But you did marry me, so hopefully your father will honor his promise.”

“I don’t care about that. I care about you. Don’t you know that?” Ethan stepped to her.

“You should’ve thought about that before cheating on me!” Mercy exploded.

“I didn’t cheat on you. You have to believe me.” Ethan took another step toward her.

Mercy felt as if she were suffocating. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. “Come on! You were caught.” She needed to go somewhere to cool off. Somewhere where the source of her anger wasn’t present.

“I love you.” Ethan’s voice was low, his eyes searching hers.

Mercy froze.

These were the words she longed to hear. As she stared into his eyes, so eager to believe him, she knew the feeling was mutual. She’d realized it somewhere between the trip to the petting farm and snuggling on the couch at home while watching cartoons with Ethan and Stevie.

And it was precisely the reason it was so difficult to walk away. Cole’s gambling issue hadn’t been as painful as this. She’d stuck with Cole. But she couldn’t stay, looking at Ethan’s lips and knowing those lips had just kissed another woman.

Cole had told her many lies.

She hadn’t expected to hear them from Ethan, too. She’d thought she knew him better than that.

“I need to go. I need to stay away from you for now.” Mercy threw more clothes into the suitcase.

“I mean it. I do love you.” Ethan’s voice sounded so sincere.

Mercy hesitated, wanting badly to stay. Then jealousy reared its head again. Today, it was Leah. Tomorrow, it would be someone else.

She shook her head. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t have done what you did.”



THE NEXT DAY, MERCY sank onto the chair after tucking in Stevie for a nap. The motel room was tiny, but it was all she could afford. The last thing she wanted to do was ask Ethan for money.

Her heart ached, more for Stevie than for herself. Her little boy had never cried as much as after leaving the guesthouse. Every tear, every hiccup was like a knife stab to her.

Mercy hid her face in her hands, as if she could hide from pain that way. She’d taken a vow for life and her son needed Ethan. But she couldn’t force herself to go back, at least not right now. The wound was still too raw.

A knock on the door caused her to look up. She pursed her lips as she walked to the door. She wasn’t ready to talk to Ethan, to listen to his lies again.

She peered in the peephole.

Ethan’s father.

Disappointment and relief stirred inside her at the same time. Relief that it wasn’t Ethan didn’t surprise her, but disappointment did. Did she hope Ethan would come looking for her? Instead, the coward had apparently sent his father.

She squared her shoulders and opened the door. “Hello, Mr. Echeverría. Come on in.” She kept her voice low so as not to wake up Stevie.

The older man stepped inside. “I didn’t come here because my son asked me to.” He seemed to read her mind. Thankfully, he took one glance at the sleeping boy and kept his voice low, too.

“Really?” She gestured for Ethan’s dad to take one of the two chairs in the room.

He sat down. “Really. When I first heard about what happened, I thought my boy made the same mistake I did. But after talking to him, I have a different conclusion. I know my son well, and I know he didn’t lie to me.”

Mercy sat down and folded her arms on her chest, a bit skeptical.

Ethan’s father continued, “I did some investigating. You received an anonymous text telling you your husband was cheating on you in his office, didn’t you?”

Mercy stared at him, startled. “How do you know?” She managed to keep her voice hushed, despite the shock.

“I talked to Leah. It took some time to find out the truth, but I can be pretty persuasive. She was so angry that Ethan didn’t come to her even after you left that she blurted it all out. She sent that text to you. She set up a trap.”

“I... don’t know what to say.” It was a good thing Mercy was sitting because her knees turned weak.

Ethan’s father was a highly respectable man, and she didn’t think he’d make up something like that just to help his son.

Mr. Echeverría’s dark eyes were kind and wise. “Don’t say anything. Just consider returning. I’ve never seen my older son as heartbroken as after you left.”

Her mind whirling, Mercy stared into space.

She’d always thought her faith was strong. Her faith had saved her during her disastrous marriage and during her widowhood. She’d surrendered her guilt at not making her first marriage work to the Lord. She’d surrendered her resentment, too.

But had she surrendered her trust issue?

No.

Instead, she'd brought it with her into her new marriage, letting it affect her judgment. She'd believed easily that Ethan had cheated on her because deep inside she'd expected it to happen sooner or later. Yes, Ethan used to be a womanizer, but he hadn't been married then. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never once lied to her.

The problem wasn't that Ethan wasn't trustworthy. The problem was that, after Cole, she couldn't trust a man, even her husband. Especially not her husband.

Lord, I'm asking for forgiveness. I'm surrendering my fears and my trust issues to You. Thank You, Lord, for opening my eyes. Please help me repair my marriage. Please bring Ethan back to me. Amen.

There was another knock on the door.

Hope stirred inside Mercy. "It's open," she said.

Ethan stepped inside. "Mercy, I..." His eyes widened at the sight of his father. "Dad?"

Mercy pressed her finger to her lips, silently asking Ethan to keep his voice down.

Mr. Echeverría rose to his feet. "I was about to leave, anyway."

Ethan shook his head. "No, please stay." He turned to Mercy.

Relief and joy swept over her, tarnished a little by guilt.

"I know it's going to take a lot of time to persuade you to change your mind, to make you believe me, but—" Ethan started.

"No," Mercy interrupted him.

Ethan visibly swallowed. "Please don't say no yet. Hear me out."

"I mean, no, it's not going to take a lot of time for me to change my mind or believe you. Thank God, I already did. Your father explained to me what really happened between you and Leah."

Ethan looked at his dad. “What am I missing here?”

“I know you’re not the one to blame for that... thing.” Mercy allowed herself a tentative smile. “There’s something else I need to tell you. I’m in love with you.”

One moment, Ethan’s eyes widened, as if he could hardly believe the news.

The next moment, Ethan ran to her, lifted her, and whirled her around. The feeling of elation swept her up. When he put her down, she was dizzy in the most wonderful way.

“Oh, about the box I went to pick up at the office yesterday...” Ethan reached into his pocket.

Mercy shook her head. “I don’t need the proof you needed to be there.”

He took out a small black velvet box and dropped on one knee. “Mercy, will you please marry me?”

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. “I already married you.”

“Well, I’m so happy you love me that my thoughts got scrambled. I meant a renewal of vows in the church. I want you to have the wedding of your dreams that you’ll remember forever.” He opened the box. A gorgeous ring sparkled with seven diamonds.

Mercy felt dizzy again. “Of course I’ll marry you. I mean, we’ll renew the vows. How kind of you to think of that. And the ring is beautiful.”

Ethan grinned as he rose to his feet. “The ring was in that box I just mentioned. I had to buy it online because we don’t have a jewelry store in our small town. And then I mailed it to my work address because I didn’t want you to accidentally see it. I meant what I said, Mercy. I love you.” He slipped the ring on her finger.

“I love you, too.” She moved closer to him.

He dipped his head, and a wave of excitement rushed through her in anticipation of a kiss.

Ethan's father cleared his throat.

Ethan glanced in his dad's direction. "Oh, sorry, Dad."

The older man winked at him. "Nothing to be sorry about. It's about time that you kissed your wife."

Mercy chuckled. She could see where Ethan got his charisma from.

Stevie stirred, jumped from the bed, and ran to Ethan. "Daddy!" Then he turned to Ethan's father. "Grandpa!"

Ethan lifted Stevie in the air. "Hey, buddy! I'm happy to see you again."

Her son turned pleading eyes at her. "Mommy, are we gonna go home?"

Everybody seemed to stay still.

Her heart swelled in her chest. "Yes, sweetie. We're going home."



EPILOGUE



ON HER WEDDING DAY, AS Mercy waited for the ceremony to start, she could hardly believe this was reality. The fears and trepidation in her heart when she'd married Ethan in the hospital were long gone. Now she had no doubt the man waiting for her at the end of the aisle was the man she wanted to spend her entire life with, until the very end.

Everything was so different today, from the church decorated with white bows and her favorite hyacinths to the incredible feeling of happiness that filled her.

As she walked down the aisle, her parents about to give her away, Mercy felt elated. The church was filled to the brim. Ethan did have many relatives and cousins. His parents smiled at her as she passed, and so had Mamá Rosa. Ethan and Mercy had decided to have the reception catered by Mamá Rosa's restaurant, set in Ethan's backyard, which was big enough for that. There was going to be a sea of hyacinths there, decorating tables, chairs, and even trees and the fence.

She smiled at the thought that Tom Marks's band had agreed to play at the reception.

Stevie looked so handsome in his little tuxedo, holding a pillow with rings. He'd been bursting with excitement to be a ring bearer and practically bounced off the walls the entire day. It was difficult to believe that not so long ago he'd had surgery. Mercy's heart overflowed with love.

Her precious, precious boy, finally getting the family he deserved...

She let her hair flow over her shoulders, and the white dress, while simple, made her feel beautiful. She beamed at Ethan, who'd opted for a blue tuxedo.

That day in the hospital, she'd held her head high and smiled, but she'd cried inside. If she cried today, it would be

tears of happiness.

As she stood near the altar, she knew she'd finally left her fears and insecurities behind. She'd thought that her second marriage might turn out to be her biggest mistake.

Instead, it had been the biggest blessing for her and Stevie.

When it came time to say the vows, she felt true tears of happiness prickle behind her eyes. She'd written her vows, but they suddenly felt too formal. So she went with her thoughts at that moment. "I fell for you, Ethan, the moment I saw you. But you didn't pay attention to me then." She paused, as there were several murmurs in the pews.

"What did she say?" one of Ethan's cousins asked.

Mercy hesitated. "Okay, I think I started wrong. My road to you was a long and bumpy one. Sometimes I wasn't sure if I should be running toward you or from you." With more murmurs in the pews, she paused again. She should've gone with the written vows.

Ethan's smile was unwavering on his face.

It gave her strength. "Now, I'm so grateful to God that He gave me you as my soul mate, because that's who you are to me. My soul mate. My friend. My confidant. My supporter. The best father for my little boy I could wish for. And the husband I love with all my heart."

Ethan's eyes sparkled. "You were meant for me, Mercy. And I was meant for you. I'm sorry it took me some time to figure it out. I'll be forever grateful to God that you became my wife. You're beautiful, kind, caring, lovely..." He took a breath.

"Okay, we get the point," one of Ethan's cousins whispered and was immediately hushed by Mamá Rosa.

Ethan continued, "You're everything I could want and more. You're the most amazing person I've met in my life. And if I live to a hundred, I know that you'll still be the most amazing person I'll ever meet."

"You, too," Mercy whispered.

“You’re the one for me. The only one. You’ll always be.”

“You’re the only one for me.” Mercy didn’t know she could love him any more than she already had. But she was wrong. She felt her love was growing stronger not just with each passing day but with each passing moment.

“I know that you love me because of me, not because of my social status or money. If I lost the job, the mansion, the car, and had to start from washing and painting vehicles again, you’d still stay with me.”

Mercy nodded. “I would. I’d be washing or painting vehicles by your side, if necessary.”

Ethan’s smile became even brighter. “You’re my soul mate. My friend. My confidante. My supporter. The best mother to the little boy I adore as my own. Well, and it doesn’t hurt that you make excellent chicken mole and tamales.”

Several people chuckled.

“That’s important!” Mamá Rosa said in a whisper loud enough for the entire church to hear.

“I treasure every moment I spend with you, Mercy. People told me love diminishes in marriage. They are wrong. I love you more and more every day. I’ll cherish you forever. You’re the wife I love with all my heart.”

As she listened, Mercy felt so absolutely, deliriously happy that she was afraid to take her next breath. She smiled her brightest smile as one happy tear rolled down her cheek.

I love You, Lord. Thank You.



THE END



From Alexa: Thank you so much for reading *Best Friends and Second Chances*! I hope so much that you enjoyed Mercy and Ethan’s story.

Would you like to read one of my other books, free? How about the prequel to my Cowboy Crossing series, [*Show Me a Single Dad Cowboy*](#)? A single dad cowboy and the matchmaker who might just be his perfect match, if only she'd stop trying to pair him off with someone else!



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