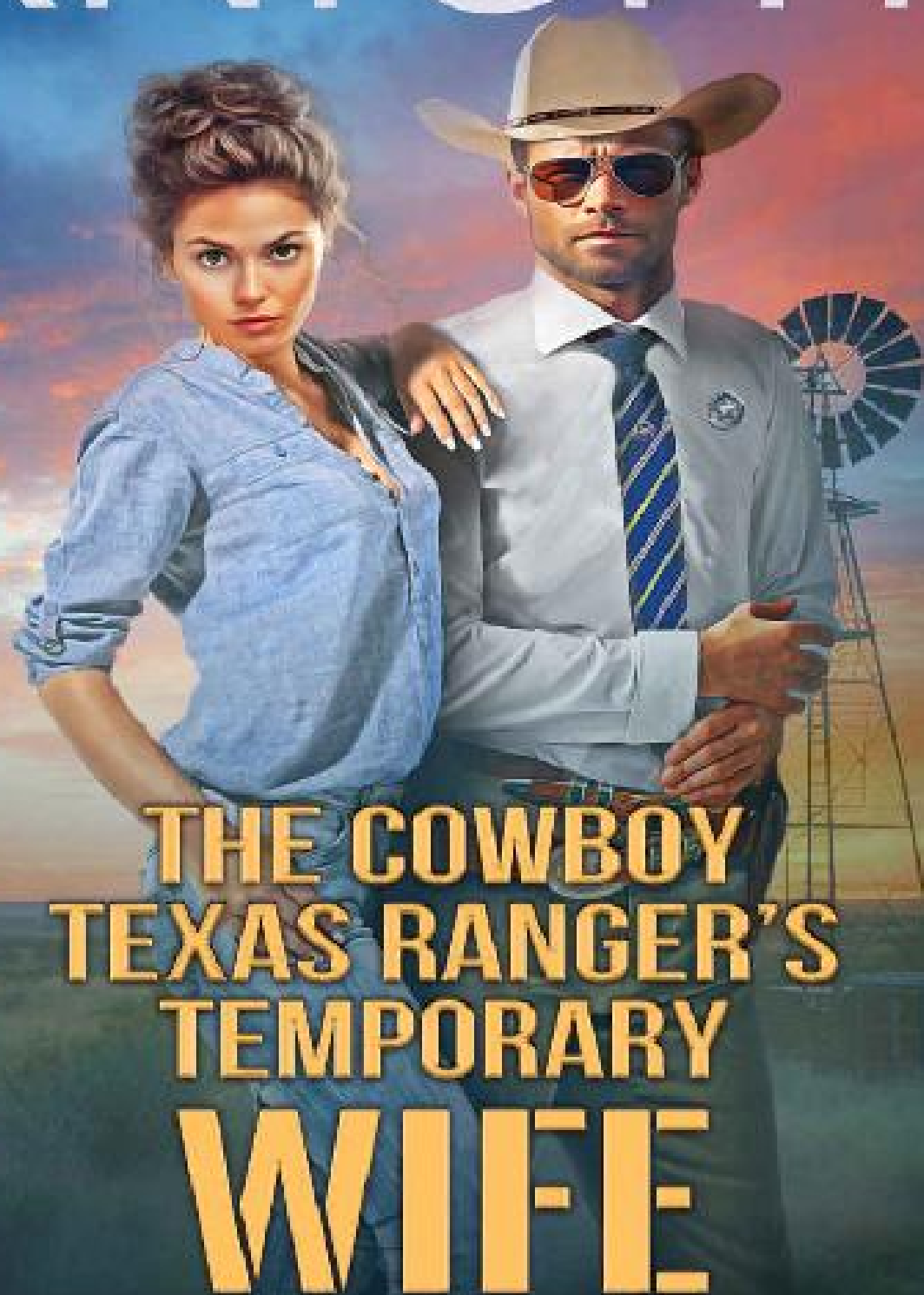


THE COWBOY TEXAS RANGERS SERIES BOOK TWO

# JANALYN KNIGHT



THE COWBOY  
TEXAS RANGER'S  
TEMPORARY  
WIFE

# The Cowboy Texas Ranger's Temporary Wife

The Cowboy Texas Rangers, Volume 2

Janalyn Knight

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# Chapter One



Maverick Decker entered the Black Horse Café in downtown Austin and found a table in Jaz's section. He always sat where she could be his waitress. In the five years since he'd been coming to the café, they'd become friends, and he looked forward to chatting with her when he ate there.

She looked over and smiled at him, holding up a finger to tell him she'd be over in a minute. He smiled back and nodded. Having just gotten back in town, he was hungry. He'd skipped lunch, and breakfast had been a long time ago.

Knowing his preferences, Jaz came over with two cups and a pot of coffee. "Hello, stranger. Haven't seen you in a while. Been out of town on some secret Texas Ranger business?"

He grinned as she poured coffee into his cup. "I've been out on Ranger business, yes, but it's not all that secret. Initially, I was at the Dallas office for meetings. Did you miss me?"

She chuckled. "Of course." She set the other cup on the table across from him and filled it for herself before sitting down.

He'd been hoping that she could take her break when he came in. She was easy to talk to, and he looked forward to their conversations. Jaz had brown hair that curled below her shoulders and beautiful hazel eyes with flecks of green in them. She wore light makeup that enhanced her striking cheekbones and full lips. Despite how gorgeous she was, she was the kind of down-to-earth person he felt comfortable with. Since his divorce, he hadn't been looking for any kind of steady relationship. He saw women from time to time, but he was sure to keep them at arm's length. With Jaz, he never felt pressure to ask her out. Their friendship wasn't about that. They were just two people who enjoyed each other's company

and who could talk about anything. He counted himself lucky to know her.

“So, how’ve you been?” he asked as he took a sip of his hot coffee. It tasted freshly brewed, and he savored it before swallowing.

“Just fine. Work’s been busy, of course, and I’ve read a couple more books.”

He smiled. Jaz loved reading romantic suspense novels, and he felt sure that that was one reason she liked hearing about his Ranger work. “Were they any good?”

“One of them was great. I tried out a new author, and I’m so glad I did. I’ll be reading more of hers. The other one was so-so. I liked it, but it could have had more suspense in it.”

“I know, you go for the action.”

She took a drink from her cup. “That’s right. I like a fast-paced book with lots of giddyap.”

She was something else. “After my meeting in Dallas, there was a school shooting I was on for several days. One student was killed, and several were injured.”

She gave him a sober look. “I heard about it on the news. So you were on that one, huh?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He didn’t give her details she shouldn’t know, but they talked about it for a little while as they finished their coffee.

As she stood up, she said, “Are you ordering dinner?”

“Sure am.” He knew the menu by heart and gave her his order. She smiled and patted his shoulder as she walked off.

The Black Horse Café was only a few blocks from his house. It got its name from the tall, rearing iron horse that stood outside the building. The interior had Western décor that felt like home to him. He’d been raised on a cattle ranch in North Texas and grew up rodeoing. Wearing a uniform of tan Wranglers, boots, a white dress shirt, and a Western hat to work as a Texas Ranger every day had been an easy transition for him.

He didn't like cooking for himself and, more often than not, he ate breakfast here at the café. Every other week, Jaz worked the counter in the mornings, and he'd eat there so they could chat in bits and pieces as she waited on her customers. The in-between weeks, she worked the afternoon shift, like today, and he'd stop in for dinner. He couldn't remember when he'd started planning his meals around Jaz's work schedule, but it'd been a long time ago.

He seldom admitted it to himself, but sometimes his life was lonely. Most of the time, he didn't mind. His work kept him especially busy, and he concentrated on that. He worked hard, and although he'd gotten a promotion to lieutenant two years ago, he wanted to make captain in the not-so-far-off future.

Jaz brought his plate. "Here you go, cowboy. Enjoy your dinner."

"Thanks, Jaz."

She squeezed his shoulder as she walked away. She always touched him when she walked over to him or left his table. He'd come to expect it, and it was one of the things that made their friendship special. It didn't come off as flirting—it just showed that she cared about him. In fact, one of the things that he liked most about Jaz was that she *didn't* flirt with him. He had to put up with enough of that, and it got tiresome.

He ate slowly, enjoying every bite of his chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes topped with white gravy, and corn with lots of butter. He loved the food here at the Black Horse. It reminded him of his mother's cooking—although not quite as good, of course.

Jaz came over and refilled his coffee, knowing that he always liked to enjoy a last cup after his meal. He smiled and nodded to her as he leaned back against the booth. This place had come to feel like home to him after all this time.

When he'd finished his coffee, he left Jaz a lavish tip, as he always did, and cashed out. He turned to find her gaze on him and waved. She grinned and waved back. As he walked out the

door, he smiled. He was ready to go home. His empty house wouldn't feel so lonely now.



Jasmine Garner, known as Jaz to her friends, watched Mav walk out the door. She always looked forward to him coming in for his meals and missed him when he traveled out of town on Ranger business. She couldn't remember when she'd started watching for him to come in, but it had been a long time ago. Now she kept a lookout throughout her shifts, searching for his tall, broad-shouldered body walking through the door.

The man had striking good looks that always brought admiring glances from the women in the café; looks he never seemed to notice. His clean-cut, dark-brown hair and bright-blue eyes were hard to forget once you'd laid eyes on him. But what she liked best about him was his smile. He had a good sense of humor and told her the funniest clean jokes. It was an endearing quality that went straight to her heart. She counted herself lucky that he called her his friend.

Mav was a man she felt comfortable with; something that wasn't common for her since her experience with her ex-husband. She'd been a foster child; her mother was a drug addict and had lost custody of Jaz when she was young. She'd been lucky, though. Her last foster parents had really cared about her. She'd lived with them for five years, and when she'd aged out of the system at eighteen, they'd continued to let her live with them. But she hadn't wanted to be a burden. She'd gotten this job at the Black Horse and had saved her money for a car. She'd met her ex at the café and had fallen in love with him. They'd married when she was nineteen, and not long after, she'd become pregnant.

She looked over as a family walked through the café door. Glad of the interruption, she smiled at them and picked up menus as they walked to an empty table and sat down. She set the menus in front of them and asked, "What would you all like to drink?"



As she wrote down their order, her thoughts returned to the past. Four weeks after her baby daughter had been born, she'd died in the night. They'd called it crib death. She called it God turning his back on her one more time. It had shattered her husband, and although she'd insisted that they go to couples counseling, he'd left Jaz five months later.

His abandonment had left her with a sour taste in her mouth for the male half of the human race. That is, until Mav had come into her life.

She readied a tray with the family's drinks and walked back to the table, smiling as she passed out the glasses. The family was still studying their menus, so she let them have some more time.

Getting to know Mav had shown her that she'd been wrong about men. He was gentle and kind and a great listener. It was always nice when he was able to come in at a time when she could take her break and chat with him. Occasionally, she sensed his loneliness, and when she did, she always tried to make him laugh.

She went back over to clear his table. The café was getting busy, and the busboy hadn't gotten to it yet. She smiled as she picked up the twenty-five-dollar tip. Mav always tipped her extravagantly. She'd told him more times than she could remember that he didn't need to do that, but he'd just smile.

Samantha, another waitress at the café and her best friend, walked over. "I see Mav came in this afternoon."

"He's been out of town for a while. He came in for dinner."

"When is that man ever going to ask you out?"

Jaz frowned at her friend. "Our relationship isn't like that. We're close friends, that's all. He doesn't flirt with me like the other men do. It's nice to be able to just be myself with him. You know what I mean?"

Samantha shrugged. "It'd be nicer if you were dating, don't you think?"

Jaz rolled her eyes. "Girl, you have a one-track mind."

Samantha laughed. “Of course I do.”

The door opened, and another customer walked in.

Samantha said, “You know I’m right, girl,” and walked off.

Jaz shook her head. But part of her couldn’t help but wonder if what her friend said was true.



## Chapter Two



Several days later, Mav walked into the café at just after six-thirty in the morning, hungry for breakfast and looking forward to chatting with Jaz. She looked up and smiled as he took a seat at the counter.

She walked over with a coffee pot and a cup and saucer. “Howdy, cowboy. How are you this morning?” Her smile lit up her face and did something to his heart, as it always did.

“I’m just fine. Looking forward to my breakfast. How are you?” Despite it being early in the morning, she looked exhausted. He knew how hard she worked; he’d seen it. His heart went out to her.

She shrugged. “Same ol’, same ol’, I guess.” As she poured his coffee, she said, “I did work a double yesterday, though. One of the other waitresses on the afternoon shift was off sick. Man, did my feet kill me last night.”

He knew what being on your feet for hours on end felt like. When he was on a case, there were times when he did that from early in the morning until late at night. It sucked. “I hope you soaked in a hot bath when you got home.”

A man farther down the counter called her name. She glanced that way and then back at him. “Oh, you know I did.” She wrote down Mav’s order and turned it in to the kitchen before rushing over to the man who’d called her.

Mav took a sip from his cup and thought about what Jaz had said. He was sure that she’d happily worked that extra shift. That was the kind of person she was. She’d been at the Black Horse for ten years, longer than any other employee. He hoped they treasured her the way she deserved.

He watched as she took the coffee pot from one end of the counter to the other, refilling cups as she went. She was quick and efficient and had a kind word and a smile for every

customer. She returned to the coffee machine and put on another pot.

Stopping in front of him, she asked, “So what’s on my favorite Texas Ranger’s agenda for today?”

“I’m meeting with an FBI agent that I network with a lot later on this morning. She works here in Austin, too. Other than that, I have paperwork to catch up on and phone calls to make.” He grew serious. “I hope you can get some rest soon. When are your next days off?”

She sighed. “Not until day after tomorrow. Then I’m off for two days.”

He nodded. “I hope you’ll go home and take a good nap when you leave today. I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but you look exhausted.”

She gave him a tired smile. “I know you’re right. And a nap sounds like heaven right now.”

He heard, “Order up!” come from the kitchen, and she turned around.

It turned out to be his breakfast, and she brought it over to him. “Enjoy, cowboy.” She hurried back to the pass-through window as another order was called.

A few minutes later, she paused in front of him again and refilled his cup. “Any plans for tonight, Mav?”

“Yeah, Mark texted me early this morning and asked me if I wanted to go out for a beer. He was already at the gym. That guy puts me to shame.” Mark was a good friend and fellow Ranger. Since he was also single, he and Mav often got together in the evenings.

She raised her brows. “What? You go to the gym, too, right?”

“Yeah, after work. I can’t imagine hitting it as hard as he does at six in the morning. I mean, seriously. I can barely make it to the shower. I’m not an early bird.”

She chuckled. “Well, whatever you’re doing is working. You always look great, Mav. You don’t have anything to worry

about.”

A customer stood up from the counter, and Jaz rushed over to her, probably to hand over the check for her meal. As the customer left to pay her bill, he noticed Jaz put her hands on her lower back and arch backwards a little. Her back must be hurting her too.

He wished there was some way to help her; some way he could make a difference in her life. He knew from talking to her that she often worked extra shifts to put money aside. She was trying to build an emergency fund, but she'd said that it was slow going on what she made at the café.

He finished his short stack and mulled it over in his mind. Surely there was something he could do? As he took the last bite of his over-easy eggs, he had it. He glanced down the counter to where Jaz was talking quietly with a woman, and then he smiled. He took out the small notebook in his pocket and wrote:

*Have dinner with me on your first evening off. It's time you had someone wait on you for a change.*

Then he wrote down his cell phone number and tore it out. He didn't want to ask her in front of the other customers; it would set a bad precedent. She didn't need every Tom, Dick, and Harry asking her out.

The next time she stopped by for a quick chat, he slid the note toward her.

She raised her brows and picked it up. As she read it, she smiled and nodded. Then she took her pen from her apron and wrote her cell phone number on a blank order sheet, folded it in half, and handed it to him.

He grinned and put it in his shirt pocket. “Thanks, Jaz. I've gotta go.”

She reached out and patted his shoulder. “You have a good day, cowboy. Be seeing you.”

“That you will.” As she walked down the counter again, he put his tip under the edge of his plate and stood up. While he paid his bill, he realized something. He felt all wound up,

happier than he'd been in a while, and he knew the reason. He had a date with Jaz.



Two days later, Jaz gazed around at the interior of Mav's truck. It was immaculate, just as he always was.

He glanced at her and smiled. "Hungry?"

"Starving. I ate a light lunch so I'd have plenty of room for that steak you promised me."

"Good. Like I said, we're going to Vince Young, so you'll enjoy their beef."

"I sure will. Thanks for this, Mav. I seldom go out to eat—and certainly not for steak. This is a real treat."

He nodded. "I'm just glad you agreed to come. I hate seeing you so tired. I want you to relax and enjoy a meal while somebody else waits on you."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'm glad you're my friend, Mav. Having you in my life means so much to me." It was the first time she'd ever said that to him, and she wasn't sure why. She should have said it a long time ago.

As she let go of his hand, he recaptured it. "I'm the one who's lucky, Jaz. I don't get close to a lot of people; it's just not the way I am. But I enjoy talking to you when I come in to eat at the café." He smiled. "I really look forward to it, actually."

She nodded. "I look forward to you coming in, too. It's like my day is always better after you've been in." She'd never really thought of that before, but she realized it was true. His visits really did brighten up the whole remainder of her day.

He let her hand go and returned his to the steering wheel. "It looks like we have a mutual admiration society going on here."

"I think we do, cowboy."

When they arrived at the steakhouse, Mav got out and opened her door, helping her down from the truck. Knowing

that they were going to the upscale restaurant, she'd worn a coral-colored, mid-thigh, formfitting dress, so she appreciated the assistance. It didn't surprise her one bit that he was such a gentleman.

Mav had made reservations, so they were immediately shown to a small table for two. The modern, minimalist interior was completely different from the old-fashioned Western décor in the café, and it made this evening out even more special.

Mav held her chair and seated her, a rare occurrence in her life. She smiled and thanked him. He looked so handsome in his dark-blue dress shirt, Western hat, and heavily starched Wranglers. His rodeo trophy buckle shone brightly as he sat down beside her. His clothes reminded her that he was a real cowboy, not just a Texas Ranger.

He asked, "Is this your first time here?"

She nodded. "It's lovely."

"I like eating here. I can enjoy my food and have a nice, quiet conversation with whomever I'm with."

Hmm. Did that mean he took women here often? She'd never wondered much about that before. Something about tonight had her thinking in that direction, though, and she shouldn't be. She and Mav were just friends, after all.

When the waitress took their drink order, Mav ordered a beer, and she ordered a glass of red wine. Not long after, they put in their dinner orders.

"I don't think I told you," Mav said as he took a swallow of beer. "My sister, Julia, is engaged now."

"Really? That's wonderful. She's quite a bit younger than you, isn't she?"

"Yes. She just graduated from college. That's where she met John."

Jaz took a sip of her wine. "I'll bet Jan's excited."

"Yeah, Mom's really happy. She said that she's tired of waiting for me and my brother to give her grandkids. Said now



she has a third shot at it.”

“At least Paul’s married. That should give her hope.”

“I’m sure it does, and last time I talked to Paul, he said that they were trying,” Mav said.

Warmth swept through her at the intimacy of their conversation. She loved it when Mav shared the closest details of his life with her. She knew that he and his first wife had never had children, and she wondered why.

They continued to chat until their steaks arrived.

“Oh, this tastes fabulous, Mav,” she said after she’d taken her first bite.

“You like it? Their meat is always tender and juicy. That’s why I love coming here.”

“You’ve got that right. It practically melts in your mouth.” She took another bite and closed her eyes, savoring the wonderful taste and texture.

When she opened them, Mav was smiling. “I’m glad you came tonight, Jaz. It’s a real treat seeing you enjoying yourself like this.”

“Thanks for inviting me. This is such an extraordinary pleasure.” She smiled, letting her eyes express her feelings for him.

His gaze warmed in response, and he reached across the table for her hand. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

The deep timbre of his voice sent a thrill through her, reminding her just how sexy he was. She felt closer to him tonight than she ever had before. Not for the first time, she realized that there was something very special about Mav. His eyes twinkled when he smiled, and when she talked, he listened as though she was the only person in the world.

After dinner, as they walked to his truck, she suddenly wished he would put his arm around her shoulders. Then she scolded herself. What was wrong with her tonight?

He helped her up into the seat on the passenger side and handed her the seat belt. She said, “Thanks. You’re such a gentleman.”

He smiled. “You bring out the best in me.”

Her heart gave a double thump. Was he flirting with her?

On the way home, she kept thinking about what he’d said, and she glanced his way more than once. His hand rested casually on the steering wheel, and a small smile played around his chiseled lips. Lord, the man was handsome. She felt her body responding to him; she couldn’t help it. With a sigh, she turned to look out her window.

When Mav pulled up in front of her apartment, she said, “Thanks for a wonderful evening. I don’t know when I last had such an amazing time.”

He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I did, too, Jaz.”

He helped her out of the truck and walked her to the door. Hating that their time together had ended, she inserted her key, but before she could open her door, Mav took her hand and looked into her eyes. She smiled up at him, her heart pounding. Then he enveloped her in a gentle, intimate hug. She snuggled her cheek against his broad chest, nestling in his strong arms. Nothing had ever felt so good. He held her there for a long moment, resting his chin against her temple. Then he kissed the top of her head and drew back.

“I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed this evening. Maybe we can do it again.” His eyes sparkled in the porch light.

Still overwhelmed by his hug, she said softly, “I’d love that.”

He waited while she opened her door and stepped inside before heading back to his truck.

Before she got undressed, she kicked off her heels and called Samantha. Sitting on her bed, she waited as the phone rang.

“Hey, girl, how did your date go?” Samantha asked when she picked up the call.

“It was fabulous!” Jaz told her about her intimate conversation with Mav and how it had made her feel. “You know, tonight was different. It really did feel like a date, and I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Well, I don’t know why, you goofball. The guy asked you out for dinner—*finally*, I might add.”

Jaz chuckled. “I just thought it was because we were friends, but now I’m not sure.” She told Sam about the wonderful hug he’d given her at her door. “I’ve never felt anything like it. I tingled all over. And his body—it was so warm and overpoweringly masculine. It was amazing!”

“Wow, girl. That man’s a hunk. I’m so glad you two got together at last.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t say that we got together.” Jaz wanted to put a stop to Sam’s matchmaking at once. “It was only one dinner, and I’m sure he was just being nice when he gave me that hug.”

“Right. You go on telling yourself that,” Sam said wryly.

When Jaz hung up, she undressed and got into bed. However, she wasn’t sleepy at all. She kept thinking about the evening, about her conversations with Mav, and especially about their hug. It really had been wonderful. She could still feel the way he’d held her; so gently, even though his muscular arms and chest were evidence of his strength. That final kiss, barely felt through her hair, had sent a thrill straight through her body. She’d never forget it, no matter what happened in the future. It would always be a special memory. Mav was an amazing man, and she was so incredibly lucky to have him as a friend.



# Chapter Three



Mav settled into the driver's seat but didn't immediately start his truck. He was still buzzing. He'd enjoyed dinner with Jaz immensely, although he was sure that Jaz only considered him a friend. Before this evening, he'd really never thought of her as anything other than that, either.

After his divorce, he'd sworn off serious relationships. It was one reason that he'd never asked Jaz out. He enjoyed her friendship and didn't want to complicate it.

Somehow, though, it had felt right to ask her out this time, and his reasons not to hadn't seemed important. He was glad that he had. Tonight had been amazing. He could tell that Jaz had enjoyed herself too. That little line between her eyes had been gone by the time they'd finished their meal.

He started his truck and backed out of the parking space. Maybe it would actually be okay to ask her out again. His pulse sped up at the thought. As he headed back to his place, he realized that he was smiling.

When he arrived home, he changed into comfortable clothes and settled in his recliner in front of the TV. He turned it on to a show that he'd already seen, but he didn't mind that. He couldn't really concentrate on it, anyway. Scenes from dinner kept flashing before him. He pictured Jaz laughing softly at one of his jokes. They were silly things, but she always seemed to love them. He tried to have at least one to tell her every time he saw her.

He recalled Jaz closing her eyes to savor that bite of her steak. God, she'd been beautiful then. He also loved how intently she listened to him when he talked. He knew that he had her full attention, no matter what he was sharing with her. Why had it taken him so long to ask her out? She was a wonderful woman.

As he went back over the evening they'd shared, he realized that it was the first time since his wife had left him that he'd been completely himself on a date with a woman. He hadn't needed to be on his guard, worrying that she would read something unintended into his words or actions. With Jaz, he could relax—and it was fabulous. The freedom to be himself was exhilarating.

He got up and took a beer from the fridge. It really had been an exceptional night. He raised the longneck and took several long, cold swallows. Smiling, he walked back to his chair.

As he settled down into the recliner, he called Mark. "Hey, did I catch you in the middle of something?"

"Nah, I'm just sitting in front of the TV. What's going on?"

Mav told him about asking Jaz out to dinner, then said, "It was great. I can't remember when I've enjoyed a date so much."

"Really? How come?"

"I was thinking about that, and I guess it's because I could just be myself. Jaz and I are such close friends that I didn't have to worry about her coming on to me or wanting more from me than I'm ready to give. I enjoyed the hell out of myself, and I think she did too."

"Well, I'm happy for you, bro. I know dating hasn't been easy for you. I'm glad you've found someone you like," Mark said. After a pause, he continued, "Are you sure you just want to be friends? She sounds like the kind of woman who could be right for you."

"Well, I'm not so sure that she feels anything for me beyond friendship, but I gave her a hug when I dropped her back at home, and I think she enjoyed it. I know I sure did. She's really awesome, Mark."

"I've got to meet this lady. Why don't you let me sometime?"

That was actually a great idea. "I told you that she's a waitress at my favorite café. How about we have lunch there

sometime?”

“I’d like that. You’ve told me how good the food is, and I’ve been meaning to try it. It’s just that it’s not on my way home from work, and you know that I bring my lunch most of the time.”

Mav chuckled. “I know, Mr. Health Food Freak.”

“Listen, Mav, think about what I said. She could be the one.”

“You might be right, but I just don’t want to ruin a good thing, you know? Listen, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

As he hung up, he considered what he’d just said, and a niggling of doubt entered his mind. Would it really be such a bad thing to let his relationship with Jaz go further?



Several days later, Mav got back into his truck and took a drink of his cold coffee. He hated working child kidnappings. It crushed him when they turned out badly, and he didn’t have a good feeling about this one. Many times, it was one of the parents who made off with a child, but in this instance, that wasn’t the case. Over the past three days, an intense search of the surrounding areas had been carried out, and no clues as to the whereabouts of Brandon, a missing three-year-old, had turned up.

An attractive woman with naturally curly black hair pulled back in a clip walked toward his truck. Michelle “Mick” Parker was his FBI colleague.

“What’s up, Mick? Any news?”

“Nothing good, Mav. I don’t understand how the boy could have just disappeared from his backyard like that.” She grimaced. “I wish there were more cameras in this neighborhood. At least we might have found *something* that way.”

He nodded. An Amber Alert had immediately gone out, and the boy’s picture and information had been on the evening news. The surrounding states had been notified after the initial

search of the area had turned up nothing. All agencies involved would keep working the case, but the hope that had sustained everyone at the beginning was starting to fade.

The child's parents were still frantic, and he couldn't blame them. He desperately wished he could say or do something that would ease their pain.

As Mick walked away, he suddenly had an urge to call Jaz. Then he shook his head. Where had that come from? He'd never done anything like that before. Yet he knew that talking to her would somehow make him feel better. She was working the morning shift this week, though, so he sent her a text instead:

*Thinking of you. Wish I'd had one of my breakfasts at the Iron Horse this morning. The food here didn't even compare. Hope you're not working too hard, and I'm looking forward to seeing you when I get back into town.*

He read it again after he'd hit send. Was it too much? Would she think it was weird? He almost wished that he hadn't sent it. He sighed and put his phone back on the dash. No, he was glad that he'd contacted her. He missed her. He felt awful this morning: depressed and useless and scared that they'd never find the boy. Hearing from Jaz would be a comfort.

A moment later, his text tone went off.

*Hey, I miss you too. Can't wait for you to get back. Come on in, and we'll have a good visit.*

He grinned. She missed him? *Yes!* He suddenly felt better.

*I will. I don't know when I'll get back, but I'll see you as soon as I do.*

It was good to have someone who cared about him waiting for him when he got back. It had been a long time since he'd had that.

He was beginning to see her as more than a friend. But how did she see him? He had a suspicion that she saw him more as a brother than anything else. Could that be true? He definitely didn't want to ruin what they had. He enjoyed



having her in his life—and he would certainly be much lonelier without her. Maybe he should keep this new feeling for her to himself for now.

He looked up to see Mick waving frantically at him.

He got out and jogged over to her and the local sheriff, who was standing next to her black SUV. She clasped Mav's arm. "They found him at the Mexican border in Laredo! The guy had Brandon disguised as a girl, but the guard recognized him from the picture. Oh, Mav, we have him!"

Mav's heart hammered in his chest. "Thank God!" He'd already almost given up. It was a miracle that the guard had recognized the child through the disguise.

"I'll notify the parents," the sheriff said and stepped away.

Mav's knees felt weak, and he realized just how worried he'd been.

Mick shook his hand, her face beaming. "We won this one, Mav, and I didn't think we would. By the skin of our teeth, we won!"

It was great to see Mick so happy. Her usual somber, professional shell had completely failed her. He smiled and squeezed her hand. "We sure did, Mick. We sure did."

This was one case that wouldn't give him nightmares. And soon he could return to Austin—and Jaz.



Jaz smiled as she put her phone back in her apron and walked over to pick up the coffee pot. As she began to fill the cups at her tables, she thought how awesome it was to hear from Mav. Surprised at first, she'd wondered if something bad had happened, but reading his text had filled her with warm tingles. He must be feeling something like she was: attracted and missing their time together. She hoped that whatever this case was about, it would wrap up quickly. She felt closer to Mav than anyone else in her life except Sam, and she couldn't wait to see him again.

There was another reason she wanted to see him again, though. She wanted to tell him about the lump she'd found under her arm. She didn't want to share the bad news with him while he was out of town because she knew how worried he'd be. And she was worried. Incredibly worried.

Although she didn't have anything to do with her biological mother, who was an on-again, off-again drug addict, Jaz knew that the woman had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. It could be hereditary, and enlarged lymph nodes, especially under the arm, were a symptom of the disease.

She glanced at one of her tables as a man gestured for her attention. It looked like he'd finished eating, so he probably wanted his check. She tore it from her order pad and smiled as she walked toward him.

As the man left his table, she picked up her tip.

She had no insurance. She'd looked at the Marketplace, but even with the subsidy, the monthly premium had been too much for her to pay on her income from the diner. She hadn't been to her doctor yet because she still held out hope that there might be some other way to acquire insurance, and if she was diagnosed prior to that, the company might decline her coverage.

She hadn't slept for days. Not since she'd found the lump. Tossing and turning and worrying all night had left her with dark circles under her red and swollen eyes. She felt trapped and scared to death.

As she returned the coffee pot to the station, Sam came up to her. "Honey, you look like hell. Please tell me what's going on."

Jaz glanced at her tables. Her customers seemed content for the moment. She took a deep breath. "I've found a lump under my arm. Remember I told you that several years ago my birth mother had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma? I'm so worried that's what I've got."

Sam gave her a quick hug. "Sweetie, have you been to your doctor? You've got to get the lump checked out. It could

be this disease or breast cancer. It could be anything.”

Jaz shuddered. “I know, but I don’t have insurance, Sam. I just don’t know what to do.” She felt the beginnings of tears welling in her eyes.

Sam gave her another hug, patting her back as well. “Now you listen, it might be nothing, but you need to find out. Don’t put this off, you hear?”

Jaz nodded, but she was still unsure about what to do. She did feel better after sharing with Sam, though.

The party at one of her tables stood up, and she said, “Thanks, Sam. I’m glad I told you.”

“Of course, honey. I’m here for you, you know that.”

Jaz rushed over to give the group their ticket, then smiled and thanked them all.

As she picked up her tip, her thoughts returned to Mav. It would feel good to tell him, too. He’d understand the fear she felt, and maybe he’d have a suggestion for her on how to proceed. Warmth spread through her as she imagined their conversation. Mav’s encouragement and strength had become something she counted on.

He hadn’t mentioned what he was working on or where he was, and she didn’t feel comfortable asking him about an ongoing case. He often told her when he got back into town, though. She just wished that she knew when he’d be home. Right now, her anxiety was almost overwhelming, and if she could anticipate his return, she knew that would help.

Sighing, she strode to one of her tables. “Is there anything else I can get you all?”

The woman seated at the table said, “I don’t think so. This was wonderful.”

Jaz smiled. “Great!” She slid their ticket face down onto the table. “Thanks for stopping by.”

She walked back to the coffee station and put on a fresh pot. Time seemed to drag, and her heavy heart beat sluggishly in her chest. *Mav, please come home. I need you.*



# Chapter Four



Mav got back into town around four in the afternoon and took a quick shower. Jaz was working the afternoon shift now, and he'd been looking forward to going into the café for dinner since he'd awakened that morning.

As he dried off, he imagined how sweet it would be to see her again. She always had a big smile for him when he arrived, and he hoped that she'd have time to take her afternoon break while he was there.

He put on a dress shirt and a heavily starched pair of Wranglers, his belt with its trophy buckle, a hat, and his boots. Looking in the mirror, he was satisfied with his appearance.

It was still unseasonably hot outside at this time of day, so he drove the five blocks to the Iron Horse.

As he walked inside, Jaz turned toward the door and gave him a smile that lit up her beautiful face.

He smiled and gave a little wave as he chose an empty table in her section.

She came striding over a moment later with two cups and saucers and a pot of coffee. He smiled when he realized that she was going to take her break with him.

"Hey, cowboy. It's great to see you back in town," she said as she filled their cups.

He grinned. "It's good to be back. I missed you."

The warm look in her eyes sent a ripple of desire through his chest. She said, "I missed you too. I really did."

He let his grin change into a slow, intimate smile. "I'm glad, Jaz."

She sat down across from him. "Can you tell me what you've been doing, or is it something you need to keep to yourself?"

He shook his head. “No, it’s fine to talk about it. Did you hear about that three-year-old boy being kidnapped?”

“I got an Amber Alert, and then I saw something on my phone. Is that what you’ve been working on? I hear he was found.”

He smiled. “Yes, we had some real luck.” He explained how they’d been without leads until the border agent had spotted the boy in disguise.

She whistled. “Wow, that was just pure luck. I don’t know if I could have done that. Thank God you found the poor little thing.”

Mav took a sip of his coffee. “I think God had a lot to do with it, honestly. I’m just damn glad we found him.”

“I assume you came in for dinner. What would you like?” she asked.

He told her, and she wrote it down, then turned in the slip at the kitchen window.

When she sat back down again, he reached for her hand. “I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, Jaz, but you don’t look well. Is something wrong?”

She looked down at their hands. “I think there might be.”

His heart beat harder. What could be so wrong that it gave her dark circles under her eyes like that? “Tell me what’s going on,” he said with an urgency he didn’t try to hide.

She sighed. “I found a lump under my arm.”

A tremor of shock went through him. “What?”

“I don’t think I ever told you that my biological mother was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma several years ago.”

He felt himself blanch. “No, you didn’t. Does this lump have something to do with that?”

She bit her bottom lip. “It may. One of the most common symptoms is enlarged lymph nodes under the arm. It could be something else, but Hodgkin’s lymphoma can be hereditary, so I’m worried.”

He squeezed her hand, and she said softly, “Actually, I’m scared to death, Mav.”

“Jaz, have you seen a doctor about this lump?”

She looked down at their hands and shook her head. “I’ve checked it out, and from what I’ve found, I can’t afford insurance. I’m still open to try other avenues if something presents itself, but until then, I can’t get a diagnosis, or the insurance company may turn me down.”

“That’s just awful.” He leaned forward. “We’ve got to do something. You can’t just go on like this.”

She gave him a wan smile and reached for her cup again. After a sip, she said, “I wish I knew what else I could do. Although I don’t make much, I make too much money to qualify for Medicaid. Texas is one of those rare states that requires you to be income-eligible for it.”

“I’ll search for an answer, don’t you worry.” He took a drink of his cooling coffee. “Jaz, I can’t tell you how sorry I am about this. I know you’re worried sick, and I don’t blame you. If there’s anything I can do, you let me know.”

She smiled. “Just talking to you has made me feel better. You don’t know how much I’ve wanted you to come back home. I knew if I could just share this with you, I’d feel better. And I was right. I think I’ll finally get some sleep tonight.”

The cook called, “Jaz, order up!”

She rose and brought Mav his plate, then sat back down again.

He thanked her and tucked into his dinner.

She took a last sip from her cup and stood up from the table, leaving Mav his check. As she walked away, she caressed his shoulder. “See you tomorrow?”

He smiled. “You bet.” He had an idea forming, and he needed to do some research to find out if it might work. He’d do anything to help Jaz. She had to do something about that lump.



Not long after, Jaz looked up as Mav opened the door. He smiled and waved, and she waved back, feeling her heart grow heavier as he walked out. Just knowing he was there had bolstered her mood. Sharing her fear with him had somehow eased her anxiety.

As a new couple entered the café, she smiled. Grabbing two menus, she welcomed them. “Hi there. Let’s find you a table. Or would you prefer to sit at the counter?”

The woman said, “We’d like a table, please.”

“Sure thing.” Jaz led them to her table in the corner by the front windows and took their drink orders.

“Two iced teas coming right up,” Jaz said as she turned around. She headed for the space behind the counter where the sweet tea dispenser was. Somehow unburdening herself with Mav made her steps lighter than they had been all day. Now that he’d said that he would look into her problem, she felt more hope than she’d had since discovering the lump. His offer made her feel safe; cared for, even.

She smiled as she scooped a glass into the ice bin and then filled it with tea. The man was a rock, someone she could count on, and she’d never really realized that before. As she filled the other glass, she held that knowledge close. She didn’t quite have a name for it yet, but Mav had moved from friend to something else, and the knowledge made her heart swell.

Throughout the busy dinner rush, she found her mind constantly returning to the handsome cowboy, wondering what he was doing and if he was thinking about her as she was thinking about him.

As business slowed and she began to fill her condiments, she took a moment to text him:

*I really appreciate you listening to me, Mav. I feel better after our discussion. More hopeful that somehow this can be resolved. Having you in my life means so much to me.*



Mav answered right back:

*Jaz, I can't tell you how much I enjoy having you in my life as well. Of course I'm there for you. I'd do anything to help you. I hope you know that.*

She sent:

*I think I do, and thanks. You're a very special man, you know. I'm lucky that you care for me.*

He texted:

*I'm the lucky one. I hope when you get off this evening you go home and get some good rest. I'm really worried about you.*

She smiled.

*I promise I will. Thanks for worrying about me. I'm not used to having anyone to worry about me, and it feels nice.*

After a long moment, he sent:

*I do worry about you. I really care about you. I'm glad you got in touch.*

She flushed with warmth at the heart that he ended his text with.

She sent a final reply:

*I really care about you, too. Have a wonderful evening.*

She put three hearts after her reply and smiled.

A moment later, she found herself humming as she filled a ketchup bottle at an empty table. Mav made her truly happy, and she might as well accept it. As she put the cap back on the bottle, she smiled. Despite the lump under her arm, she felt good.



The next day, Mav stopped in at Human Resources when he arrived at work. He'd done several hours of internet research the night before and had some questions to ask. It didn't take long to get the information he needed and, as he headed on to

his desk, he texted Jaz and asked if he could meet her before she went in to work that afternoon.

When Mav arrived at his desk, Mark nodded to him. “How you doing, bro? You want to get a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” Mav set his briefcase down and followed Mark to the break room.

Nobody else was in there, and, after filling their personal mugs, they took a seat at one of the tables.

“Can I talk to you about something?” Mav asked.

Mark raised his brows. “Of course. Shoot.”

“Jaz found a lump under her arm. She’s worried that it might be Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

“Really? How come?” Mark took a sip of coffee.

“Her mother has it, and it can be hereditary.” Then Mav told him about the plan he’d come up with.

Mark frowned. “I hate to rain on your parade, buddy, but don’t you think you’re taking on too much? I mean, you’re kind of putting everything on the line here.”

“I know I am, and I’m fine with that. Jaz is worth it, and I’ve got to do something to help her.”

Mark shook his head. “I can imagine how you feel, but Mav, this is too much. There’s got to be another way.”

“Mark, I’ve thought about it, and after everything Jaz told me, I don’t see any other way, and I won’t let her down. She’s got to get that lump looked at. If not Hodgkin’s, it could be breast cancer. I don’t want anything to happen to her.”

His earnest, worried voice must have made an impression on Mark because he finally nodded. “I understand. I hope it works out for you, Mav.”

Mav leaned back and nodded. “I’m sure it will. Now I just need to convince Jaz to go along with my plan.”



It was an overcast October day as Mav pulled up in front of Jaz's apartment.

The door opened and she stepped out, greeting him with a wave. Pulling the door shut behind her, she strode to his truck as he got out to open her door.

"Hey, you," she said with a smile as he helped her up into the tall vehicle.

She looked beautiful today. Her eyes were much brighter, and even the dark circles under them were less prominent. She must have slept well.

"Hello, gorgeous." It was the first greeting of that type that he'd ever given her.

She glanced at him, her eyes widening with surprise. "Well, thank you, Mav."

That made him glad he'd said it. She needed encouragement right now, and it was truly how he felt about her.

As he backed out of the parking place, he said, "I thought I'd take you to Peace Park. It's a nice place for a chat, don't you think?"

"Oh, I love Peace Park. What a great idea." She set her purse on the floorboard and leaned back comfortably in the seat.

She glanced over at him. "So, you said you wanted to talk to me. What's this about, Mav?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Do you mind if we wait until we get to the park? I want to take my time and lay it all out for you."

"Hmm, a mystery. I like mysteries."

He was relieved that she wasn't irked by his request. She was curious, and now that he'd said that, even more so.

"So, how's your day been?" she asked.

"I made several phone calls, one that seemed to take forever. Caught up on paperwork and attended a meeting. Such

a boring day that it made me appreciate going out of town.” He grinned at her.

“I’ll bet. I did housework, which I think is worse.”

“I need to do some of that this evening. I don’t like it when my house gets messy.” He glanced at her. “I had a cleaner, but she moved, and I haven’t gotten around to finding anyone else.” He shrugged. “I like hiring individuals, but I’ll probably just go with a company this time. That way I don’t have to worry about losing my cleaner again. And it’ll be nice having someone in and out, so it looks like the house is occupied while I’m out of town.”

“That’s probably a good idea. I wish I had a cleaner.” Jaz grinned. “That’d be a luxury. And while I’m dreaming, I’d have someone to do my grocery shopping too.”

He laughed. “I hear you. I hate grocery shopping.”

He quickly found a parking space when they arrived at the park. They got out and walked down the sidewalk until they came to a low rock wall.

“This looks like a nice place to sit, don’t you think?” There was a soft breeze blowing, and the temperature was perfect.

“Yes, this is lovely, Mav.” She sat down, and he took a seat beside her.

“So, I’m dying of curiosity. Tell me what’s going on.” She turned toward him, an expectant look on her face.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wanted to present his case perfectly so that she’d accept his solution. “I’ve done a lot of research on this, Jaz, and I spoke with my Human Resources department this morning. I have a plan that I think will solve everything.”

She raised her brows. “You do?”

“I sure do.” He took her hands in his and she smiled. “Jaz, I consider you my best friend. I don’t know if you know that.”

“I consider you one of my best friends, too, Mav.”

He smiled. “Good, that makes my solution easier.” He took another deep breath. “Jaz, I’d like you to marry me and move into my home. That way you’ll qualify for my insurance. You can get your lump examined—and, if it turns out to be the worst-case scenario, you can be treated.”

Her eyes flew open wide, and her jaw dropped. “Mav...”

“Just think about it, Jaz. It makes total sense. We care about each other, and I can’t stand the thought of you going without treatment.”

She shook her head. “It’s too much, Mav. You’re offering something that’s just way too much. I can’t marry you.”

He frowned. “Do you mean that you don’t want to marry me?”

“I... No... Of course I’d like to marry you... Wait, I mean... Oh, *Mav!*”

He chuckled and squeezed her hands. “So there’s really no problem. We’re best friends. I promise, we won’t be sleeping together. I have a nice spare bedroom. More than anything, I want to help you get through it if it turns out that you do have this disease. Please tell me that you’ll at least think about my solution?”

She covered her face with her hands for a moment. Then she took a deep breath. “I can’t lose my apartment. I’d never find one like it so cheap. I’ve been there for ten years.”

“Well, keep it, then. I’ll help you financially.”

“You won’t need to do that. I’ll keep working.”

So, she was considering his idea. Fantastic. He’d looked into the treatment for the disease, and he doubted that she’d want to keep working through all of it, but he wasn’t going to argue that now.

“That’s fine. Just know that the offer’s there.”

She stood up and began to pace. “I don’t know. I just don’t see how I can let you do this for me.”

He got up and strode to her, taking her by the shoulders. “Listen, you don’t have to make a decision now. Let’s talk again in a couple of days. But remember, that lump’s a very serious issue. We can’t put this off long, okay?” He held her gaze so that she could see his deep concern.

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll think hard about it.” She reached up and put her hand on his cheek. “Thank you, Mav. Do you know how special you are? I’m the luckiest woman in the world.”

He smiled and clasped her fingers. “No, I’m the lucky one. I keep telling you that.” He gathered her into a gentle hug. “I’d better get you to work. Don’t want you to be late on my account.”

He held her hand as they walked to the truck, wanting that closeness, and he sensed that she did too.

She smiled at him as he handed her the seat belt, and there was a special warmth in it.

Once they were on the road again, he glanced her way. “Mind if I text you later?”

“I’d love that. You have no idea how much I enjoy hearing from you.”

His heart thumped. “Great. I will, then.” She was on his mind almost constantly now. He wondered if she felt the same way.

When he opened the door to let her out in front of the Iron Horse, she slid down and surprised him with a tender hug.

He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes, savoring the feeling. When she released him, he smiled. “I liked that, Jaz. Thanks.”

She nodded. “Talk to you later, cowboy.”

“You bet.” He stood and watched her until the door closed behind her. As he walked around to the driver’s side, he realized he had a smile on his face. Damn, that hug had felt good.



# Chapter Five



Jaz walked into the Iron Horse and nodded to Sam, who was picking up a tip from one of her empty tables.

“That Mav is so dang handsome. I swear, I wish I’d seen him first,” Sam said.

Jaz grinned. “Thanks for offering to take me home this evening. It was nice not having to worry about getting my car after meeting with him.” She gave Sam a quick hug. “You’re the best.”

“You’re welcome. Always glad to help in the name of love.”

Jaz rolled her eyes. “You’re terrible, and you know it.”

Sam laughed and picked up several menus, heading to the door to meet the customers who had just walked in.

Jaz went to the coffee station and put on a fresh pot. She still couldn’t believe that Mav had asked her to marry him. Shock was reverberating through her system. Could she seriously consider it? Should she?

The waitress Jaz was relieving waved goodbye, and Jaz waved in return. Taking a half-full pot of coffee, she began a round for refills while the new pot brewed. She smiled as she approached each table, but her mind wasn’t on her task. Instead, her thoughts were centered on Mav’s expression as he’d asked her to marry him. He’d been serious, but he’d also given her a sweet smile. Lord, what should she do? She pressed her hand to her chest as she headed back for the fresh pot of coffee. She was so touched by his offer. Just thinking about it made tears form in her eyes again.

It also made her heart hurt. It hurt because she was in such a sad predicament. So poor that she couldn’t even afford insurance, and she was sure that Mav considered her a charity case. She’d always been proud of her independence. Proud of



the fact that she'd been able to take care of herself, despite money always being tight. Now, she couldn't even do that. Her life was a damn mess.

And, like she'd told Mav, she couldn't let anything happen to her apartment. Rent was so high here in Austin. She was incredibly lucky that hers had stayed so low. She'd never find anything like it if she lost it. Her apartment wasn't the fanciest place, but it was just fine for her needs.

Plus, she had a car payment now. When she was in high school, she'd worked at a dollar store and saved up her money. Her foster father had found an old car, and she'd purchased it after she'd started working at the Iron Horse and could add to what she'd saved. She'd babied that car and taken good care of it, and it had lasted her until two years ago. Then she'd purchased one with low mileage from a reputable dealer. But she still had three years to go to pay it off.

Between rent, utilities, her car, food, and other necessary expenses, as well as saving for her emergency fund, there was seldom anything left over at the end of each month.

She finished refills at her last two tables.

Sam followed her back to the coffee station. "You look worried. Is something going on?"

Jaz glanced at her customers. They looked content for the moment. "I told you that Mav said he'd try to figure something out to help me with my medical problem, right?"

Sam nodded. "Right."

Jaz bit her lip. "Today he asked me to marry him."

Sam's jaw dropped. "What the hell? You're kidding me, girl!"

Jaz gave her a wry smile. "No, I'm not kidding. He said that if we married and I moved in with him, I could be on his insurance." She put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes for a moment, still unable to believe it.

Sam gave her a hug. "I think that's the sweetest, most amazing thing I've ever heard. So, when's the big day?"

When Jaz didn't answer, Sam gave her a little shake and stood back, looking into her eyes. "You said yes, didn't you?"

Jaz grimaced and shrugged.

"Damn, girl, you've lost your senses. First of all, that man's the best thing that's ever happened to you, and he obviously cares about you. Secondly, you need to get that lump taken care of, and you don't have a lot of options. In fact, you have no other option that I can see."

Jaz sighed. "I know you're right, but it just feels so wrong to marry him when he doesn't love me."

"You two are really close, and that could be the beginning of love. Who knows? But even if it's not and you just remain friends, you've got to look out for yourself, honey. Please, take his offer."

Jaz couldn't make herself agree, but she nodded. "I'll think about it, Sam. Thanks for caring about me. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

A man walked through the door, and Jaz picked up a menu and headed his way.

As she greeted him and led him to one of her tables, she thought about what Sam had said. Was she being silly by not accepting Mav's offer? Was she letting pride get in the way of good sense?

Saying yes under these circumstances felt like giving up her hard-earned independence, but did she really have any other choice?

She still kept in touch with her foster parents, but she hadn't told them about the lump. They were so incredibly busy caring for their current foster children, and she didn't want to worry them unnecessarily. What would they encourage her to do? She frowned. Knowing how they loved her, they'd probably tell her to marry Mav, too.

The café was busy through the evening rush, and yet Jaz's mind wrestled constantly with the dilemma. Finally, when things slowed down, she started her end-of-shift chores, her mind still filled with thoughts of Mav.

Her text tone sounded, and her heart leapt when she saw that it was him.

*Hope today wasn't too busy. I've been thinking about you all afternoon. I really, really hope you accept my proposal, because that's what it is. I want to marry you. I truly do. What we have isn't love, but we care deeply for each other. That's what counts. We can make this work while we take care of you.*

The man was incredible. She texted back:

*I've been thinking of you almost nonstop since you dropped me off. Your proposal is such a wonderful, sweet gesture. I can't help but consider it, Mav. I just don't want to take advantage of you. And I've always been so proud of taking care of myself. This is a terribly hard thing for me.*

He texted right back:

*Everyone needs help sometimes, Jaz. There's no shame in that at all. If it was me needing help, wouldn't you offer it in a heartbeat?*

She grimaced. He had her there. She definitely would, and she'd do anything to get him to accept it.

*Yes, of course I would. I hear where you're coming from. God, I just don't know what to do.*

He sent:

*I think you do, but you're having a hard time accepting it. This is the answer. Please, please just say yes.*

She closed her eyes. Marry Mav? Could she?

*Mav, I love it that you want to do this for me. I promise that I'm seriously considering your offer. Sam thinks I should accept.*

He shot back:

*I knew I liked that woman. LOL.*

She laughed.

*She's amazing, all right.*

He texted:

*Well, I guess I'll quit twisting your arm and let you get back to work. Promise me that you'll get some good sleep tonight. Don't worry about this when you go to bed. Tomorrow is another day.*

Well, she couldn't promise that. His proposal was all she could think about.

*I'll sure try. Thanks so much for getting in touch. Talk to you tomorrow, my friend.*

He sent:

*Bye for now, my best friend.*

She held her phone to her heart. What a special man he was—and, despite the lump under her arm, she was the luckiest woman in the world.



Several days later, Mav left the office conference room after a long meeting. As soon as he got back to his desk, he sent a text to Jaz, who had returned to the morning shift.

*Sorry I didn't get to see you at breakfast this morning. I had an early meeting at work, and I had to finish something before it started. I'd like to take you to dinner this evening if you're up to it. I thought we might be able to talk about my proposal.*

She sent:

*Dinner sounds wonderful. What time?*

He breathed a sigh of relief, even though she hadn't mentioned anything about them talking.

*How about I pick you up at five-thirty?*

She texted:

*Great. I'll see you then. And, thanks, Mav. I'm looking forward to seeing you.*

That was certainly good news.

*I want to see you, too. Have a good day, beautiful.*

The rest of his day was busy, and yet his mind frequently went to his upcoming date with Jaz and the hoped-for talk about their future.

As four o'clock rolled around, Mark stopped by his desk. "Hey, good luck tonight. I hope everything goes the way you want it to."

Mav shook hands with him. "Thanks, bro. I hope so, too. She's had time to think it over, and I'm just praying that she'll let me help her. It's all I've been able to think about these past few days."

Mark nodded. "I've noticed how preoccupied you've been, and with good reason. This is a huge step for you, man." He clapped Mav on the shoulder. "Good luck to you, whatever happens. Let me know how it goes, huh?"

"I sure will." Mav locked his desk and logged out of his computer. He just had time to stop by his house and shower before he picked up Jaz.

An hour later, he was on the way to her place. He was a little surprised to find that he was nervous. Not about dinner, but about the conversation he hoped to have with her. Would she agree to his plan? God, he hoped so. He couldn't see any other way for her to get treatment. And the thought of her going without treatment was unbearable.

When he knocked, she opened the door dressed in jeans and a pretty, tailored black shirt. It showed off her figure but wasn't revealing. "You look nice," he said as she walked out the door.

"Thanks, Mav. I appreciate that. So, where are we going this evening?"

"How does Mexican food sound? I know a great place, and they have good margaritas."

As he helped her into the truck, she replied, "That sounds marvelous. I'm hungry, and it's been a while since I've had a margarita."

"Good. Then that's where we'll go."

He put the truck in gear and headed out. “How was your day today?” he asked.

She shrugged. “The same as always. Busy. I earned a couple of nice tips from some big spenders. That’s always a good surprise. How was yours?”

“After my meeting this morning, the day went pretty fast. I was busy, and I like busy days because the time flies.”

“Hm, I guess I’ve never noticed that. I don’t have days at the café that aren’t busy. My tables are usually full, and when the evening lull comes around, I have my chores to do.”

He hated it that Jaz had to work so hard. He wished she made more money, although he was sure that most of her grateful customers tipped her well.

They were seated quickly when they arrived at the restaurant, and they each ordered a frozen margarita as they looked at their menus.

Jaz asked, “What’s really good here?”

“I haven’t found anything that I don’t like. I’m partial to the Big Mex Combo Platter, but it’s a lot of food.”

She grinned. “But you’re a big guy. I’m sure it suits you.”

After she studied the menu some more, she said, “I’ll have a shrimp quesadilla, I think.”

“Oh, you’re going to love that. They toast their quesadillas just right on the grill and use lots of cheese. I often get their beef quesadilla along with chiles rellenos. Mm-mm.”

“That sounds wonderful. I can hear my stomach growling already. Do you come here often?”

He shot her a teasing glance. “Not really. I’d rather eat where my favorite waitress works.”

She looked like she was biting back a grin. “Oh, right. Well, I can’t say that I’m sorry about that.”

The waitress came and took their orders, and they chatted as they sipped their margaritas.

He was worried at how tired Jaz looked. Those dark circles under her eyes were proof that she wasn't sleeping well. Had she been missing sleep over his proposal? That wasn't his intention. And he was sure that she was still worried sick about that damn lump.

As their waitress brought their food to the table, he ordered two more margaritas. Maybe the second drink would help Jaz's anxiety.

She took a bite of her quesadilla. "Mm, this is delicious. I'm so glad I ordered it."

He'd started on his enchilada and gave a contented sigh. "This place is great. If you worked here, I'd eat here all the time."

She smiled. "Thanks, Mav."

When they finished eating, he said, "We have some time before dark, and I thought we could go to Town Lake Park. It's nice in the evenings, and it's been mild out today."

She bit her lip. "Okay, Mav."

She seemed anxious again. Hadn't she made up her mind yet? Or had she decided to decline his offer? His heart fell. She just couldn't turn him down. He couldn't bear the thought of her going on any longer without finding out the truth about that lump under her arm.

At Town Lake, they parked and walked until they found a bench. Jaz sat down, and he settled in beside her.

He decided to jump right in. "Jaz, have you made your decision about my marriage proposal?"

She looked down at her hands and clenched them together. "Mav..."

Oh God, was she going to say no?

She started again. "Mav, your proposal is all I've been able to think about. I've hardly been able to sleep." She looked up and met his gaze. "I'm so thankful that you care enough to ask me to marry you."

She *was* going to say no. *Hell*.

“Mav, I want to stand on my own two feet. I want to take care of myself.” She looked down at her hands again.

His heart fell to his feet.

She blinked back tears. “But I know that I don’t have that luxury. I’m not capable of handling something this big right now.”

His pulse began to race.

She reached for his hand. “Yes, Mav, I’ll marry you. Thank you with all my heart for wanting to take care of me.”

His breath gusted out with a rush, and he gave her a gentle hug. “Jaz, I’m so grateful. I honestly don’t know what I would have done if you’d turned me down. I’m so worried about you.”

He felt her nod against his chest. “I am too.”

He released her. “Just in case, I’ve prepared the spare bedroom for you. And don’t worry, I’ll take care of the marriage license and everything.”

She leaned toward him. “There’s just one thing. I won’t take advantage of your kindness. If this is a worst-case scenario and I do have lymphoma, our marriage ends when my treatments end and I’m cleared. Are we agreed?”

At this point he was ready to go along with anything. “Of course.”

“I’m thinking that we can just go to the Justice of the Peace, right?”

He nodded. “Of course. That’s the simplest solution, if you’re okay with that.”

“And Samantha could be one of our witnesses.”

She’d put some thought into this. Good. “That’s great. I’ll ask Mark. I’m sure he’d be fine with helping us.”

He held her hand again. “I think the sooner the better, don’t you?”



She bit her lip and then nodded. “I think you’re right, given my situation. Maybe give me a week to get ready?”

He nodded. “Of course. I’ll let you know what I find out at the courthouse.” He gave her another quick hug. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am. You’ve made the right decision, and I know how hard it was for you.”

She touched his cheek with her fingertips. “Thank you, for everything.”

On the way back to the truck she clung to him, as if for reassurance that she was doing the right thing.

As he helped her into the truck, he gave her a comforting look. “Everything’s going to be okay. I’ve got this.”

She nodded. “I know you do. I trust you.”

Her words went straight to his heart. He shut the door and walked around the truck. He’d do whatever was necessary to take care of her. For as long as it took.



Buoyed by the tender hug Mav had given her at the door, Jaz went into her bedroom and changed into a sleepshirt. Relieved at having finally made her decision, she lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. It felt wonderful to relax; something she hadn’t been able to do in weeks.

After a few moments, she got up and took her phone out of her purse. She sent a text to Sam:

*Dinner with Mav was amazing. Then we went to Town Lake Park, and we talked about his proposal. I know you’ll be happy to hear that I said yes. Mav was so sweet. He gave me the best hug and said that he’ll handle everything. We decided to do it in a week. He’ll let me know the date when he’s checked on some things. Will you go dress shopping with me? I don’t mean for a wedding dress, but I’d like to get something nice.*

Sam was still working the evening shift, so Jaz didn’t expect an immediate reply. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine, even though she’d already had

two margaritas. She could celebrate a little, couldn't she? It wasn't every day that a girl decided to get married.

She took her wine out onto the balcony. She had a potted ficus tree in each corner and ferns hanging from the eaves. The tenants on either side of her were elderly and seldom sat outside, so it felt like a private jungle sanctuary. She brought the trees inside during the winter. The ferns were messy, but she brought them inside as well.

She sighed as she settled into her comfortable, padded rocking chair. It was already dark, and in the dim light, she felt peaceful, surrounded by her plants. She knew that there were other people in the complex, but she seldom heard them in the evenings. It was one of the reasons that she'd hate to give up her home.

Her thoughts turned toward Mav and their evening together. She'd enjoyed the Mexican food immensely. No wonder he liked eating there so much. She'd definitely remember the place. But more than the food, she had loved just being with him.

She sipped her wine and let her thoughts wander until after eleven when Sam called.

"Oh my God, woman. You're getting married!" she said as soon as Jaz answered.

Jaz laughed. "I guess I am."

"Of course I want to go dress shopping with you, girl. Aren't we both off together in a couple of days?"

"That's what I was thinking. Is that a good time for you?" Jaz asked.

"It's perfect. The only thing I had going on was cleaning house, and you know how bad I hate doing that."

Jaz chuckled. "You and me both. How about I pick you up around ten-thirty? We can shop for a few hours and then have a late lunch."

"That's perfect. Man, I can't wait to find the perfect dress for you. You're going to make a beautiful bride, honey."

Sam was such a sweetheart. “Thanks. I needed to hear that. I’m a nervous wreck about this.” Then she remembered the other thing she needed to ask her friend. “Hey, would you mind being a witness for Mav and me? We’re getting married at the Justice of the Peace’s office.”

“Of course I’ll do that. I’m honored that you asked. Who’s going to be the other witness?”

“Mav’s asking his friend Mark. He sounds like a nice guy.”

“Is he cute?”

Jaz laughed. She could have guessed that her friend would ask that. “I have no idea. I haven’t met him yet.”

Sam said, “Another thing we need to shop for is a ring for Mav.”

“You’re right. I think a simple gold band will do, don’t you?” Jaz asked. This was all seeming real now. Mav would wear her ring. She bit her lip and imagined his hand with it on. A slow smile came to her lips.

“I think that’d be perfect. I won’t let you forget to look for one,” Sam said.

When they finally hung up, Jaz went inside. She set her wineglass in the sink and headed for bed. The night had cooled off by the time she’d ended the call, and she had goose bumps on her arms from the chill.

She climbed into bed and shut off the light. Tired though she was, her eyes were wide open. Thoughts of the future whizzed back and forth in her mind. She’d be married in a week. What would life with Mav be like? What would it be like if she were sick? She’d be vulnerable as she’d never been before.

She shivered and pulled the covers up to her chin. Her apartment, everything that was familiar, would be far away. She swallowed hard and forced her eyes shut. There was no going back. The decision was made. She’d soon be Mav’s wife, for better or worse.



## Chapter Six



Mav grinned as his friend slapped him on the back. “Thanks, Mark. I’m glad you’re happy for me. I know you had your reservations about my proposal.”

Mark shrugged. “Hey, I can tell this makes you happy, and that’s what’s important.”

Mark opened the restaurant door for him. Mav was taking his friend to lunch at the Iron Horse. As promised, he was going to introduce him to Jaz.

She was working the counter and looked up as they walked through the door. A wide smile lit up her face as she waved at them.

Mav led the way and motioned for Mark to take a seat.

Jaz rushed over. “Mav, it’s great to see you. I missed you this morning.”

“I skipped breakfast. I had a lot to do before I got to work.” He grinned and turned to his friend. “Jaz, this is Mark. He’s agreed to witness for us.”

Jaz reached out her hand. “That’s so kind of you. I’m glad to finally meet you. Mav talks about you all the time.”

Mark shook her hand and smiled warmly at her. “He talks a lot about you, too, and I can see why. It’s great to meet you, Jaz.”

She handed them menus. “I’ll be back in a minute to take your order.”

As she walked away, Mark leaned close to his friend. “She’s gorgeous, Mav. And she seems really sweet. No wonder you proposed to her.”

Mav smiled. “She is sweet—and, yes, she’s beautiful. But she’s even more beautiful inside.” He met his friend’s gaze.

“She’s an amazing person, Mark. I have no reservations about this marriage at all.”

As he looked at the menu, Mav had to admit that it wasn’t exactly true. He did have one reservation. He didn’t like the fact that Jaz had insisted they get a divorce as soon as her health was clear. That didn’t leave any wiggle room for their relationship to grow.

Mark closed his menu and looked at Mav. “Listen, I’d like to take you and Jaz and—what did you say the other witness’s name was—Samantha? Anyway, I’d like to take the four of us out to eat at Ruth’s Chris Steak House after the wedding. What do you say?”

Mav clapped Mark on the back. “That’s really nice of you, and I think that’d be great. I’m sure Jaz and Sam would enjoy it, and I would, too.”

Mark nodded. “That’s settled, then.”

Mav was starting to get excited about the wedding. He’d been at the courthouse when they opened that morning and had taken care of everything necessary. They had an appointment with the justice of the peace at 2:30 p.m. on Friday afternoon. He’d gone by the jeweler right after that. Jaz had insisted that they use gold bands, but he’d purchased one with beautiful engraving on it. He wanted to give her something special to wear.

Jaz bustled back to them. “You two ready to order?”

The smile she gave them warmed Mav to his toes. He gave her his order, then watched Mark as he gave her his. The man was obviously as moved by her charm as Mav was, and Mav bit back a smile. Jaz had a way of doing that without even trying.

As she walked to the kitchen to turn in their orders, Mark turned to him, an eyebrow raised. “Whew, she’s really something, isn’t she? I mean, when she smiles and looks at you like that...”

Mav grinned. “Right? It’s like you’re the last person in the world and she’s only aware of *you*.”

Mark's eyes widened. "Yeah. That describes it perfectly. Wow." Mark shook his head as if to clear it and grinned.

Mav sighed. He still wasn't sure how Jaz felt about him. He knew how he felt about her, but other than that, she was still a mystery. He gazed farther down the counter, where she was taking another customer's order. The woman smiled and nodded at Jaz.

A moment later, Jaz set his and Mark's iced teas in front of them and then strode to the other end of the counter again.

Mav took a swallow. What would it be like to come home to Jaz after work in the afternoons? Although he ignored that aspect of his life for the most part, he had to admit that he was often lonely. It would be nice to come home to someone he cared about, and to have that person around in the evenings.

"What are you going to wear for your wedding?" Mark asked.

"I was trying to figure that out. I asked Jaz, and she said she wasn't wearing a wedding dress, so I guess I'll probably just wear a suit."

"Okay, then I will, too."

A few moments later, Jaz brought their plates over. "Here you go, gentlemen. Can I get you anything else?"

Mav shook his head. "I'm fine. You're running your feet off as it is."

She rolled her eyes. "You know it. This place is always hopping at lunchtime." She reached out and patted Mav's arm. "It's good to see you."

He smiled. "I'll call you tonight, okay?"

She beamed at him. "I'd love that." She turned to Mark. "It was good to meet you. See you soon."

Mark met his gaze and shook his head. "That smile, man. Lord, that *smile*."

Mav grinned. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

Mark nodded. "Yep."

Later, Mav paid the tab and looked over his shoulder as he opened the door for Mark. Jaz was looking at him, and he waved.

She grinned and waved back, and his heart did a little flip as he walked out the door. He couldn't wait to call her. In fact, he wouldn't wait until he got off work. He'd give her time to get home from her shift and call her then.

Mark looked at him as they arrived at Mav's truck. "You've got it bad, bro."

Mav rolled his eyes and opened his door.

Mark climbed in. As he buckled his seat belt, he said, "I can sure see why, though. She's something special." Then he clasped Mav's shoulder and, in a more serious tone, said, "I'll pray for the both of you that her condition isn't anything serious."

"I appreciate that, Mark, more than I can say." As he backed out of the parking space, his mind centered on that very thing. All of his feelings, his future, depended on the outcome of the tests the doctors would run. He would be saying fervent prayers of his own.



Jaz pulled up in front of the little boutique she'd wanted to investigate for so long.

"Oh, this looks awesome." Sam touched her arm. "Have you shopped here before?"

Jaz shook her head. "I've never had any money, so there didn't seem any point in going inside." She'd taken four hundred dollars from her hard-earned savings yesterday to cover this shopping trip. It would have to be enough.

Sam threw her door open. "Let's go."

Once inside, Sam led Jaz to the dress section. After only a few minutes, she asked, "Are you looking for something really dressy and formal, or a dress that's more casual but pretty?"



Jaz had been flipping through the rack. “I’m not sure. I think I’ll just know when I find it.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s a lot of help.”

Jaz wrinkled her nose. “Sorry. I can’t quite visualize myself as a bride. But I have this feeling—it’s like how I want to be when I stand up next to Mav. The dress has to fit that feeling.”

Sam chuckled. “A dress with a feeling. Okay.” She walked a couple more steps. “So, what’s this feeling, then?”

Jaz stopped and clasped her hands together, closing her eyes. “It’s happy and it’s special, but it’s simple, too, because Mav and I are best friends. Most of all, it’s kind of pure. Does that help?”

Sam put her finger on her chin and squinted. “Actually, I think it does.” She glanced around the shop. “I don’t think anything here fits the bill, do you?”

Jaz sighed and took one more look around. “No, I don’t either.”

Sam hooked her arm through Jaz’s and led the way out the door. “Where to next?”

“There’s another place not far from here we can try.”

Jaz drove in that direction, suddenly wondering if what she wanted even existed. Were her expectations too high? If she found the perfect dress, would she be able to afford it?

She pulled up in front of the next boutique.

Sam looked at the entrance, then at her friend. “Are you sure about this place?”

Jaz shrugged. “Nope, but we can take a quick look.”

Inside, they found clothes that were trendy and definitely more casual than the look Jaz was going for. She nodded toward the door when she met Sam’s gaze.

Sam followed her outside. “Well, at least we didn’t waste much time. Any other ideas?”

“There’s just one more place in this part of town. Then I thought we’d hit the mall.”

“Sounds good.” Sam slid into the passenger seat.

A few minutes later, Jaz pulled up in front of a vintage boutique. She actually had hope that she might find what she was looking for there.

“Well, this is interesting. Were you looking for a long dress, or a knee-length one?” Sam asked as she got out of the car.

“I’m thinking more knee-length, but I’m not going to decide until I find the dress, you know?”

Sam huffed a breath. “You’re not making this easy, girl.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I was more sure myself.”

Once inside, Jaz looked around. The place was packed with clothing, unlike the other two stores they’d been in. She went up to the salesperson behind the counter. “I’m looking for a special dress, but I’m not sure what exactly. I’m getting married this Friday. I think I’d like it to be knee-length. Something that suggests purity of style and simplicity.”

The woman frowned. “I’m not sure what that would be exactly, but let me show you what we have in that length.”

It seemed to take forever to go through the offerings on the racks of dresses, but nothing fit what Jaz had in mind. She was beginning to wonder if anything would. With a sigh of desperation, she signaled to Sam. “Why don’t we stop for lunch? I need to rethink what I’m looking for, I guess.”

Sam clasped her hand as they walked out the door. “Now, don’t get frustrated. We’ll find the perfect dress. There’re a lot of places still to look.” She squeezed Jaz’s hand. “You may not like this suggestion, but why don’t we try a few bridal shops? They have knee-length dresses galore, and you may find something you like.”

As they approached the car, Sam said, “Listen, lunch is my treat. I know a little wine bar not far from here. Let’s go there and relax with a glass of wine while we eat. You need a break

so you can think.” She grinned. “And my feet need a rest, too.”

Jaz smiled. “That’s sweet of you. Thanks.”

The place was obviously popular—they had to park a block away— but at least they didn’t have to wait long for a table. There was seating outside, and it was a nice day with a fresh breeze and lots of sunshine.

After they’d placed their orders, Sam leaned back in her chair, which was shaded by a large umbrella. “This is nice. I haven’t been here in a while. Sometimes I stop after work for a glass of wine. They’re open until midnight. We should come sometime.”

Jaz looked around. “I can see why you like it. It’s small enough to seem private, but big enough that you don’t have to wait long to be seated. I’d love to come here with you.” Then she remembered that she was getting married. “I wonder if Mav would mind.”

Sam raised a brow.

“I don’t mean it like that. I just wonder if he’d be looking forward to seeing me after work or something.” She felt herself blush and looked down. Thankfully she was saved from explaining further when the waitress arrived with their wine.

But Sam didn’t let the subject rest. “Listen, honey, just because you’re getting married, it doesn’t mean you’re giving up your own life. You don’t answer to Mav for everything. You know that, right?”

Jaz looked up. “Of course. Mav’s not like that, anyway.” She searched frantically for a change of subject. “What are you wearing Friday?”

Sam narrowed her eyes for a second, obviously not fooled by Jaz’s diversion. Then she answered, “I have a red dress that I’ve only worn once. It’ll do nicely.”

“Oh, you’ll look great in red. That’s wonderful.” Sam spent a lot more on her wardrobe than Jaz did. But then, she dated more too.

They'd ordered a light lunch and had finished their glasses of wine by the time their plates arrived. Sam ordered them each another glass.

Jaz nibbled her thinly sliced cheese and fresh bread, her mind on Mav. He'd texted her earlier in the day, wondering how she was doing. She looked forward to each communication from him, no matter how short. He'd wished her well on her shopping excursion and said that he'd call after work. She smiled, anticipating hearing his deep voice.

"Don't tell me. You're thinking of Mav," Sam said with a grin.

Jaz felt herself blushing again. Was she that transparent? "I guess I was. He said he'd call me this evening."

Sam nodded. "Don't worry. I'd be smiling too."

When they were done eating, they decided to go to a bridal shop. Jaz was a little hesitant, but Sam felt like they had a good shot at finding something there. Sam looked up several possibilities and found the closest one as they walked back to the car.

"Got it. I'll put it into my phone," Sam said.

It took them about fifteen minutes to get to the place, but it was big and should give them a lot of choices. Sam's eyes were excited, and she clasped Jaz's arm as they headed for the entrance.

Jaz's eyes widened as they walked through the doors. "Oh my goodness. This is overwhelming."

"Now, remember, we're not here for a wedding dress. Let's see if we can find someone to help us look for something that fits your idea."

Soon they had a young woman who was happy to show them to the right place to look. The store was busy, and Sam said that they'd like to browse. As the woman walked away, Sam asked, "Jaz, do you have any idea as to what color we're looking for?"

Jaz bit her lip and stared around at the full racks. “Um, light-colored, maybe?”

Sam nodded. “Okay, that helps. We can weed out a lot of these right away.”

They each took a rack and searched, Sam pulling out dress after dress to show Jaz. After an hour, they’d been through everything, but Jaz still hadn’t found her dress.

Jaz sat down on a bench, her shoulders sagging. “I think this may be a lost cause. Sam, what am I going to do?”

But Sam wasn’t paying attention. Instead, she was focused on the conversation of a young woman and her mother as they walked by.

Finally, Sam turned back to Jaz. “Did you hear them? They were talking about a place called Atiana’s Boutique and how beautiful the dresses were there. It’s worth a shot, don’t you think?”

Jaz stood up. “At this point, I’ll try anything.”

Sam looked the place up as they walked to the car. “Got it. Let’s go.”

The boutique was about ten minutes away. Jaz pulled up in front and was impressed by the appearance of the place. Maybe she *would* find her dress there.

“This place looks nice,” Sam agreed. “Let’s pray for good luck.”

Jaz smiled. What would she have done without her best friend today?

As they walked inside, they were immediately approached by an attractive, well-dressed woman who asked if she could help them. Jaz explained what she was looking for.

The woman looked thoughtful for a few seconds, then said, “I may have just the thing. Follow me.”

As soon as Jaz laid eyes on the cream-colored, knee-length dress, she knew it was perfect. It had cap sleeves and a scoop neck that was low, but not too low, and a lace-covered bodice.

She loved how it nipped in at her waist, which was one of her best features, and then followed the curve of her hips.

The woman led them to a changing room, and Jaz couldn't wait to try it on. She quickly undressed and slipped it over her head. Sam zipped it up in the back.

Jaz gasped as she looked at herself in the mirror. She was transformed into an elegant beauty; someone she wouldn't recognize on the street.

Sam pulled her hair up high on her head. "Wear your hair like this, honey. You're absolutely stunning."

Jaz gave a wondering smile and scanned herself from head to toe. "Thank you, Sam. I couldn't have made it through today without you."

Sam gave her a fierce hug. "You've got this, honey. And I'll be right there with you on Friday."

Jaz walked out of the changing room and the woman smiled. "That fits you perfectly."

"Will you help me find some shoes and a clutch?"

"Of course."

Fifteen minutes later, Jaz followed Sam out the door. Jaz opened the car's back door, and Sam hung the dress bag from the hook.

Sam gave Jaz a high five. "To marrying a handsome Texas Ranger!"

Jaz laughed. "Amen!"



# Chapter Seven



Mav glanced over at Jaz in the passenger seat and smiled. He'd taken the afternoon off to help her move into his house. He'd suggested that she transfer her things over before the wedding, and he couldn't help but wonder why she'd waited until the very last day to do it. Was she getting cold feet?

Her answering smile seemed a little off. Was she nervous? He hoped not. When they arrived at his place, he'd have to work hard to make her feel comfortable. In fact, once he unloaded her boxes and suitcases, he'd make sure he didn't hover. She'd want time to herself to unpack.

He kept his gaze on the road. "I was thinking earlier today that you've never been to my house, and how strange that was. We know each other so well, and yet I've never invited you over." He glanced at her again. "I'm sorry about that, Jaz."

She gave him a startled look, her brows raised. "You don't have anything to be sorry about. I've never thought anything about it." She gave him one of the sweet smiles that always melted his heart.

He reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. "Good."

As he pulled up into his driveway, Jaz sighed. "What a beautiful home. I love your yard."

"I have a service that takes care of it for me. I'm out of town too much to do it myself." He looked at his drought-resistant lawn and the xeriscaped beds, which were free of weeds. He was proud of his home. As he killed the ignition, he added, "I'm glad you like it."

He helped her out of the truck and then grabbed the two suitcases. She carried one of the boxes as they headed to the front porch, where a wrought iron bench with a large Texas star on the backrest stood by the door.



Mav used his key and motioned Jaz in ahead of him. Once inside, he said, "Follow me. I'll show you where you'll sleep." He hoped she'd be happy with her room. Unlike in some homes, the spare bedroom was large, and she should have plenty of space for her things.

Jaz walked into the room and gasped in surprise. "Oh, Mav, they're beautiful!"

He'd bought a large bouquet of sunflowers before picking her up and had left the vase on the dresser as a welcoming gift. Jaz and her beautiful smile somehow reminded him of the large, bright blooms.

She went over and lightly touched several of the flowers, a bemused smile on her lips. "How did you know that I love sunflowers?" she asked softly.

"I didn't, but I chose them because they remind me of you." He was thrilled at her reaction to his gift.

She turned with a questioning look but continued to smile. "Well, I love them, and thank you for thinking of me."

He wheeled the suitcases over and set them on the bed. "If you'd like to start unpacking, I'll go get the rest of the boxes."

"Thanks. I'll do that. And Mav?"

He turned back to her. "Uh-huh?"

"This is a lovely room." She smiled again.

He grinned. "I'm glad you like it. Your bathroom is the next door down on the right."

It didn't take long to finish unloading. Once he was done, he asked, "Do you need any help?"

She looked up from the box she was busy with. "No, thank you. I kind of have to do this myself. I'm glad there's plenty of storage in that walk-in closet. I wasn't expecting that. And these shelves by the window are going to be a real help, too. This room is perfect, Mav." She smiled at him again.

"I hope you'll be happy here," he said softly.

She looked down and then met his gaze. "I'm sure I will."

He took a step back. “I’m going to start on dinner while you finish up.”

“Are you a good cook, too? What else don’t I know about you?”

He smiled. “I don’t know how good I am, but I cook for myself once in a while.”

“I’ll hurry.”

“There’s no rush. Take your time.” He took one more look as she bent to her task again. His heart warmed at the vision she made—so domestic and, as always, so beautiful.

Dinner would be simple: hamburgers and oven-baked fries. Nothing to tax his less-than-ample culinary skills. As he formed the hamburger meat into thick patties, he hummed to himself. Next, he tore leaves from the head of lettuce he’d just washed and sliced the large, ripe tomato he’d bought yesterday. After setting pickle slices, ketchup, and mustard on the table, he took on his least favorite chore: slicing the onion.

He put the patties on to cook on medium low heat in his large skillet before starting on the fries.

He’d peeled and sliced the potatoes that morning and put them in a ziplock bag in the refrigerator. Now he took them out and spread them on a baking sheet. After salting them liberally, he slid them into the preheated oven.

Now that everything was under control, he headed in to check on Jaz’s progress. He knocked on the doorjamb and crossed his arms, surveying the room.

She had her back to him as she worked at the bookcase, arranging the contents of a box at her feet. “Come in.”

The suitcases had been unpacked, and so had two of the boxes. She’d been busy.

“How’s it coming?” he asked.

She turned and pressed her hands into the small of her back. “This is the last box I brought. After all, we don’t know what’s going to happen. If everything goes well, I won’t be here long, right?”

His heart fell, then he mentally chastised himself. He didn't want her to leave—but, of course, he wanted her to be healthy. “That makes sense.” He pushed off the doorjamb. “Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Hamburgers and fries.”

“That sounds wonderful. Thanks for cooking. I'll be done by then, no problem.” She smiled and turned back to her chore.

He pressed down the patties with a spatula, and grease crackled and spat. He'd made iced tea that morning as well, so he put ice in two glasses and set them and the pitcher on the table. After that, he crossed his arms and leaned back on the counter, feeling more content than he'd been in years.

By this time tomorrow, he'd be married. Jaz would be his wife, and she'd live in this house. Thinking about coming home from work and finding her there sent a rush of warmth sweeping through him.

He'd always disliked coming home to an empty house. He'd been raised on a working cattle ranch, and his mother had usually been home, either inside the house or outside tending her large garden. Her green thumb supplied the family's needs year-round, since she canned whatever they didn't eat fresh. Home had never been a quiet, solitary place.

Now this house would feel like a real home again. He smiled and looked around his kitchen. Cooking for Jaz tonight felt good. It was his first effort at caring for her, and it affected him in a profound way.

He turned the patties, then took the fries out and turned and salted them again. They'd need another seven minutes to cook.

Mav's phone rang.

It was Mark calling. He'd been out of the office for several days.

“Hey, Mav. How're your feet feeling? Are they cold or toasty warm?” his friend teased.

Mav chuckled. “Like I’m walking on coals, smartass. You already back in town?”

“Yeah, I got home a little while ago, Prince Charming. How’s Cinderella holding up? Everything a go for tomorrow?”

Mav checked on the patties. They were almost done. “She’s great. She’s here unpacking right now. I’m making dinner, and we’re about to eat. So everything’s on schedule, bro. Thanks for checking in.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m hitting the sack early, so I’ll see you at two, okay?”

“Thanks, Mark. I appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“Hey, no problem.”

As he was taking the patties with the buns he’d warmed on top of them out of the skillet, Jaz walked in. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Not a thing. Dinner’s ready. Just take a seat.” He set the plate of patties and buns on the table, then returned to take the fries out of the oven. After dishing them up into a serving bowl, he set them on the table and took the chair opposite her.

“Hand me your glass, and I’ll pour you some tea.” Jaz reached out her hand.

“Thanks.” She looked tired, but there was an energy about her, too. Was she a little bit excited about being here?

He put a patty and buns on his plate and began assembling his hamburger.

She did the same. “This meat looks juicy and delicious, Mav. You *are* a good cook.”

He grinned. “It’s pretty hard to mess up hamburgers.”

She added ketchup to her patty, then laid lettuce, pickles, and onions on it. Then she spread mayo on her bun. “I can’t wait to taste this. I’m hungry.”

He’d finished making his and took a big bite. He had to admit it was pretty tasty. “So, did you finish everything you wanted to in your room?”

She nodded. "It's fine for now." She took a bite of her burger. After she'd swallowed, she added, "I left everything I need for tomorrow at my apartment. I'll bring that with me when I meet you here tomorrow, before we go to the justice of the peace's office." Her face blushed a faint pink.

He spoke quickly to ease her embarrassment, although he wasn't quite sure what it was about. Was she suddenly feeling shy? Surely *she* wasn't getting cold feet? "What color is your dress?"

"It's cream-colored and knee-length. Understated." She looked down at her plate. "I really like it, though," she added softly.

"I'm sure you'll look beautiful." It would go perfectly with the other surprise he had for her, currently hidden at the back of his refrigerator.

He'd had a call from his dad the night before, and Mav told Jaz all about the ranch doings, hoping the normal conversation would help her feel comfortable again.

It worked like a charm. She asked questions about his mom and then how Julia was doing and whether things were going well with her fiancé, John. By the time they'd finished dinner, she was her old self again.

"I'll do the dishes, since you cooked." She rose from the table with her plate in her hands.

"We'll do them together. I appreciate the help." He added his plate to hers and grabbed the condiments from the table.

"Deal," she said with a smile.

While she rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, he put things away and washed down the table and counters. He enjoyed working with her. Was this the way it would be from now on? He hoped so.

When they'd finished, he said, "I'll take you home now, if you like, but there's no rush."

She gave him a tentative smile. "I really do need to go. I still have a lot to do before I come back tomorrow."

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Okay, then, let’s head out.” He grabbed his keys while she fetched her purse. When she stopped at the door, she gave him that smile he loved so much. “Thanks for dinner, Mav. It was great.”

He followed her outside, feeling her absence already. “You’re welcome. I have to warn you, though—meals will probably be all downhill from here.”

She burst out laughing. “I’m sure you’re selling yourself short.”

As he helped her up into the truck he grinned. “Don’t count on it.”

She seemed relaxed on the way home, as if she were at peace with the way things were between them. The little knot in his chest relaxed then, too.

When he walked her to her door, she surprised him with a hug. It was fierce and quick and sent a thrill through his chest. Then she was through the door with wide eyes and a brilliant smile. “See you tomorrow, Mav,” she said just before it closed.

He held onto that hug and that smile all the way home. She definitely didn’t have cold feet, and the relief that gave him was enormous.

When he arrived back at the house, it felt as lonely and empty as he’d thought it would. He should be used to that feeling after all this time, but it hit him harder after having Jaz there all afternoon. She’d left her door ajar, and he couldn’t resist. He walked in and looked around the room. He didn’t touch anything or look in the closet, but it was amazing to see a woman’s things in his house again.

He smiled and walked out, leaving the door as it had been. He continued to smile as he undressed and got into the shower. Tomorrow, his life would change in an enormous way. He would no longer be alone, rattling around the three-bedroom home that had been much too big for him. His needs were small. He was often gone, and he wasn’t a social person; he didn’t entertain much. Now, he’d have someone else in his

life, someone he truly cared about who would share many of his evenings. His life was looking up.

As he turned in, he still had Jaz on his mind. As he looked out the window, he realized that he was relaxed and happy in a way he hadn't been since he'd been happily married to his ex-wife. Before things had gotten tense between them.

He ground his teeth. He needed to be cautious. This marriage to Jaz was in name only. It was for convenience, not love. He couldn't forget that. No way could he let himself make more of it than that. He definitely had to keep his emotions under control. After all, she considered him her best friend. What a betrayal of her trust it would be to try to make it into something completely different. That would be unfair to Jaz and himself.

He thought back to that blush of hers. Was she already feeling uncomfortable about the state of things between them? Damn. He had to be careful.

He turned onto his other side, his mind wandering to what would happen at the justice of the peace's office. Would Jaz be happy at their wedding, or nervous? Or, worse yet, sad? He ground his teeth again and thrust that thought from his mind. Surely she'd be fine? She'd agreed to marry him, right? He groaned and flipped onto his back. This was going to be a long night.





# Chapter Eight



Jaz pulled up to Mav's house Friday afternoon, her heart pounding. This was it. The beginning of everything.

Mav must have heard her drive up, because he came to the door and waved.

She picked up the bag with her makeup and other things that belonged at Mav's house now and got out of the car. Her pulse sounded loud in her ears, and she kept her eyes on the ground in front of her. What would Mav think of her dress? She hoped he'd like it.

She heard him step out on the porch, and she looked up and stopped in her tracks. He looked fabulous in a perfectly tailored black suit and charcoal grey tie. She was deeply touched that he'd made such a special effort for this day, even though their marriage wasn't really for real. She shook her head. It *was* real enough; just not in the emotional sense.

"You look beautiful, Jaz. I love your dress," he said, as she stepped up onto the porch.

Her heart skipped a beat at the warmth in his tone. "Thank you. I'd hoped you would."

He took her bag and ushered her inside. "Let me put this in your room, and then I have something for you."

When he returned to the living room, he stepped into the kitchen.

She frowned. What was going on? Then she smiled when she saw what he held as he walked toward her again.

"You said once that red roses were your favorite, and I told them to use cream ribbon when they made this. When you mentioned what color your dress was last night, I knew this would be perfect."

She held up her arm, and he attached the bracelet corsage onto her wrist. A fierce joy swept through her at his caring gesture. This day would be more than a cursory step for them. Mav had made sure of that. How could she have doubted this sweet man?

She smiled and put her arms around his waist, giving him a hug. “You always know just what to do, don’t you?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know about that, but I’d hoped you’d like it.”

She sighed, her tension subsiding all in a rush. “I love it. You’ve made this day perfect.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I’m glad. Now we’d better get a move on. We don’t want to be late.”

They arrived at the Richard Scott Building in plenty of time and soon found the justice of the peace’s office. Mark was already there.

He shook Mav’s hand. “This is a big day, bro.”

Mav grinned. “It sure is. Thanks for being here.”

Mark turned and gave Jaz a gentle hug. “Good to see you again.”

Jaz smiled, warmed by Mark’s friendliness. “I appreciate you being our witness today. My friend Sam should be here any minute.” She patted his shoulder as he stepped back. “Mav sure thinks the world of you.”

Mark grinned. “I’ve got him fooled.”

Just then, Sam walked into the room. She came toward them, her arms outstretched. “Oh, honey, you look fabulous!”

“Doesn’t she?” Mav said, as Sam gave Jaz a hug.

When Sam finally stepped back, Mav said, “Sam, I’d like you to meet my friend Mark Crowley. Mark, this is Samantha Turner.”

Mark reached out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Jaz noticed the instant widening of Sam's eyes as she took in the sight of the handsome Ranger. Jaz bit back a smile. Sam would want the whole scoop on Mark the next time she saw her.

Finally, they were called back for their ceremony.

Mav leaned in and whispered to her. "I asked for his special service." He clasped her hand. "You ready for this?"

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. He'd asked for a special wedding service? His kindness overwhelmed her. "Of course I'm ready." She smiled up at him and squeezed his hand.

He slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Good. This is going to be wonderful."

Within minutes, they stood before the justice of the peace as Mav held firmly to her hand. She leaned against him. Sam stood behind her on her left, while Mark stood behind and to Mav's right.

The JP met both of their gazes and said, "We're here today to celebrate the coming together of two lives. To bear witness to the joining of Maverick Decker and Jasmine Garner in marriage. To rejoice with them in the making of this very important commitment. The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we're loved.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It doesn't envy. It doesn't boast. It isn't proud. It isn't rude, self-seeking, or easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

"Maverick and Jasmine, we're here today to celebrate the love that you have for each other and to recognize your decision to take each other in marriage. It's a decision that means that you'll promise to always be there for each other. To share in each other's joys during happy occasions, and to be there to support and comfort one another during difficult times. It means that you'll walk the path of life alongside each

other and experience everything it has to offer you together, as a married couple.”

Mav glanced down at her and smiled, squeezing her hand. Her heart melted.

The justice continued. “Maverick, you’ve chosen Jasmine to be your wife. Is it your intention to love and respect her, to be honest with her, and to stand by her through whatever may come?”

He looked into her eyes. “It is.”

Her heart thumped hard. He truly seemed to mean it.

“Jasmine, you’ve chosen Maverick to be your husband. Is it your intention to love and respect him, to be honest with him, and to stand by him through whatever may come?” the justice asked firmly.

Oh God. “Yes, it is.” She could do no less than Mav.

His eyes met hers, and the warmth and caring in them washed through her like a gentle wave. Oh, how lucky she was.

“Maverick and Jasmine,” the justice continued, “we’ve now come to your vows. Please face each other as I read them to you. What you promise here today must be renewed tomorrow, and each and every day that stretches before you.”

He met each of their gazes. “Maverick, do you take Jasmine to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, and to be faithful to her alone?”

Mav smiled down at her, and she bit her lip, waiting for his answer.

He said boldly, “I do.”

The justice of the peace repeated the vows to her, and she looked into Mav’s warm gaze and said, “Yes, I do.”

Sam and Mark handed them the rings.

The justice continued, “Every day that you look upon these rings, may they remind you of the promises you’ve made here

today. May the love that has brought you together continue to grow and enrich your lives. And may everything you've said and done here today become a living truth in your lives.

“Maverick, please place the ring on Jasmine's finger and repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed, and pledge you my love.’”

Mav slipped the ring onto her finger, his hands gentle, and then he met her gaze. “With this ring, I thee wed, and pledge you my love.”

Her heart swelled. This all felt so wonderful and real. Mav's tender look filled her heart with joy.

As Mav released her hand, the justice said, “Jasmine, please place the ring on Maverick's finger and repeat after me: ‘With this ring, I thee wed, and pledge you my love.’”

She slid Mav's ring onto his large finger and in a strong voice, repeated the words.

Mav gazed tenderly into her eyes.

The justice said then, “Maverick and Jasmine, we have heard you pledge to share your lives in marriage. Having sealed these vows with the giving and receiving of your rings and affirming your acceptance of the responsibilities of such a union by pledging your love and faith to each other, we recognize and respect the promises you have made here today. Therefore, in the honesty and sincerity of what you have said and done, with the power that has been granted to me by the State of Texas, it's my great honor and proud privilege to pronounce that you're now married. You may now kiss!”

This was the part that she'd dreaded. Would Mav kiss her? After all, this wasn't a real wedding. She'd worried half the night that he wouldn't kiss her, and that she'd be embarrassed at this point in the ceremony.

Mav slipped his arms around her, and her fears melted away at his simple, gentle kiss on her lips. When he released her, she bit back a sigh, silently wishing that it had been more. He smiled into her eyes and slid his arm around her waist as they turned around.

Warmth spread through her. Why had she ever doubted him? Sam gave her a hug, and Mark slapped Mav on the back.

After settling the paperwork, they were soon heading for the entrance. Mav took her hand and gave her that wonderful smile of his. There was no doubt in her mind that he was happy. She grinned up at him, warm and happy and trying not to think that what they'd just done wasn't real.



Mav seated Jaz at the table in Ruth's Chris, and Mark talked easily with Sam as he did the same for her. Then Mav took the seat next to Jaz, wanting the opportunity to speak privately to her.

The hostess set menus in front of them, and a waitress arrived a moment later to take their drink orders.

"These two just got married," Mark said with a grin, indicating Mav and Jaz. "We'd like to start with a bottle of champagne."

Mav chuckled. "Thanks, Mark." He reached under the table for Jaz's hand.

"What a sweet gesture," Jaz said, smiling at Mark.

Now that the service was over, she seemed relaxed and happy. It did Mav's heart good to see her this way.

"That was a beautiful service," Mark said. "Not at all what I was expecting from a JP."

"He has several versions that he performs, and I thought the one he used today would be perfect," Mav said, glancing at Jaz.

She nodded. "It *was* perfect." She increased the pressure of her fingers on his hand.

Warmth filled him, and he enclosed their hands with his other one. He'd wanted this day to be incredibly special for her, even though they weren't marrying for love. Her wedding day, for any reason, should be a blessed memory.

The waitress set the bucket with the champagne on the table and then opened the bottle for them. After letting Mark approve it, she poured glasses for Jaz and Mav, then for the other two.

Mark raised his glass. "To my best friend and his beautiful bride. May you be incredibly happy together."

Tough guy that he was, Mav felt tears prickle his eyes. He knew that Mark understood the reason for his marriage and yet still wished them happiness.

They all clinked their glasses together as Sam said, "To your happiness."

Mav looked into Jaz's glistening eyes and smiled as he took a swallow from his glass.

Then he raised his and said, "To my beautiful wife. May she live a long and wonderful life."

Jaz's eyes teared up as they all clinked glasses again.

While Mark started a conversation with Sam, Jaz leaned toward Mav. "Thank you for being so kind today."

He slid his arm around her shoulders. "It's my pleasure. I'm enjoying myself immensely."

She looked into his eyes. "Are you really?"

He brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "I promise." She looked so lovely, everything a bride should be. He had to keep telling himself that this wasn't real, that they were just friends, because his heart was telling him otherwise.

A few minutes later Mark refilled everyone's glasses. "Come on, you two. We're celebrating today."

Mav grinned at his friend. "That's right, we are." He took another swallow from his glass.

Jaz picked up her full glass, taking a sip and smiling at Sam. "You look great in that dress. Red suits you. I should have said something earlier."

"No problem. You were nervous before the ceremony." Her gaze ranged over Jaz's face. "Now you look like your old

self again. I'm glad, honey."

Mark picked up his menu. "So, we're all having steaks, right?"

Jaz looked doubtful. "I'm not sure if my stomach's up for something that heavy right now."

Mark frowned teasingly. "Come on, woman, it's your wedding day. By the time it gets here, I'll bet you'll be ready."

Responding to his teasing tone, Jaz said, "You're probably right."

Mav chuckled at his irrepressible friend. Mark's upbeat, outgoing personality was a good counterpoint for his own quiet, slightly unsociable one.

As Jaz perused her menu, he said quietly, "You don't have to eat a steak. Choose anything you like."

She glanced at him. "I'll order one. I don't want to hurt Mark's feelings. I can eat the sides and some meat as well. We *are* celebrating, after all."

He grinned at her reminder of Mark's words. "Right."

Sam soon closed her menu. "I know what I'm ordering. A nice T-bone. Mm-mm."

Mark smiled. "Good choice. How about you, Jaz?" He set his menu on the table and looked hopefully at her.

She glanced at Sam and said in a rush, "That sounds great to me, too."

"All right!" Mark turned to Mav. "Lay it on me, brother. Don't worry about breaking the bank. I'm prepared for anything."

Mav cracked up. "I'm sure you are."

The waitress arrived then, and everyone gave her their orders. Since they'd finished the champagne, Mark also ordered a bottle of wine.

While they waited for their meals, Mark talked about the case he'd recently worked on, and Sam was enthralled.



Mav glanced at Jaz, who was watching her friend closely, obviously trying not to smile. It appeared that Sam was quite taken with Mark. Women usually were.

Unlike Mav, Mark dated frequently, undaunted by the stress that traveling put on relationships. He seldom dated seriously, though, preferring to keep things simple rather than intimate. Mav just wasn't made that way. Not these days, anyway.

Jaz glanced his way and smiled. He clasped her hand again, the connection making his heart beat harder. He sipped the last of his champagne with a sense of peace, something that had been missing in his life for years. Something that he'd forgotten even existed.

Sam laughed at something Mark said, and Mav tuned back into the conversation.

"I'm telling you, crooks can be so dumb sometimes. It amazes me how easy it is to catch them." He grew more serious. "Not always, though. When we're left with very few—or no—leads, it's frustrating as hell, because you know the bad guys are out there and you don't know how to catch them."

Mav nodded. "Those cases are the worst. You're just spinning your wheels, hoping that something will turn up if you work hard enough."

"I can only imagine the responsibility you must feel toward the victims. I don't know if I could handle that," Jaz said in a quiet voice.

She'd touched on the worst of it. "Yeah, that's the horrible part," Mav said.

Sam gave a visible shudder. "I couldn't be in law enforcement. It's too terrible."

Mark, his face somber, said, "It can be, for sure."

Sam asked Mark what he did for fun. As he talked, Jaz looked at Mav and said quietly, "Are you hungry?"

"I'm always up for a good steak. Don't worry about me."

The corner of her mouth lifted. "I'll remember that."

That sounded like she planned on doing some of the cooking around the house. How sweet. He wasn't letting her buy groceries, though. Not on her income. He'd have to be sure that he always brought them home. He kept a note on the fridge for things he needed. She could add to it so that he'd be sure to bring back what she wanted.

When the waitress brought their plates out, Mark smiled in satisfaction. "That's what I'm talking about."

As the waitress uncorked the wine bottle and poured them each a glass, Mav noticed that Jaz's eyes had widened at the amount of food on her plate. She really must be worried about being able to eat this afternoon. Was her stomach that wonky? He hoped she wasn't worried about going home with him. She knew she had her own room.

He thanked the waitress and decided not to say anything to Jaz. It would probably just make things worse for her.

Sam was happily cutting into her steak and talking to Mark.

Mav took a bite of his, listening to their conversation. Jaz kept silent, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed her taking a bite of her baked potato. Good; she was eating.

"How's your ribeye, bro?" Mark asked.

"Amazing. This place was a great choice. I love coming here."

"Right?" Mark turned to Sam. "Yours okay?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm in heaven over here."

Mark laughed and took a bite of his meat, happy that everyone was enjoying themselves.

Mav noticed that Mark hadn't asked Jaz. She had yet to sample her T-bone.

As if she'd noticed, Jaz cut a piece and put it in her mouth. After she'd swallowed, she said, "This is good, Mark. I'm glad you suggested I go for it."

“I knew you’d want one if you gave yourself time.”

Mark was always so self-assured. It was one of the things Mav liked about his friend. If you didn’t care about him as Mav did, though, it could grate on your nerves a bit.

He was happy when Jaz began participating in the conversation, even laughing occasionally. She seemed at ease; more like herself again.

When they’d finished dinner and the last of the wine, Mark smiled expansively. “That was a great meal, if I do say so myself.”

Mav laughed softly at the comment, which was so like his friend. “Yes, it was. Thanks, Mark, for everything.”

“Yes, thank you for being our witness and for taking us out to eat,” Jaz said.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had a steak this good. You have my thanks too,” Sam said.

After Mark paid the tab, Mav stood to pull out Jaz’s chair.

Mark did the same for Sam.

Mav gave Mark a hug outside, and then Mark walked Sam to her car. Mav looked after the two, wondering if something was brewing between them.

Jaz chuckled. “I’m wondering about them, too.”

Once they were on their way back to his house, Jaz turned to him. “I just wanted to say, today was...” She paused, as if searching for words. “It was so much more than I was expecting. The service was lovely, and you’ve been—well, like I said, really kind. And Mark taking us out to dinner made the day even more special. I want you to know that you’ve made me very happy.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I wanted your wedding day to be something that you’d remember with joy, even under our particular circumstances. I’m glad that happened.”

Her eyes grew red and began to fill. “Well, you succeeded. Thank you.”

She turned to look at the road then, as if she were on emotional overload.

He felt the same way. He kept hold of her hand as he drove, wanting that connection with her. Her clasp on his fingers was firm and warm.

As he pulled up in front of the house, he said, “This is your home now, Jaz. For as long as you want it to be.”

She turned to him then, her eyes searching his. Then she nodded and released her seat belt.

He went around and helped her from the truck, tucking her arm under his elbow as they walked up to the door.

She went inside ahead of him and walked toward her room. But instead of going inside, she turned at the door. “What shall we do this evening?”

His heart thumped. “Do you want to stay in or go out?”

“Definitely stay in,” she replied. “I’m tired. I didn’t sleep well last night. I guess I was anxious about today.”

“Do you want to watch TV?”

She gave him a small smile. “I’d like that. Let me get changed, and I’ll be right out.”

He could hear his pulse as he walked to his room, so glad that she wanted to spend time with him. He hadn’t been sure that she would.

A short while later, he returned to the living room clad in a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. He would love to share the couch with Jaz, but that would probably not be a good idea. He’d promised himself to give her room when she moved in with him, to avoid crowding her or imposing on her personal space. This was his first opportunity to live up to that promise. Instead of the couch, he took his normal place in the recliner and switched on the TV.

Jaz arrived a couple of minutes later and sat on the couch. She wore black leggings and an oversized T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She looked so cute he had to bite back a smile. Her hair fell below her shoulders in wavy light brown curls that made him want to run his fingers through them.

“So, what kinds of things do you like to watch? Movies or TV series, or both?” he asked.

“I’m not opposed to a good series. I like detective series, American or English. I love shows about serial killers. I don’t like horror, and I’ll occasionally watch a rom-com if I’m in the mood. Oh, and I like shows about combat. Modern, not historical. How about you?”

He raised his brows. “Wow, we like a lot of the same things. Except the rom-com. I don’t know if I’ve ever actually sat through a romantic comedy before. I do like war movies and serial killer shows. I definitely don’t like horror, either. I’ve watched a lot of detective series, but no English ones. Are they good?”

“Fabulous. I can recommend some if you want to try one out.”

She looked so happy and eager he couldn’t help but smile. “Let’s see what we can find. I’ll pull up the guide, and you help me pick.”

They eventually settled on a movie about a SEAL team. It turned out to be really good, and he could tell that she was thoroughly enjoying it. About halfway through, he asked, “Would you like a beer?”

She tore her gaze from the screen. “I’d love one.”

He returned with two longnecks and handed her one.

She smiled up at him as she took it. “Thanks. This is fun.”

“I think so too.” He sat down, relaxing back into his chair and realizing that he hadn’t had an evening like this in a very long time. He glanced at her; her gaze was glued to the screen. Smiling, he took a swallow of beer. And to think that he had this to look forward to all the time now. Warmth swept through him, followed by a wave of pure joy.

When the movie was finished, Jaz looked over at him.  
“That was great. I liked the ending, didn’t you?”

“It was perfect. Do you want to watch something else?”

She raised her arms and stretched, yawning as she did so.  
“I think I need to shower and hit the sack instead. I’ve got a lot of sleep to make up for.”

He smiled. “I’m sorry you’ve been missing so much sleep. I hope you’ll rest better now that you’re settled here.”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I’m sure I will.”

“Why don’t you see about making an appointment with your doctor, and I’ll add you to my insurance when I go into the office on Monday, okay?”

She sighed. “I know I need to do it, but I’m also dreading it. No more hiding from the truth. I need to find out whether it’s bad news or not.”

“We’ll hope for good news. Keep our thoughts positive, okay? But we’ve got to know,” he said firmly.

“You’re right. I’ll call on Monday.”

He stood up when she did, and they said goodnight. As her bedroom door shut behind her, he felt a sudden sense of loss. He was alone again, and he didn’t like it. He craved being with her, and he wasn’t sure when that had started.

Sighing, he strode toward his bedroom. He had that promise to give her space to keep, and it was going to be harder than he’d ever anticipated.



## Chapter Nine



Still buoyed by happiness, Jaz gathered up her pajamas and headed into the shower. All her worrying had been for nothing. Mav had made this day extraordinary. As she stood under the hot water, she felt the last of the tension of the past weeks fade away. She was here now, with Mav, and he would be there for her no matter what. It was a powerfully strange sensation, having someone to lean on. She still found herself distrusting it until she reminded herself that it was Mav she was counting on.

She turned and let the water pound on her shoulders, sighing at the pleasure of it.

After a few minutes, she washed her hair and finished up, ready to crawl into bed. It was earlier than her normal bedtime, but she found herself feeling drowsy. She quickly brushed out and dried her hair and headed back to her room. Before climbing into bed, she took a moment to look around. The flowers were bright and cheerful, reminding her again of how thoughtful and sweet Mav was. And the room was spacious and tidy, just how she liked it.

She slid under the covers and turned out the bedside lamp. Darkness settled around her, and she snuggled under the comforter, feeling warm and safe.

Her mind traveled back over the day to the beautiful wedding ceremony that Mav had arranged. She'd been so surprised as the JP had begun the service with the Corinthians reference. As he'd continued, she'd become more and more aware of how special the service was and incredibly touched that Mav had chosen it for them. His firm grip on her hand had given her such joy, had made the experience feel so real.

She closed her eyes as she remembered his gentle kiss and the way it had made her tingle all over. The way it had made her heartbeat speed up until she could hear her pulse racing.



Mav had looked into her eyes, and his expression had been something she'd never forget—caring and sweet and vulnerable. She'd wanted to pull him down and kiss him again. But, of course, that had been impossible. They were just friends, and theirs was a marriage of convenience. She couldn't take advantage of Mav's kindness by reading more than friendship into his actions.

Sighing, she turned over and faced the window. It wasn't quite dark outside. The lights of the city made sure of that.

It'd been nice spending time watching TV with Mav this evening. And finding out that they liked a lot of the same things had been fun. She'd secretly wished that he'd sit on the couch with her, but that wasn't reasonable. Of course he'd taken his usual chair. Friends didn't snuggle together.

Despite the futility of it, she let herself imagine the scenario: Mav, his arm thrown across the back of the couch, and herself settled in beside him. Moments later, he would move his arm to her shoulders, and she would snuggle close to his chest. His masculine scent would fill her nostrils, and warmth would spread through her as he caressed her arm...

She clenched her teeth and opened her eyes. Enough of that. Why torture herself when her marriage to Mav was a sham? When it was based on his kindness, his willingness to put his life on hold to help her? She ought to be ashamed of herself. She had no right to expect, to even dream of, that kind of relationship with him. Wasn't what he was offering enough? It was way more than she'd ever dreamed of. More than she had any right to expect. She should be ecstatic instead of having these romantic fantasies about the man.

She turned over again and shut her eyes firmly, determined to be happy with the incredible gift he'd offered her and to want no more from him.

Minutes passed as she forced her mind to focus on a mental image of total blackness, something she did to put herself to sleep. Yet, despite her best efforts, Mav's handsome face appeared before her time after time, smiling that wonderful smile or looking tenderly at her. She finally gave in

and let herself revel in the experiences of the day. God help her.



Thursday morning, Jaz signed in at her doctor's office while Mav took a seat in the waiting room. Once she'd told the appointment scheduler about the lump she'd discovered and her family history, the woman had gotten Jaz into the clinic right away.

Mav had taken the morning off to come with her. He'd said that he didn't want her to face potentially bad news on her own. She'd been so overwhelmed by his support that she'd had to fight back tears.

She walked back and took the seat next to him. He clasped her hand and gave her a smile. She clung to him, nervous as a cat, hoping against hope that she'd get good news today.

"I've got you," Mav said in a quiet voice. "Take deep, slow breaths and stay calm."

She realized then that her breathing was shallow and quick. It was crazy. She wasn't that nervous, was she? Nodding, she followed his directions and actually found herself feeling better.

Fifteen minutes later, when her name was called, she suddenly made up her mind. "Would you come back with me, Mav?"

His eyes widened, but he immediately nodded. "Of course."

She knew he'd see her bare chest, but it didn't matter right now. She couldn't bear the thought of getting terrible news alone.

He stood outside the exam room while she changed into a paper gown. She called him in when she was done and climbed onto the table while he took a seat in the only chair. Under lowered lashes, she examined him for signs of discomfort with the situation, but he seemed completely calm. The man was amazing.

“Thanks for coming in here with me,” she said, feeling a little awkward in the silence.

“I’m glad you asked me. I’d have been a wreck sitting out there waiting for word.”

“You would?”

He met her gaze. “Of course I would. I’m desperate for this to go well, honey.”

He’d called her “honey”! What did that mean? He didn’t even seem to realize that he’d said anything out of the ordinary. She said, “Now that I’m here, I have this big ball in my stomach. I want to know what’s going on, but I’m afraid to find out.”

Mav got up and took her hand. “I’m here, Jaz. You’re not alone anymore. We’ll get through whatever happens together.”

Her chest relaxed a little, and she squeezed his hand. “I’m normally not such a scaredy-cat. I don’t know why this is affecting me like this.”

He frowned. “Of course you’re scared. Who wouldn’t be? But just lean on me. I’ve got you.”

That was the second time he’d said that. He really meant it. Her eyes blurred, and she sniffed back tears.

They stood that way until the nurse came in to take her vitals.

A few minutes later, the doctor walked in carrying her file. He greeted her warmly. She’d been his patient for years.

She sat up straighter. “Dr. James, I’d like you to meet my husband, Mav Decker.”

The doctor offered his hand. “Nice to meet you, Mav.” He turned back to Jaz. “Congratulations are in order.”

She smiled. “Thanks. It was all kind of sudden. I have insurance now, too.”

Dr. James smiled at her. “That’s good news. You’ve been uninsured too long.” He tapped her file against his leg. “Now, tell me, why did you come to see me today?”

She immediately sobered. “I’ve found a lump under my left arm, and you may remember that my birth mother was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma several years ago.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, I remember. I know why you’d be especially concerned about the lump.” He set her folder on the counter. “Now, lie down for me, and I’ll examine you.”

Mav took a seat in the chair again after giving her a bright smile.

She took a deep breath and followed the doctor’s directions.

“Let’s open your gown, Jaz, so I can feel what you found.” The doctor gently pulled the paper gown open and began to palpate under her arm.

She was conscious of her exposed chest, but she was so glad that Mav was there that she didn’t let herself worry about it. Telling herself to breathe, she focused on her doctor’s gentle fingers.

“Is this the one you felt?” he asked as his fingers stopped under her arm.

“I think so. That’s about where it was.”

“Okay, good.” His fingers continued to move, bit by bit, working their way backwards. Suddenly, near her back, they stopped again. “I’ve found another one. Did you feel this one as well?”

Fear blazed a trail through her chest. “No. I don’t think I can reach that far. Is it big?”

“It’s about the same size as the other one.” His fingers explored for a moment longer, and then he quickly examined her neck and other underarm before covering her chest again.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, then met her gaze as she sat up. “Jaz, with your history, I’m going to refer you straight to an oncologist.”

Mav came to her side again and clasped her hand.

She looked at him, knowing that her eyes were filled with fear.

“Do you have an oncologist that you prefer to work with, or would you like me to refer you to someone?” Dr. James asked.

With forced calm, she said, “Please refer me to someone.”

He nodded. “Dr. Hubble is a wonderful man, and I trust his judgement implicitly. My nurse has his information, and we’ll schedule an appointment for you.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Try not to worry. We’ll take this one step at a time. There’re perfectly reasonable things that these lumps can be. However, we’ll take them seriously with your history. We don’t want to put off finding out what they are. Right?”

“Right. I promise I’ll stay on top of this.”

He patted her again. “Good.”

He glanced at Mav. “Nice meeting you. I’m so glad Jaz has you now.”

“Me too,” Mav said, putting his arm around Jaz’s shoulders.

She leaned into him and closed her eyes. When the door closed behind the doctor, Mav took her into his arms. His hug was gentle as he ran his hand up and down her back.

She said softly, “Oh, Mav. It’s worse than I imagined. Two lumps. If it’s not lymphoma, it could be breast cancer. I’m so scared.”

His arms tightened, and he kissed the top of her head. “I’m here, honey. I’m here.”

*Honey.* There was that word again. She cherished it. Burying her head against his chest, she let the tears come. In silence, she cried out her disappointment and fear.

At last she pushed away and wiped her eyes.

Mav moved and took several tissues from the counter. “Here. Take your time. I’ll wait outside while you get dressed.”

She nodded and blew her nose, her knees weak. She felt utterly spent.

He was right outside the door, arms crossed, when she walked out.

He put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the front desk. Before she could say anything, he said, “Dr. James said that we could get Dr. Hubble’s information and that you all were going to make an appointment for Jaz with him?”

The young woman smiled. “Yes, we’d be glad to do that. Just a moment.”

She reached into her desk and came out with a business card. “This is for Dr. Hubble, and we’ll call you as soon as we’ve made the appointment.”

“Thank you so much,” Jaz said and took the card.

Mav nodded his thanks and put his arm around her waist as he led her out the door.

It was a silent ride home. Her mind was swirling around all the possibilities, and none of them made her happy. Mav held her hand the whole time.

When they got to the house, she sat on the couch, feeling numb, her emotions in overload. To her surprise, Mav sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. She shuddered, the feeling so wonderfully intense that her nerves couldn’t handle it.

He kissed her temple. “Just relax. You’re going to be okay,” he whispered.

His thigh touched hers, and she let herself melt against his chest. She gave up all sense of propriety and clasped his hand hanging down from her shoulder. He laced their fingers together like they’d done it a million times.

Sighing, she closed her eyes. It was like a dream—the very best dream—and she didn’t want to wake up. She could face the truth about her body now. With Mav, she could face anything.



Four days later, Mav turned off the expressway, the rush hour traffic still heavy even though it was almost seven. He'd already called and told Jaz when he'd be home. He'd been out of town and had been worried about her the whole time he'd been gone. He knew that she was worried sick and would be until she had some answers from her oncologist. He'd texted her several times a day and called her every evening, yet still he'd felt that wasn't enough. He could sense her tension whenever they spoke.

She'd told him how much she appreciated him for keeping in touch. She'd been incredibly lucky when she'd gotten her appointment with the oncologist. They'd had a cancellation on Friday, and she'd snapped it up. Thankfully, Todd, her manager at work, was aware of her situation and supported her in her quest for treatment.

Mav had called his captain as soon as he'd found out about her appointment and had asked for the afternoon off. His boss was aware of Jaz's circumstances and had no problem with allowing Mav time off to support his new wife.

When he walked in the door thirty minutes later, wonderful smells assailed his nostrils. Jaz had obviously cooked dinner. He called out, "Jaz, I'm home." Then he smiled. It seemed so old-school to say that, just like in an old movie.

He followed his nose toward the kitchen, and she walked out to greet him.

"I hope you're hungry." She gave him a shy smile that went straight to his heart.

"It smells fabulous, and I'm starving."

"I thought you might be, and I wanted to surprise you." She turned back to the kitchen. "I made meatloaf with mashed potatoes and corn. I hope you'll like it."

It sounded like a meal his mom would make. "I love it already. Let me go wash up."

He changed into more comfortable clothes while he was at it and walked back into the kitchen. Jaz had the table set and was just putting the food out. He said, “Here, let me help you with that.”

He set a trivet on the table and put the meatloaf pan on it. Jaz added a bowl of mashed potatoes beside the bowl of corn. The tea glasses were already filled. “Anything else?” he asked.

“Nope. We’re ready.” She took a seat opposite his chair, so he sat down too.

“You worked hard on this. Thanks, Jaz. I really appreciate you cooking tonight.”

She smiled; her eyes full of warmth. “I wanted to do something nice to thank you for everything you’re doing for me.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I want to help you,” he said as he began to serve himself. Then he laughed as his stomach gave a loud, hungry growl.

Jaz chuckled. “Looks like you got home just in time.”

He told her about his work while they ate, and she filled him in on a few details about her day, too. His body slowly relaxed from the stressful days that he’d spent on the job.

Somehow, just being with Jaz was an antidote to his exhaustion. Now, though, he had more anxiety. Since they’d gotten married, he didn’t just worry about doing an excellent job at work; he worried about her well-being too. Being with Jaz reassured him that she was okay. At least for now.

As they both finished their plates, he said, “I’m doing the dishes—and no argument. You cooked, and it was a lot of work.”

Her mouth quirked up. “I’ll agree to that. I’m wiped. Standing on my feet to cook after working a full day isn’t much fun. I don’t know how other women do it.”

“Me neither. Why do you think I eat at the café so often?”

“I get it. Believe me, I get it.”



“Why don’t you find something to watch while I finish up in here? I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

She nodded and got up from the table. “Thanks, Mav. You’re the best.”

“Welcome.” He quickly cleared the table and put the leftovers in containers. Stacking the dishes in the dishwasher didn’t take long at all. In no time flat, he walked into the living room and found Jaz sitting on the couch. However, when he noticed the lost look on her face as she watched TV, he decided not to take his usual seat in the recliner. Instead, he sat down beside her.

She looked up and smiled wanly at him.

He slid his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into him, heaving a deep sigh.

“What are we watching?” he asked.

“Nothing special. Why don’t we look for something else?” She flipped to the guide.

They settled on a murder mystery. It was an older movie with lots of suspense. He’d seen it before, but it was worth watching again. Jaz snuggled back against him, making it easier for her to see the screen. God, he loved the feel of her body like that. It was so comforting. He felt himself melting into a puddle as the plot began to unfold. She linked her fingers with his, and he sighed.

He was glad that he could give her the comfort of his body like this while she awaited her oncology visit. It was the only thing that he could do with the state of their non-relationship. Simple friendship didn’t allow for much else.

When their movie was over, Jaz sat up and turned to him, her eyes half closed with sleep. “Thank you, Mav. That was wonderful. I think I’ll be able to sleep now.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’m glad. Off you go, now, before you wake up again.

She smiled and got up. “Good night.”

He watched her until her door closed behind her. Sitting here with her tonight had fed his soul, filled a need in him that he didn't know he had until she'd come to live with him.

He headed to his room and prepared for bed, content and yet discontent. But that was the way it had to be.



# Chapter Ten



A heavy weight sat on Jaz's chest as she waited with Mav in her oncologist's office late Friday morning. He held her hand, and the firm connection was the only reason her heart wasn't pounding. What would this doctor's opinion be? Would he do any tests today, or would he schedule them for later? She didn't know how long she could bear to wait for answers.

Mav glanced at her and then squeezed her hand, obviously picking up on her worry.

She gave him a lopsided smile, then started as the door to the back office opened. A nurse called out a name, but it wasn't hers.

"Easy now," Mav said and put his arm around her shoulders.

She leaned against him, feeling like a fool. Where was the stoic calmness that had always gotten her through difficult times?

A moment later, the door opened again, and this time the nurse called her name. She stood and drew Mav to his feet beside her. "Come in with me, please?"

"Of course. You don't have to ask." He followed her through the door, his hand clasping hers firmly. The woman showed her to a changing room, where Jaz put on a cloth gown while Mav waited outside.

A few minutes later, the nurse brought them back to an exam room. She took Jaz's vitals and asked quite a few questions. Jaz glanced at Mav frequently, and he quietly reassured her with his gentle smile.

Leaving Jaz on the exam table, the nurse said, "You're all set. Dr. Hubble will be in to see you in a few minutes."

Mav walked over to the side of the table and took her hand, brushing her hair back from her cheek. “It’s going to be fine. No matter what we find out, we’ll handle it.”

She blew out a nervous breath. “Thanks. I don’t know why I’m letting this get to me. I’m normally not like this.”

“It’s natural to be worried. Don’t apologize.” He moved closer, his body leaning against hers.

She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder, feeling his strength filling her. What if she were doing this alone? It’d be horrible.

The door opened and a tall, blond man walked briskly into the room. “Good morning. I’m Dr. Hubble.” He met Jaz’s gaze and smiled. “And you must be Jasmine.”

“You can call me Jaz.” She motioned to Mav. “This is my husband, Mav.”

The doctor shook hands with him and then returned his attention to Jaz. “I understand that you’ve found some lumps under your arm?”

She nodded. “Yes. I found one, and my doctor found the second one.”

“Which side?”

“My left.”

He nodded. “How about I take a look at them now? Is it easier to feel them sitting up or lying down?”

Jaz thought for a moment. “I found the first lump while I was standing in the shower. My doctor found the other one while I was lying on the exam table.”

“Okay, why don’t you lie down? Slip your arm out of the gown on that side, okay?”

Mav sat down as Jaz lay back onto the table.

The doctor’s gentle fingers palpated up and down Jaz’s left side and under her arm. “Have you found any lumps in your breast?”

“I haven’t felt any.”

“I feel the two lumps that we’re discussing.” A moment later, he said, “Okay, you can put your arm back in your sleeve and sit up.”

He stepped back and made a note in her chart. “I’m going to schedule you for a mammogram first thing, Jaz. We want to rule out anything from that area. We’re also going to schedule some X-rays. I’m ordering blood work, too.”

He smiled. “I don’t want you to worry. We’ll get to the bottom of this, and we won’t waste any time, either. I know you’re worried about these lumps, and you want to know what they are, but right now, I don’t want to throw around guesses that may be wrong.”

She nodded. “I understand, but I really am worried. I’m having trouble sleeping, and I’m anxious all the time.”

Dr. Hubble patted her shoulder. “We’ll get through these diagnostics as soon as possible. You’ll hear from us in a week. The tests I’ll schedule will be done and the results back by then, okay?” After a pause, he went on. “I suspect that we’ll schedule a biopsy at that point. I can do it at the outpatient clinic next door.” He gave her another reassuring smile. “You just hang on. We’ll know what’s up with these lumps very soon.”

She stifled a groan. Another week? And then more waiting for the biopsy to be scheduled? “Okay, I will.”

He shook Mav’s hand again. “Good to meet you. I’m glad you came in with Jaz. Having support makes all the difference in times like this.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else, sir.”

Mav went out to the waiting room while she changed clothes. She was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that she wouldn’t know anything for more than a week, at best.

Mav put his arm around her as they walked out to the car. “How about we stop for some lunch?”

Her stomach was tied in knots, but she was sure that he was probably hungry. “Okay.”

She did her best to force enough food down to keep him from worrying, but by the time he paid their tab, she was desperate to go home.

Mav held her hand as they drove. He was tuned into her well enough that he didn't try to talk, and she was thankful. She was trying to feel hopeful because of all the tests that the doctor would schedule and how quickly he felt that the results would be in.

When they walked into the house, Mav drew her into his arms. “Why don't you come lie down with me? We'll take a nap, and you can relax and hopefully wake up feeling better. What do you think?” He kissed the top of her head and leaned his cheek against her.

She sighed. How did she deserve this man? But would she be able to relax lying beside him? Then she thought of being alone with her thoughts and nodded. Anything was better than that.

He released her. “Good. Just come back when you're ready.”

She went into her bedroom and changed into comfortable clothes. When she walked down the hallway, his door was open, and she could see that he'd done the same. He lay atop the bedspread, propped up on pillows, and he reached out a hand as she came into the room.

“Come lie down.”

Feeling awkward, she moved to the side of the bed.

He opened his arm wide, encouraging her to lie on his chest.

With a sigh, she snuggled against him. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her head. “Close your eyes. I've got you. We have all afternoon, honey.”

Her eyes flew open. There was that word again. She was beginning to think that he meant it, if only in a sweet way. It

went straight to her heart.

“Thank you, Mav. This is nice.”

“You rest now. Try to sleep.” His fingers moved slowly up and down her back, sending faint tingles across it. She shivered at the sensation.

“Cold?”

She shook her head. “No, you’re keeping me warm. It’s just your hand. It... It feels good.”

He chuckled softly as his fingers continued their movement, slow and gentle.

She breathed deeply and sighed it out. There was no way to be anxious, no way to worry wrapped in the warmth and safety of Mav’s embrace.

He kissed the top of her head again, and she smiled. She was going to be okay.



Two and a half weeks later, Mav followed Jaz into Dr. Hubble’s office. They sat in the two chairs opposite him and returned his warm smile. Jaz held Mav’s hand so tightly his finger bones ached.

The doctor leaned forward in his chair and opened Jaz’s file. “I’ve received the biopsy report as well as the test results.” He raised his head and met Jaz’s gaze. “I have a diagnosis now.”

Mav heard her sharp intake of breath and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“This is actually good news. Now that we know what we’re dealing with, we can begin treatment right away,” Dr. Hubble said in an encouraging tone.

“What do I have, doctor?” Jaz said in a faint voice.

The doctor glanced at Mav and then back at Jaz. “You have classic Hodgkin’s lymphoma. In particular, nodular sclerosis classic Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”



Jaz looked at Mav, her eyes panicked and full of fear.

He drew her closer to his body and asked, “What’s the treatment, doc?”

“Well, first let me tell you that the five-year survival rate for it is very high, ninety-three percent in Jaz’s case. I’m quite hopeful that you’ll make a full recovery, Jaz.”

Mav squeezed her shoulders in encouragement and kissed her temple. “That’s good, doc.”

The doctor closed the folder. “Now, as for treatment, I’ll start you on chemotherapy immediately, which will last from three to six months, depending on how you respond. It’ll be given to you in cycles that will last several weeks. My nurse will schedule your first appointment with you. There’s a treatment center near here, and it’s where most of our patients go. She’ll give you information that’ll explain everything and answer any questions you may have.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hubble,” Jaz said quietly.

“I know this wasn’t what you were hoping to hear, Jaz, but we’ll get through it,” he said as he rose from his desk. He shook hands with both of them. “I’ll see you soon. One thing’s important, Jaz: get plenty of rest. Your body needs time to heal.”

Fifteen minutes later, they left the office, Jaz with a handful of brochures and a sheet of paper with her appointment schedule on it.

Mav kept his arm around her shoulders, sensing her vulnerability. They headed straight home. He’d taken the afternoon off for her appointment and didn’t have to return to work.

In the truck, Jaz leaned her head back on the seat and closed her eyes.

Mav said nothing. She needed time to assimilate the reality of her situation. It would take a while for the shock to wear off. He felt helpless, at a loss for words of comfort. He reached for her hand, offering her the only support he knew how to give.

When he pulled into the driveway twenty minutes later, she slowly raised her head and looked blearily around her.

“Come on inside. I’ll make you a glass of tea.”

She nodded and reached down to the floorboard for her purse as he got out to open her door.

She stepped woodenly down from the truck, and he put his arm around her as they walked to the door. Once inside, he said, “Why don’t you change into something comfortable? I’ll fix our tea and then do the same.”

She nodded and headed for her room.

When she came back into the living room a few minutes later, he was on the couch, and their tea sat on the table in front of it. “Come sit by me, and we’ll find something to watch.”

“Okay.” She sighed and sat beside him.

He put his arm around her, and she leaned against him. He kissed the top of her head. “What do you feel like? A movie, or do you want to continue our series?”

She closed her eyes. “Why don’t you decide?”

“A movie, then.”

He found a rom-com, hoping to cheer her up. But a few minutes later, he heard her sniff and realized that she was crying. “Oh, honey, come here.” He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. He could hear her crying softly into his chest. Heart breaking, he wiped the tears from her cheek and kissed her forehead, murmuring reassurances under his breath.

Eventually she grew quiet. He kissed her forehead again and whispered, “We’re in this together, honey, all the way through.”

She nodded and raised her head, looking into his eyes. “Thank you, Mav. I should have known that I’d get this news today, but I was so hoping that I wouldn’t. I’m sorry for falling apart.”

He held her face in his hands. “You did just fine, you hear me?”

She nodded and gave him a ghost of a smile.

“Now come lie down with me. We can take a good nap before dinner.” He helped her to her feet and led her to his bedroom. This time, she seemed more comfortable and snuggled right up to him. She even surprised him by sliding her calf over his leg and giving a deep sigh of contentment. He held her in his arms and ran his fingers slowly up and down her back, remembering how much that had relaxed her before.

She patted his chest, and he smiled at the sweetness of it.

He kissed her forehead. “Sleep now, honey. Clear your mind and drift away.”

She sighed deeply and curled her fingers into a ball.

He continued to rub her back for long moments, sensing her slowly relaxing, and then hearing the lengthening of her soft breaths. Eventually, she drifted off. He stopped rubbing then and let himself relax. He could sleep now.

He loved the way she curled against him. The deeply protective tenderness he felt for her was an entirely new and wonderful sensation. He’d do anything, be anything for her. No matter what the future held for them, he’d take care of her.



# Chapter Eleven



Jaz settled back into the comfortable recliner, her heart galloping like a racehorse. What would she experience with this first chemotherapy infusion? The nurse had told her that it might make her sleepy or cause other side effects, and Mav had insisted on accompanying her.

She'd made him promise that he wouldn't take off work for every one of her appointments. She planned on working throughout her treatment and would drive herself to the clinic. He hadn't been happy about her decision, but he'd eventually relented when she'd made her wishes clear in no uncertain terms.

He squeezed her hand now as the tech inserted the needle into her arm. She'd soon have a port in place so that she wouldn't have to go through this unpleasant procedure each visit.

Soon, she was all set up, and the tech walked away.

"Do you want your magazines?" Mav asked, his voice betraying his worry.

She was too nervous to read, anticipating her reaction to the toxic fluid now dripping into her vein. "Not right now, but thanks."

He rubbed her hand. "Just relax. I'm not going anywhere." He settled back in his chair, which was a standard waiting-room one. Poor man. He'd be stuck in here as long as she was.

He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

She wondered if he'd had trouble sleeping last night, too. She'd been worried about her reaction to this infusion. Wondering if she'd get sick or worse.

It was comforting to have him here with her. Suddenly she wished that she hadn't told him not to come to her future appointments. Then she grimaced. Of course she'd done the right thing. He couldn't miss work just for her. He had an important job to do, and he traveled out of town frequently. Planning around her infusions would completely disrupt his schedule.

Her arm burned where the fluid entered it. She was sure it was okay, though. Of course the awful stuff wouldn't feel good going in.

She'd changed her schedule at work. Now, she'd be working the morning shift full-time instead of alternating weeks on the evening shift. That way she could have her infusions in the early afternoon when she got off work.

She shifted in the chair, realigning her spine. She'd been too nervous at first to sit properly.

Mav opened his eyes and looked at her, a question in his expression.

She smiled. "Just getting comfortable."

He squeezed her hand and watched her closely, as if to reassure himself that she was okay.

She was such a lucky woman to have him in her life. She increased the pressure of her fingers, letting him know that she cared, and then closed her eyes. She had to be patient with this process, although time seemed to be dragging by.

Dr. Hubble's nurse had said that her infusions would take approximately three hours. Jaz sighed. At this rate, that was going to be a hell of a long time. Then she focused on the feel of Mav's hand wrapped around hers. His gentle grasp was firm, giving her his strength as it always did. She patted his hand, and he opened his eyes and smiled. She smiled back, suddenly feeling better. She closed her eyes again and let herself relax.



When the tech came to remove the needle from her arm, Jaz realized that she'd actually slept.

Mav helped her to her feet, and she tilted sideways, suddenly feeling unsteady. Grabbing his arm, she regained her balance.

He grasped her around the shoulders, tucking her against his side. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I don't know what that was all about."

"I'll help you to the car." He sounded worried. "This is why I don't want you coming to your appointments alone, Jaz."

"I'll get used to the treatments, I'm sure. This was only my first one."

He let out an exasperated sigh. "I wish you weren't so damned independent. There's nothing wrong with needing help."

"I know, but you have a job to do, and it's a demanding one. The last thing you need to be doing is taking me to doctor's appointments all the time. I won't have it."

When they got to the truck, he handed her the seat belt and shut the door with more force than was necessary, a hint that he was unhappy with her.

She just couldn't let him turn his life inside out for her, though. She couldn't bear that.

When they arrived back at the house, Mav went straight in and started fixing dinner. She offered to help, but he insisted that she rest and watch TV.

By the time he called her into the kitchen to eat, he seemed in a better mood. She breathed a sigh of relief and took her seat at the table. She had zero appetite, but she wasn't about to tell him that after all his hard work.

He'd fixed spaghetti, another thing he'd told her he was guaranteed not to botch. Browned hamburger meat and sauce out of a jar were easy to make.

He'd made buttered French bread as well, and she ate a few bites of that while she slowly made headway on the serving of spaghetti he'd given her.

She asked Mav what he'd been doing at work that morning.

"I went to meet with Mick—you know, the FBI agent I told you I work with occasionally. We went over some new chatter she'd been made aware of and then had lunch."

Jaz felt an instant stab of jealousy, then shoved it down harshly. She had no right to that emotion. "Was there anything interesting in the chatter? Or can't you talk about it?"

He shrugged. "I can't, really, but I'm glad she called. It's important that we stay informed. I'll meet with my team in the morning and share what I learned."

When they'd finished eating, they cleaned the kitchen together. She enjoyed working side by side with Mav, although she was exhausted from the infusion after working all day. Well, most of the day. She'd had to ask to cut her shifts an hour short on the days of her treatments, and Todd had agreed without hesitation. She was so thankful for his support.

As Mav hung the dishcloth up to dry, he said, "After our showers, let's watch some TV and relax. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." She smiled and caressed his shoulder as she passed by, overwhelmed by his kindness and understanding. The last thing she wanted was to be alone.

Thirty minutes later, when she walked into the living room, he was sitting on the couch. She'd been worried that he'd be in his chair. She wanted—no, needed—his arms around her tonight. The thought of facing her future treatments weighed heavily on her.

He held out a hand for her, and she smiled as she walked toward him. He pulled her close against him and put his arm around her. "What shall we watch?" he asked in a quiet voice as he kissed her temple.

A shiver ran through her. She loved it when he did that. "How about an action movie?"



He chuckled. “You’re up for one of those, huh?”

“I need something to take my mind off myself.”

He pulled her closer to him. “One action movie coming up.”

They finally settled on one that they’d both seen but had liked. He leaned his cheek against her and sighed as the movie began. She closed her eyes, sinking into the amazing sensation of being held in his strong arms, warm and safe. What would she do without Mav?

She searched for—and found—his hand. She wouldn’t have to find that out. At least, not until her treatments were finished. Her heart thumped hard at that awful thought. She’d lose him then. She couldn’t bear to think of that. Not now. She’d grown accustomed to this very special cowboy, and losing him would destroy her heart.



Mav returned to his hotel room after a quick dinner. He’d found that he didn’t have much of an appetite after leaving Jaz during the second week of her treatments. It had cut him to the quick to see the look on her face when he’d said goodbye to her the morning he’d left. She’d put on a brave face, but underneath he could see the devastation lurking.

She’d had no appetite and, although she was on anti-nausea medication, she’d experienced mild nausea since her second treatment. She forced herself to eat, but to his discerning eye, it was never enough.

Since he’d been gone, he’d been texting her several times a day and calling every evening. Still, he felt as if he’d abandoned her. She was always happy when she answered the phone, as if she’d been looking forward to his call, and that filled him with joy.

He, too, looked forward to their nightly conversations. He anticipated them all day, their texts not nearly enough to satisfy his need for closeness.

Her treatments would last for three weeks, and then she'd have a week off to rest. He'd booked four days at a beach condo in Port Aransas as a surprise for her. It was only a four-hour drive, and they could lie in bed all day and take walks on the beach when they wanted to. This was the offseason, and people would be scarce. The winds would be bracing and the waves loud as they walked along the shoreline. He loved the coast in the fall.

He hoped the trip would do Jaz good. She was feeling tired and run-down, physically as well as mentally. He hated that she continued to insist on working full-time during her treatments. He had plenty in savings to support her, but she wouldn't allow it.

He showered and changed into his sleep clothes, ready to call Jaz. She'd had a treatment earlier, and he knew that she'd be wiped out. Before he left, he'd bought plenty of fresh, ready-made dinners from the grocery store for her. All she had to do was pop one into the oven. By now, she'd had time to eat and settle in front of the TV.

He put the phone on speaker as it rang.

"Hey, Mav, how was your day?" she said as soon as she answered. Her voice was tired, but she put enthusiasm into it.

He appreciated her effort, knowing how she probably felt. "It was just fine. I've been thinking about you and hoping you're feeling okay. Were you able to eat your dinner?"

She paused before answering. "I ate most of it."

That worried him. Was she not eating well? But he didn't want to press her. It was bad enough feeling nauseated without someone making you feel guilty if you couldn't eat.

"Well, that's good. How was work?"

She sighed. "It was hectic. We had a large group of people who'd come to see the capitol and got lost. We're several blocks away, you know. Anyway, they took all the tables. Thank goodness it was after the lunch rush. They were good tippers, which was nice." She sighed deeply again, and he

sensed that she was feeling down. Then she asked, “How was your day really?”

His had been hectic, but nothing to write home about. But he could tell that she must just want to hear the sound of his voice, so he gave her the rundown in great detail. She listened in silence, with only an occasional small comment. He stayed on the phone with her for over an hour, and she sounded much better when he asked her, “Feeling ready for bed now?”

“I do. Thanks for entertaining me. I miss you, Mav.” Then she stopped abruptly, as if thinking she’d said too much.

Her comment went straight to his heart. “I miss you, too. I look forward to our call every night. It makes me feel closer to you somehow. I should be wrapping this up in another day or so. I’ll be home soon.”

When he hung up, he felt again that rush from her words. She missed him too. They were getting so much closer than he’d ever anticipated, and he was glad of it. However, her treatments wouldn’t last forever, and per her own words, he’d lose her then. He couldn’t stand the thought of that. The idea of living alone again made his heart ache. He’d become accustomed to her presence. He loved knowing that she’d be waiting for him when he got home in the evenings. He enjoyed preparing dinner for her or bringing home something to tempt her appetite.

His whole life revolved around her now, and he loved that.

As he went to bed, he texted her:

*Sleep well, Jaz. Wishing I was there with you tonight.*

She sent back:

*God, I wish you were, too, Mav. Come home soon.*

He turned over and switched off the lamp, his mind filled with memories of the woman he just might be falling in love with.



Two days later, Mav pulled into the driveway. It was eight in the evening; much later than he'd thought he would arrive. He'd texted Jaz earlier, though, and told her when he expected to be home.

When he walked in the door, he was assailed by rich, tasty aromas emanating from the kitchen. Had Jaz cooked? He sighed. She shouldn't have done that. The poor thing had to be exhausted after working. At least her treatments were done for now. He called, "I'm home, Jaz. Something smells delicious."

She walked out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Giving him a welcoming smile, she said, "I wanted to surprise you. I cooked pork chops and broccoli in cheese sauce, and I made a nice salad."

He strode toward her and gave her a hug. "I'm starving. Since I was running late, I didn't stop to eat. I figured I'd just make a sandwich when I got home."

She smiled, resting against his chest and letting out a long sigh. "It's good to have you home."

He loved it that she called his house "home" now. Kissing the top of her head, he said, "It's great to be back. I've missed you."

She nodded, and the movement sent shivers racing across his chest.

"Dinner should be ready in a few minutes." She stepped back, and he hated the way his arms suddenly felt empty.

"I'll take a shower and be right in." He could tell how excited she was at her surprise. He'd shower quickly so that she wouldn't have to wait for him. He left his suitcase by the bed. Unpacking could wait.

Ten minutes later, he dried himself off and put on sweats and a T-shirt. His stomach growled as he pulled on a pair of socks, and he smiled. He was truly glad that Jaz had cooked. The thought of a sandwich hadn't been appealing at all.

When he walked into the kitchen, the table was set, and the food was laid out. Jaz smiled at him and took her seat. "Sit down, cowboy. I'm starving."

He chuckled. “You should have heard my stomach a minute ago. I am, too.” As he filled his plate, he said, “These pork chops smell wonderful. You’re a good cook, Jaz.”

She scooped some salad onto her plate. “I’ve learned a thing or two over the years from working at the café. I ask a lot of questions of the cooks when I have time.”

He passed the meat to her and picked up the broccoli. It was lavishly covered in a thick cheese sauce. His mouth watered as he heaped a large portion onto his plate.

“So, what do you have going on tomorrow?” Jaz asked as she reached for the broccoli.

“The usual day for my first one back in town. Finish my report and turn it in. Go through paperwork that’s landed on my desk. Meet with the team and see how they’re progressing on what they’re working on.”

“So you’ve got a busy day.”

“Yep.” He took a bite of meat and moaned. “This is great, Jaz. I mean it.”

She smiled, looking pleased at his reaction. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I have a surprise for you too. I’ve booked four days at a condo in Port Aransas this week. Two of the days you already have off. Can you take Thursday and Friday off, too? I figure we’ll stay in bed as long as we want, walk on the beach, and just relax and rest.”

“Wow, that sounds amazing! I can ask Sam if she’ll work a double on those days, since she works already. I don’t think she’ll mind. I’ve done it for her often enough.” She took a bite of salad, her eyes alight with excitement. “Oh, Mav, you’re so sweet to do this. Thank you.”

“You’ve had a hard three weeks, and I want you to use this week off from treatment to get your strength back.”

He put down his fork and held her gaze. “Jaz, won’t you please consider taking a leave of absence from work while you’re going through this? I promise I have plenty of money to

cover your expenses, and it'd be my pleasure to take care of them for you."

He reached across the table and clasped her hand. "I'm really worried about you."

She squeezed his fingers but was shaking her head. "I appreciate your offer more than I can say, but I just can't let you do that. You're already doing so much for me, Mav. I can't let you do more."

He gusted out a breath in exasperation. Why wouldn't she see sense? Looking down at his plate again, he took another bite of meat and nodded.

He told her about the condo then. He'd stayed there before and loved that they'd be able to walk right down to the beach.

"It's been a long time since I've been to the beach in the fall. Will it be cold?" she asked.

"It'll be brisk down by the water in the early morning and evening, but otherwise it should be warm."

"So no swimsuit, then, huh?"

He grinned. "Depends on how brave you are." Then he added. "I'm definitely bringing some shorts, though, for midday."

As she'd already taken her shower, after cleaning up the kitchen, they headed for the living room to watch TV.

Fatigue lined her forehead as she sat down beside him on the couch.

He flipped on the television and put his arm around her shoulders.

With a sigh, she snuggled in close, resting her hand on his thigh.

Desire shot through him, and he forced the reaction down. Keeping the strain out of his voice, he handed her the TV remote and said, "Why don't you choose what to watch?"

After a short while, she settled on a British police series.

As the show's intro was playing, he said, "Dinner was wonderful. Thanks so much for cooking."

She patted his leg, sending shivers racing through him again. "You're welcome. I wanted your homecoming to be special."

He kissed the top of her head. "It was."

Moments later, she closed her eyes. A deep protectiveness washed through him, and he tightened his arm. She'd worked her way into his heart as no woman ever had, not even his ex-wife.

Soon Jaz's slow, even breathing told him that she slept. He continued to hold her, loving the feeling of having her resting in his arms, her body completely relaxed against him. He enjoyed watching her like this. The tension line between her eyes had disappeared, and her beautiful lips were lush and full in repose instead of pressed tightly together with worry.

He let his eyes rove over her, interested in every detail, and noticed that she'd lost weight in these past three weeks. *Damn*. She wasn't eating enough. He *had* to do something about that. And those dark circles under her eyes were worse. Her makeup hid them from him too well. He'd have to pay more attention in the evenings after her shower so that he could keep track of her real condition. He couldn't let any detail slip his notice. She was too fragile. He put his other arm around her and held her close, wishing that he could protect her from what lay ahead.

He closed his eyes and sighed. He couldn't do that, of course, but he could be with her every step of the way. He turned the sound down and let her sleep for an hour in his arms. She didn't stir, her slow breaths coming easily to her. He knew that she'd rest better in bed, though, so eventually he kissed her forehead and said quietly, "Wake up, honey. Let's get you to bed."

It took a few seconds for her eyes to open. Then she sat up groggily. "Oh, I fell asleep, didn't I?"

He smiled and helped her stand up. “You needed it. Come on, I’ll walk you to your room.”

She yawned, her eyes half-open, and held onto him as they headed for her door. The bedside lamp was on, and she crawled into bed. He pulled the covers up to her chin. Her eyes were already closed. Tucking the covers around her, he said quietly, “Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She nodded. “Night, Mav.”

Her eyes stayed shut, and he smiled. A wave of tenderness swept through him, so intense it took his breath away. He closed his eyes, unable to move. He shouldn’t feel this way. She trusted him; thought of him as her best friend. He couldn’t take advantage of her while she was so needy and vulnerable.

He turned off the lamp and headed to his room. When he climbed into bed a few minutes later, he felt more alone than he had in a very long time.





## Chapter Twelve



Jaz walked into the condo, exhausted from the four-hour drive from Austin to Port Aransas. She was surprised at how beautiful it was. It looked like an interior designer had had a hand in every nautical-themed detail. “This is wonderful, May.”

He smiled. “Follow me. You get the big bedroom and the master bath. I want you to enjoy some long soaks in that giant tub.”

“Oh, that sounds like heaven.” She followed him to the bedroom at the end of the hall, where he turned in.

He put her suitcase on the bed, which had an intricately patterned bedspread on it. The room was decorated in corals, golds, and tans, colors that she loved. She would rest well here.

He motioned to an open door. “Take a peek in there. You’ll love it.”

She walked into the bathroom and saw what he meant. There was a huge free-standing tub, deep enough for her to completely submerge her whole body. The spacious room had double sinks and a separate shower. There was plenty of vanity space for her makeup and hair stuff, too.

She walked back out. “Wow! Thanks for giving me the best room.”

He grinned at her enthusiasm. “I hope you enjoy it. I want you to have a wonderful time here.”

As he turned to the door, he said over his shoulder, “Are you up for a walk on the beach?”

She was tired, but seeing the place had given her a fresh burst of energy. “Yep. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Sure thing. Meet you in the living room.”

She unpacked, putting her clothes in the dresser and her toiletries in the bathroom. That would make the evening easier, and it didn't take long. Then, taking a last look around the room, she shut the door behind her.

Mav was already in the living room, drinking something from a tumbler with ice. He held it up. "I brought some good bourbon. Do you drink it?"

"Not usually."

"I also brought wine: one bottle of slightly sweet red, and one of somewhat dry white. That way you have a choice."

She smiled. "You thought of everything."

"I tried. We'll go to the store soon, and you can get what you want. We'll mostly be eating out locally instead of cooking, but we're staying in the rest of the time. I thought I'd even get takeout as often as I can—if that's okay with you."

She breathed out a relieved sigh. "Takeout sounds wonderful. I'd love to stay in and forget the world exists."

"I was hoping you'd say that." Then he took hold of her hand. "Let's take a short walk, nothing big. Just something to breathe in the fresh air."

"I'm all for that."

A few minutes later, they were walking just out of reach of the waves. Seagulls flew overhead, crying out and diving low, hoping for treats.

Mav clasped her hand, weaving his fingers through hers, and she realized how natural it felt.

She increased the pressure of her fingers, and he glanced down at her, the corner of his mouth lifting. A wave of warmth swept through her. How different her life was now. It was sweet and magical, something she'd never seen coming. Mav had changed her life completely.

Suddenly a large wave washed much farther up the sand and caught them by surprise, wetting their feet. They laughed and danced away.

“Well, that’ll teach us to pay attention,” Mav said.

“Does the condo have a washer and dryer?”

“Yeah, we can dry out our shoes, don’t worry.”

The wind blew her hair across her face, and she kept tucking it behind her ears. But she loved the feel of it, even though it was chilly. The rough sound of the waves was music to her ears, taking her to a faraway place. She forgot about her treatments, focusing instead on the grip of Mav’s hand and the feel of the sand giving way under the soles of her shoes. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she closed her eyes, letting him lead her, immersing herself in the experience.

After a while, he slowed, and she opened her eyes. He said, “Let’s turn back. We can make a sandwich and then take a good nap. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.”

On the way back, she looked out where the ocean met the sky. A tanker drifted far off in the distance. There were few people on the beach at this time of year, and she felt that she and Mav were in their own little cocoon.

When they got back to their place, Mav said, “After we eat, take a nap with me.”

“That sounds nice.”

They made themselves some simple sandwiches and sat at the bar with glasses of juice. It didn’t take long to eat.

Mav took their paper plates and said, “I’ll meet you in my room.”

“I’ll be right there,” she said. “Just give me a few minutes.”

“Great.”

When she walked into his room, he was sprawled on the bed. She climbed in beside him and snuggled down on his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. “Sleep well, Jaz. We have all the time in the world. I’ll go out

and pick up something for dinner when we wake up.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Wonderful. Thank you, Mav.” She could hear his heart beating, slow and strong. It comforted her.

He patted her back and began to rub it, as he always did, and she sighed, feeling her muscles slowly relax.

He kissed the top of her head again, and a wave of tenderness swept through her. He was a precious man.

She patted his chest, and he clasped her hand, sighing deeply. Smiling, she nestled her cheek closer to him and let her thoughts wander. This was heaven.



Jaz opened her eyes and yawned, wondering what time it was. How long had she slept? She didn't wear a watch, depending on her phone for the time, but she'd left that in her bedroom. She eased back from Mav, preparing to get up, and his arms immediately tightened around her. She listened to his breathing. He was still sleeping. She smiled. His move had been instinctive. The sweetness of it touched her heart, and she laid her head back onto his chest.

He'd driven the whole way, and she knew that he'd been tense the entire time, wondering if the drive was tiring her. He'd needed this nap as much as she had. Closing her eyes, she listened to his heartbeat and tried to match her breathing to his. But she couldn't quite do it. She was awake now, and his breathing was deep and slow.

She lay there, listening to him, caressing his chest softly and treasuring the experience, for another twenty minutes or so.

Then his hand covered hers and he said quietly, “Hi, did you sleep well?”

“I sure did.”

“I'll go pick up some dinner. What sounds good to you?”

She stood up and put her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “Why don’t you surprise me? You know your way around here.”

He grinned. “You trust me, huh?”

“Implicitly.” She gave him a warm smile, letting him know that she meant that in every possible way.

He raised his brows, his eyes beginning to sparkle.

While he was gone, she opened the bottle of red wine and, after putting on her jacket, sat out on the balcony. Their place was on the eighth floor, so seagulls flew at that height or below her. The gregarious birds made her smile with their antics. She’d always liked to feed them bits of bread, watching them all swoop down as she threw the food into the air above her head.

Her thoughts returned to Mav, and she bit her lip. Her feelings for him were stronger. More than friendship now, they ran deep. That was just plain wrong. She’d known Mav for a long time, and he had his life all lined out. At no point did it include a long-term relationship. Somehow, she had to make her emotions obey her.

She’d finished her second glass of wine by the time Mav returned. Putting on her best smile, she walked inside. “So, what’s my surprise, cowboy?”

“Oh, you’re gonna love it. Fried shrimp and tartar sauce, coleslaw, and the best French fries in Port A.”

“Yum. I’m actually starving.” She couldn’t believe it herself.

“It’s the sea air, honey.” He set the bags of food on the kitchen counter and pulled out two plates from the cabinet. “I see you started on the wine.”

“It’s delicious, too.”

He quickly made their plates, and they sat at the bar. He’d refilled her wineglass and poured one for himself. He held his glass out to her. “To a great vacation and spending time together.”

She tapped her glass with his. “To having fun for four whole days.” Her heart melted at his mention of spending time together. Mav was so incredibly sweet. He always knew just what to say.

They tucked into their food. After a second bite of shrimp, she said, “This is delicious. So much better than you can get in Austin.”

“Of course. It’s fresh off the boat. I love this little place that I went to. I go there every time I’m here.”

In the end, she couldn’t eat all that he’d brought her, but she sure put a big dent in it.

When they’d finished, he rinsed their plates and put them in the dishwasher.

“Why don’t you come watch TV in my room after you shower? Actually, you should try out that bathtub.”

“Are you bossing me around, mister?” she said with a grin.

“Hey, if that’s what it takes for you to relax, then I guess I am, woman.”

She laughed. “Yes, sir.”

It took a little while to fill the big tub, but, oh Lord, was it worth it. She eased down into it until only her head was above water. Sighing deeply, she closed her eyes and let the heat seep into her muscles.

Leaning her head back, she relaxed against the tub, thinking of Mav and how he thought of even the littlest things to please her. Was it possible that he cared for her in the way that she cared for him? Her thoughts wandered over the past month and to all the tender, sweet things he’d said and done. And then there was the way that he’d called her “honey” more and more frequently. Did those things add up to more than friendship?

Her heart leapt at the thought, and she felt heat rise to her cheeks. Maybe they did. Maybe Mav was attracted to her, cared for her as a woman. Cared for her in a way that had

nothing to do with friendship and everything to do with marriage.

Her heart started to pound, and she thrust this new possibility from her mind as a new realization suddenly came to her. Grabbing the shampoo, she lathered her hair and then rinsed it. It took only a few more minutes to wash herself, and then she was out and drying off.

When she entered his bedroom, the TV was on low, and Mav lay relaxed on the bed. He reached out to her in that sweet way of his, and her misgivings melted away. He did care for her, and she didn't care in what way. She settled down on his chest, sliding her leg over his.

He kissed the top of her head. "What are we watching tonight?"

"You pick. That bath relaxed the hell out of me. I'll probably fall asleep on you."

He chuckled. "Fair enough." He flipped through channels until he found an action movie. A loud, high-speed car chase filled the screen, and she yawned.

"You *are* sleepy, honey." He tightened his arm around her. "Just close your eyes. I've got you."

Sliding her arm around his waist, she drew herself closer. He kissed her forehead and sighed. The sound of the TV gradually faded, and the feeling of his strong body wrapped around hers became her world.



Jaz's eyes slowly opened on a pitch-black room. She still lay snuggled against Mav's chest. She'd fallen asleep, and he hadn't awakened her to go back to her own room. His deep, even breaths told her that he was sleeping heavily. His wonderful heart beat slowly. She couldn't risk waking him up by getting out of bed.

She sighed. Spending the night with Mav would be any woman's dream. If she was being honest, it was her dream. Yet, she couldn't stroke his face or sweep his lips with a gentle



kiss. Couldn't tell him how much she cared for him; for that was the truth she'd had to face that day. She wasn't his best friend anymore. Not in her heart. She was his lover, his mate, his everything. All in a flash it had become clear to her. As she'd considered whether Mav might care for her as a wife, she'd realized that she cared for him as her husband. She was caught in a mess that she didn't see a way out of.

She forced her panic down. She'd have to forget those feelings, continue being his best friend. Her calm gradually returned. She could do this.

Soon, Mav's slow, even breathing lulled her back to sleep.



# Chapter Thirteen



Mav slowly opened his eyes and looked out the window. It must be mid-morning, but it appeared to be overcast. He smiled at Jaz's sleep-tousled hair. She still slept soundly, cuddled against him. He loved watching her sleep. Her face was always relaxed and carefree. What would it be like to kiss her full lips? He'd had a taste of the sensation on their wedding day, and it had only whetted his appetite.

But he shouldn't be thinking this. Not only because Jaz was weak from her treatment, but because she didn't think of him romantically.

He sighed and looked out the window again. He loved being at the beach during the offseason. He needed this time to relax almost as much as Jaz did. His demanding job left little time for mental relaxation, and this was the perfect place to get in some of that.

Closing his eyes, he luxuriated in the feeling of Jaz's body pressing against his. It was such a simple pleasure, but it was one he cherished.

Her hand moved across his chest, and she lifted her head to look out the window. "Oh, it's late." She sat up. "I'm sorry I didn't go to my own room last night. I guess I fell asleep."

He brought her hand to his lips. "I'm not sorry. You were sleeping soundly. I'm glad you stayed."

She smiled. "Thanks. I feel better this morning. More rested and energetic. I think the sea's good for me." She patted his chest and got up, heading back to her room.

He rose, too, stretching and feeling amazing. Then he headed for the kitchen and a cup of coffee.

A few minutes later, armed with a hot brew, he stepped out onto the balcony. Seagulls soared by, their calls shrill in the wind whipping past him. He didn't mind the chill. He loved

looking down on the ocean like this. Tiny, white-capped waves washed up on shore, and the dark, gray-blue water met the far-off horizon. For once, there wasn't a ship in sight.

Jaz came up beside him, a brightly colored mug in her hand. She was wearing a coat. He briefly wished that he'd put one on, but he wasn't cold enough to leave and retrieve it. He put his arm around her instead, drawing her warmth close to him.

She leaned her head against him. "Thanks for bringing me here. I feel so much better already. It's good to be away from everything."

He kissed her forehead as a quiet joy filled him. A pelican glided by, ignoring them. He'd always thought they were the strangest-looking birds. "I'll go get breakfast in a little while. We'll eat sandwiches later for lunch from the stuff we brought. Then, this evening, do you want me to bring takeout for dinner, or would you like to go somewhere to eat?"

She glanced up at him. "Would you hate me if I choose takeout again? I feel like being a hermit."

"I could never hate you, silly. I'm glad to bring back food. We're here to relax, so if you want to stay in the whole time, that's what we'll do."

After a second cup of coffee, he left to find breakfast.

Jaz had brought a book to read and had settled comfortably on the couch.

While he headed for a place that served great breakfast tacos, he thought about how perky she looked this morning. This trip was turning out to be good for her. Waking up with her had made him more drawn to her than ever before. It had made him realize that he cared for her deeply as a woman. He hadn't felt this way since he'd loved his ex-wife.

It shook him to the core. This wasn't supposed to happen. It shouldn't have happened. Not when Jaz trusted him to be her friend. He thought over the ramifications of the situation as he pulled up to the little restaurant and went in to order.

When he returned, Jaz was still reading on the couch. She looked up, and that wonderful smile of hers lit up her face. It was a smile that had been infrequent for weeks now.

“You won’t believe how great these tacos are,” he told her, setting the food and plates out on the bar. “You’d better come eat before they’re all gone.”

She laughed. “You wouldn’t dare! Now that I have an appetite again, I’ll fight you for them.”

He laughed. “I brought several different kinds. You can pick your favorites.”

He chose two bacon, egg, and potato tacos for himself. “Better hurry, woman.”

“Glutton! You’re too fast for me.”

He grinned and opened the first one, adding spicy salsa to it. That was something else that was out of this world. The place made the best hot sauce.

Jaz chose two chorizo and egg tacos, another favorite of his, and added a liberal dose of salsa on top. After her first bite, she mumbled, “My God, these are delicious!”

“I told you,” he replied with a full mouth, trying not to laugh.

After breakfast, they headed out to the beach. This time, Jaz took a bowl to collect shells with. They both wore coats due to the chill breeze blowing and the overcast sky.

They walked at the water’s edge as the waves lashed against the shore. Jaz kept her eye out for shells, and he could tell that she was enjoying herself immensely.

He found himself lost in thought after his emotional discovery that morning. He was torn between acting on it and hiding his feelings, knowing that the latter was the right thing to do.

Jaz clasped his arm, then ran her hand up and down his bicep in a sweet caress. It was such an endearing thing that his heart swelled with joy. Somehow the caress filled a need in him, and he was deeply comforted. Tingles raced through him

at this new evidence that she might care deeply about him, too. His pulse sped up, and he put his arm around her, hugging her close to his side.

She smiled and closed her eyes.

He kissed her temple, secure in the fact that she enjoyed his nearness. Suddenly, he had hope.



After dinner, Jaz suggested that they play cards. “You said you know how to play spades, right?”

He headed for his bedroom to get the pack of cards. “I sure do. Better watch out, I’m an ace at cards.”

She laughed. “Already trying to psych me out, cowboy?”

“Just stating the facts, ma’am,” he said over his shoulder.

They played at the bar, and Mav had been right. He was damn good. It took all her skill to win against him. They each won several games before they’d had enough.

With a yawn, Mav slid the cards back into the box. “You’re a good opponent. That was fun.”

She grinned. “It was, wasn’t it? It’s been so long since I’ve played. I’m glad that we both like cards.”

“Shall we watch some TV for a while?”

Her pulse picked up. She loved snuggling with him, but she needed to hide her new-found feelings, too. “That sounds nice. I’m exhausted but not quite sleepy enough for bed yet.” Without more discussion, she followed him to his room.

Mav leaned against the pillows and flipped on the TV.

She crawled in beside him, and he slid his arm around her shoulders. It felt so natural to snuggle against his chest.

They eventually settled on a show, and Mav’s chest moved with a long sigh. He caressed her arm, and she realized that he enjoyed this closeness as much as she did.

Heart melting, she let her hand glide across his chest, the thin fabric of his T-shirt doing little to mask the solid muscles underneath.

He kissed the top of her head and rested his cheek there. She twined her fingers with his, and his breath caught. He gently squeezed her fingers.

A sudden, unbearable attraction swept her inhibitions away. She felt reckless—unwilling to do the right thing. Sliding her leg over his, she raised her knee to his crotch.

He sucked in a breath. “Jaz?”

She lifted her head, meeting his gaze. Then she deliberately caressed his face, running her thumb across his bottom lip.

He took her hand and kissed the palm. “Are you sure?”

She rose and brushed his lips with a soft kiss, her gaze never leaving his.

He smiled slowly. “Oh, honey, I’m glad.”

Her heart thrilled at his words.

He rolled her onto her back. “We’re going to take this slowly, okay?”

She nodded, too lost in his beautiful blue eyes to answer. He lifted her T-shirt, and she helped him take it off.

He stared lovingly down at her. “You’re so beautiful, honey.” His hand brushed against her breasts in a soft caress. Then he reached down and unbuttoned her jeans. She slid them off, leaving her small bikinis on. He ran his hand along the curve of her waist and rested it on her hip as his gaze traveled over her.

She tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, and he quickly shed it. Then his jeans followed. The bulge in his boxers told her that he was as attracted to her as she was to him. His muscular chest drew her eyes, and she ran her hand across it. A ripple of sensual pleasure swept through her.

He caught her hand, twining his fingers with hers. “I know you’re tired, Jaz. Are you sure you’re up for this tonight?”

The concern in his eyes touched her deeply, and the corner of her mouth lifted. “I don’t know if this is right or wrong, Mav, but God, how I want you.”

He cupped her face in his hand. “Sweetheart, I’ve dreamed of loving you. Now it’s real.”

She whispered, “Kiss me, cowboy.”

His pupils dilated, and he lowered his face to hers, his lips gentle as he swept a soft kiss across her mouth. A shiver ran through her. It was just as she’d imagined, tender and precious. He placed tiny kisses along her jaw until he found the deliciously sensitive spot behind her ear. His kiss there sent powerful waves of pleasure shooting through her.

She gasped and clutched at his back, feeling his muscles hard under her fingers.

He gently rolled her onto her side and unhooked her bra, slipping it off her shoulder.

She quickly took it off and tossed it at the foot of the bed.

His broad hand cupped her breast, and she sucked in a breath as his thumb rolled across her taut nipple. Although her heart sped in her chest, it was as though their loving progressed in slow motion. Every move had a special significance, a sweetness that sent warmth swirling deep inside her.

He took her nipple in his mouth, his tongue caressing it lovingly.

She moaned. It had been too long since she’d felt this way. Her body responded, desire a hot flame rising in her core. She ran her fingers through his hair as he moved to her other breast. “Mav, God, that feels good.” She felt him smile, but he didn’t stop.

He rose and kissed her again.

She clasped his face, kissing him back hard, unable to control her passion.



He chuckled breathlessly and pulled her over on top of him.

“Damn!” He rolled her off again and got up, returning a moment later and tossing a condom on the bedside table. With a chagrined smile, he said, “I didn’t exactly expect this to happen, sweetheart. I only have one with me.”

Mortified, she realized that she hadn’t thought of protection at all. Getting pregnant during chemo? What was wrong with her?

He reached for her panties, giving them a little tug, and she slid them down as he kicked his boxers off. His body was glorious in the soft glow of the bedside lamp.

“Come here,” he whispered, as he positioned her on top of him again.

He was hard underneath her, and she instantly grew wet.

Clasping her hips, he slid her slowly forward and back. The friction sent delicious shivers through her, and she smiled down at him. Tilting forward, she guided the friction to her sensitive spot and gasped at the raw pleasure of it.

Mav’s thick shaft rose at her reaction, and a low moan escaped him.

A moment later, he lifted her hips and moved her to his side. With a practiced move, he slid the condom on, then returned her to her back.

She smiled as he lowered his head toward her, her eyes meeting his and seeing the sweet tenderness in his gaze.

His kiss was deep and sensual, setting her on fire. He trailed his fingers across her breasts, then lowered them until he cupped her soft curls in his hand. Anticipation sent a ripple of pleasure through her.

He slid his finger inside her, and she sucked in a breath, the sensation going straight to her core. Taking her nipple in his mouth and caressing it with his tongue, he made her gasp at the erotic sensations flooding her body. His wet finger slid up to her sensitive spot, and she cried out as he touched it. His

fingertip made slow circles, the feeling almost more than she could bear.

Suddenly he kissed her, thrusting his tongue deep, mimicking the penetration he'd made her crave.

She reached for him. "Now, Mav! I want you inside me."

"I've got you, honey," he said, his breath almost a pant. He was obviously as desperate as she was.

He rose above her and gazed into her eyes.

She locked her legs around his waist, eager for him.

He moaned and entered her, slowly, an inch at a time.

She closed her eyes, the feel of him inside her, stretching her, filling her. It was incredible. "Oh God, Mav, yes." She opened her eyes. His were closed, his lips stretched in a fine line as if holding back were taking every bit of his self-control. She clasped his butt, pulling him close, and he let out his breath in a loud gust.

His eyes opened, and he thrust all the way in. "God, honey, you're perfect. You must know that."

She caressed his cheek, too overwhelmed for words, as he began his rhythm, slow and steady. His eyes stayed locked on hers, and she could see the tenderness, the deep passion and excitement filling him. It gave her a rush of emotions that swept her away, filled her so full that she had no words to describe the feeling.

She rose and kissed him as he thrust faster, his gaze intense as he began to lose himself in the pleasure her body gave him. His butt was hard muscle as she pulled him to her time and again, thrust after thrust. Wave after wave of pleasure washed through her. She lost track of time, of herself, of Mav. Only the center of sensation deep inside her mattered as it grew, swelled, and exploded in a fountain of pleasure.

Mav moaned. "Jaz, sweetheart." He thrust quickly once, twice more, then froze, head thrown back, for several moments.

Muscles frozen in pleasure's aftermath, she couldn't move, could barely breathe.

Mav lowered himself, sprawling beside her, his arm across her waist. She slowly relaxed, a long sigh escaping her.

"Jaz, that was wonderful. But are you okay? Was it too much for you?" He rose to his elbow, looking down on her.

She clasped his face in her hands. "I'm fine. In fact, I'm amazing. Thank you, Mav, for being such a sweet, tender lover." She brushed her fingertips across his brow. "I'll never forget tonight."

He brought her fingers to his lips. "Neither will I."

He headed for the bathroom and returned a few minutes later. "Would you like a glass of wine, or are you ready to go to sleep?"

"No thanks. I'll sleep like a baby now." She headed for the bathroom then, too.

When she came back, he said, "Stay with me tonight? I want to hold you while I fall asleep." Then he frowned. "Unless you think you won't be able to sleep well that way. Your rest is more important."

She got back into bed and slid under the covers. "I'd love to cuddle with you while we fall asleep." She scooted over next to him and smiled up at him. "Do you have any idea how much being with you like this means to me?"

His brows drew together. "Really?"

She caressed his chest. "You make me feel whole, safe, and so happy. Nothing scares me when I'm snuggled beside you in bed."

He wrapped his arms around her. "Then this is where you should always be, sweetheart. I'd love that. I sleep better when you're cuddled in my arms, too."

A sense of euphoria filled her, as though she was lighter than air. She refused to think of the future. Refused to consider what would happen when her treatment ended. Now was what was important.

She reached across him and switched off the lamp, and he wrapped his arms around her again. As she settled herself comfortably onto his chest, she said softly, “Thank you for making tonight so special, Mav.”

“Honey, you’re incredible. Making love with you was the most natural thing in the world.”

She smiled into the darkness and closed her eyes as he kissed her temple. Despite her earlier words, she sensed that it would be a while before she slept, although she was exhausted. Her mind would relive every tender, sensual moment of their lovemaking before she fell asleep in Mav’s embrace.



# Chapter Fourteen



Mav slipped quietly out of bed. At some point in the night, Jaz had turned over, leaving his embrace, so he was able to move without waking her. He glanced out the window at the dim light. It must be just after dawn. Why had he awakened so early?

As he put on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, he stared down at the beautiful woman in his bed. Her tousled hair against the pillow framed her face in a soft halo. She was his angel, his solace in a lonely life. How had he lived without her? He'd even considered himself happy before. He just hadn't known what he was missing, hadn't known what joy Jaz could bring to his life.

He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and walked silently from the bedroom.

After making a cup of coffee, he sat on the balcony where a stiff wind was blowing. This high up, there was a breeze even on hot days. Seagulls, always up with the dawn, flew below, diving and soaring, eyes scanning for anything that looked like food.

Glad of his jacket, he zipped it up against the cold fingers of the wind searching for his sleep-warmed body. The hot coffee felt good going down, warming him from the inside. The clouds from yesterday had fled, the dawn sky a clear blue-gray as the sun rose over the water. A solitary figure walked along the beach; someone certainly much braver than he felt at this time of day.

He still rode a sense of euphoria from making love with Jaz. Closing his eyes, he experienced their moment of release again, her beautiful face intense with pleasure, her body locked around his.

What if she still wanted a divorce when her treatment ended? How could he bear that now? He had no idea if last

night had meant the same thing to her that it had to him. Of course she'd enjoyed it; she'd made that clear. But did it mean anything more than casual sex to her? God, he wished he knew how she felt.

One thing was sure. He wouldn't take advantage of her. He'd read how people facing death often needed affirmation of life through sex. Well, he'd help her with that any time she needed him to, but he wouldn't force himself on her.

His heart fell at the thought of holding back, but he hardened his resolve as he took another long swallow of his coffee. He'd be whatever she needed, whenever she needed him.

A pelican rose on an updraft and flew within feet of the balcony. Their gazes met for a brief second, and he smiled at the bird's nonchalant attitude toward him.

He felt himself slowly relax, surrounded by the natural world as the sun rose higher in the sky. Several more figures appeared on the beach.

The French door opened, and Jaz came out wearing her coat and carrying a blanket and a cup of coffee. "You got up early," she said. "I turned over and you were gone." She sat down beside him and wrapped the blanket around her waist, covering her legs.

He reached for her hand. "I don't know why I woke up, but I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. My mind was racing at a hundred miles an hour."

"It was?" She took a swallow of her coffee. "Oh God, that's good."

"It's taken this beautiful morning to make me relax." He brought her fingers to his lips. "Isn't this view amazing?"

She smiled and looked into his eyes. "It is, and you are. I was thinking of last night when I woke up."

His mouth tensed. "Me, too. A lot." He looked down at their hands and then back up. "Listen, I don't want you to feel any pressure."

Her eyes narrowed, and he could see a question in them. He hurried to reassure her. “I mean, I loved last night, but I want you to feel comfortable about where this goes, okay?”

Her face relaxed. “Oh, okay. Thanks, Mav.” She looked past the railing and took another sip from her mug, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

What was she thinking? Then he forced himself to relax again. Squeezing her fingers, he looked out over the sea. He wouldn’t worry about the future. Jaz would take this where she willed, and he’d follow. Her happiness would be his happiness. That was the way it was when you loved someone, right?



That night, Mav glanced across the table at Jaz as she took a sip of wine. She looked beautiful. It was their last day in Port Aransas, and she’d asked to go out to dinner. The place wasn’t fancy, but she’d wanted to try his favorite seafood restaurant. The fish was fresh and local, and, in his opinion, the best in town.

“You’ll love your redfish, Jaz. I’ve eaten it quite a few times and really enjoyed it.” He took a long swallow of his beer. She wore a pretty red sweater and a pair of jeans, and looked fresh-faced and gorgeous in the soft light. He liked that she didn’t pile on the makeup. Her classic features didn’t need much help, and she seemed to know that.

“I’m looking forward to it. I can’t say that I’ve eaten redfish before.” Her brows drew together. “Well, maybe once. I love fresh shrimp so much that I usually stick with that when I’m down here.”

The waitress brought them house salads and they began to eat.

He glanced across the table, hardly able to take his eyes off her. He found her incredibly appealing tonight. He had no idea what to expect when they arrived home tomorrow. Would things go back to the way they were before, or would they



share a bed going forward? God, he hoped so—but he wouldn't push it.

He'd barely finished his salad when the waitress brought out their entrées. He'd ordered a seafood combination platter, one of his favorites.

“Oh, this looks amazing.” Jaz looked over at him as she picked up her knife. “I'm glad you suggested it.”

“Eat up. You won't regret it.” He carved out a bite of trout smothered in butter sauce and popped it into his mouth.

The food was too good to talk much, but they kept up a sporadic conversation as they ate. He smiled from time to time at Jaz's enthusiasm for her meal. They soon drank all their wine, and he ordered more.

By the time they'd finished eating, she looked sated and completely relaxed. She leaned back in her chair. “Lord, that was good. I'll have to remember this place. It's fabulous.”

He took a last swallow of wine and sighed deeply, full now and happy that she'd enjoyed her meal so much. “I come here at least once every time I'm in town.” He fished out his wallet as the spatter of rain sounded on the large window beside their table. “I guess that storm finally got here. I should have packed umbrellas before we left home. I didn't think about it.”

“At least we have our jackets.” She stared out the window as lightning lit up the sky.

“Let's get out of here before it really starts coming down.” He signaled the waitress and quickly paid their tab.

She waited while he brought the truck around and he practically lifted her into the passenger seat. He was surprised at how light she was.

Still, she'd gotten wet, and he could see her shivering as he drove home. He mentally kicked himself. Going out in the rain was the last thing she should have been doing in her weakened condition. What had he been thinking? He should have gotten takeout.

He dropped her off at the condo entrance, and she ran to the door through a cold downpour. His guilt was a dead weight on his shoulders. If she got sick, he'd never forgive himself.

As soon as he walked in the door, he turned on the heat in the condo and said, "I'm starting you a hot bath. I want you to soak in it until you're warmed through."

She nodded, her teeth still chattering.

He wrapped her in a hug, holding her tight. "I'm so sorry, honey. We shouldn't have gone out tonight. Come on." He led her toward the bathroom, noting that her neckline was soaked through. *Damn!* She must be freezing.

He started the bath, making it as hot as he thought she could stand, while she undressed in the bedroom. Grabbing a towel, he walked into the room, wrapping her in it as she slipped out of her panties. "Let's go, sweetheart. I've got the heater going in there."

He put his arm around her and felt her vulnerability once again. Inside the slowly warming bathroom, he held her in his arms for a moment. "You take your time and relax. You need this."

"Thanks, Mav. I'm sure I'll be fine in a little while."

He hoped so. "I'll see you when you're done." Leaving her was hard, although he knew he didn't need to stay by her side while she bathed. That was silly. He just desperately wanted her to be okay.

In his own room, he stripped and then took a quick hot shower. In less than ten minutes, he was dressed in clean sweats and toweling off his hair. He kicked up the heat another notch, hoping to have the place toasty warm when Jaz finally came out of her bath.

Then he poured three fingers of bourbon into a glass and sat at the bar. He hadn't thought to bring any kind of cold medicine. Hopefully, Jaz wouldn't need it. That hot bath should ward off any deep chill that could cause her to get sick.

It wasn't nine yet, but he wanted her to get to bed early. Resting after a chill would be the best thing for her. He wished

he'd brought tea bags. Some hot tea to warm up her insides would have been nice.

Sighing, he closed his eyes. Worry had tightened his forehead and he rubbed it, smoothing out the tiny, knotted muscles.

Taking a long swallow of the mellow liquor, he savored the flavor, glad he'd brought it along. He exhaled a long breath, letting tension flow out of him. Jaz would most likely be fine. He'd probably gone into panic mode for nothing.

He took another sip. He couldn't help worrying, though. When he thought of something happening to her, an uncontrollable anxiety took hold of him, and he found himself flailing about for ways to make her better. He hardly recognized himself at times like that.

Focusing on inner peace, he took small sips from his glass, intentionally relaxing as he waited for Jaz to appear.

In the morning, they'd pack their bags. Checkout was at eleven, and they'd grab something to eat before heading back to Austin. More than anything, he didn't want to spoil the good the trip had done Jaz by rushing around tomorrow. There was no need to hurry back.

He'd finished his drink and was standing at the French doors looking out at the storm when Jaz walked up beside him. He put his arm around her shoulders. "Feel better?"

She snuggled close, her head pressed against his chest. "I'm warm now. That tub is fabulous. And it's nice in here. What's the heat set on?"

He chuckled. "Ninety or something. When you're sure you're warm enough, I'll turn it down some."

"I'm fine for now, but I guess we should lower it when we go to bed, huh?"

He kissed the top of her head, glad that she sounded so good. "I'll do that."

A moment later, he asked, "Want some bourbon? It should warm you up."

“That sounds good. Just a little bit, though.”

He went into the kitchen and poured a small amount into a glass.

She sat down at the bar, pulling her robe over her legs as he handed her the glass. “Thanks.”

He poured a bit more into his own glass and sat beside her. “Let’s turn in early. I’m worried because you got chilled.”

After taking a sip from her glass, she nodded. “Sounds good to me—although I feel okay.” She patted his hand. “You worry too much.”

He clasped her fingers. “Your immune system is compromised. We need to be careful.”

She looked at him with a tender expression. “Mav, thanks for caring so much. You don’t know what it means to me.”

Her hair was still slightly damp, although she’d made an attempt to dry it. He brushed a stray lock back from her face. “Of course I care, honey.” He took the last swallow from his glass.

A moment later, she did the same and rose from her chair. “What should I put the thermostat on?”

“How about eighty? It’s cold outside, and I don’t expect it’ll warm up much before morning,” he said.

He put their glasses in the sink and followed her down the hall.

She turned into his bedroom’s open doorway, and he sighed in relief. He’d hoped she’d spend the night with him again. And he was prepared for anything this time. While she’d taken a nap, he’d gone into town and bought a box of condoms. He wouldn’t instigate lovemaking, however. He wanted her to rest, but he’d follow her lead.

Jaz quickly stripped off her robe and climbed into bed.

He slid in beside her and took her into his arms.

“These covers are cold,” she said through tight lips.

“I’ll warm you up,” he said as he rubbed her upper arms and back.

“Mm, that feels good.”

He felt a shiver run through her.

After a few seconds, she rose and looked into his eyes. Warm flickers of passion danced within hers as she lowered her lips to his. The slow, sensual kiss became something more—urgent, deep—and a whimper escaped her. His hands encircled her waist, and he rolled her onto her back.

She looked up at him, her pupils large and dark, and a wave of tenderness overtook him. She was so beautiful, so special. How did he deserve her?

He caressed her cheek, her skin velvet-soft. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing faster than normal, and he sensed her arousal growing. He whispered, “Baby don’t worry. I’ve got you.” Then he tugged at the short nightie she wore, and she quickly took it off.

She slipped out of her panties as he kicked off his boxers, then smiled as he lowered his lips to her breast, taking it in his mouth and caressing her nipple with his tongue.

“Mav,” she whispered, arching toward him. He hummed his satisfaction, loving the fact that he could make her feel this good. She sighed when he moved to her other breast, her hands clasping his head.

When he moved lower, planting tiny kisses down the middle of her belly, she sucked in a breath. Did it tickle, or was she anticipating what he was planning?

He moved lower, pausing at her curls.

She whimpered again, and he smiled. She wanted more.

He settled between her legs, and she tensed, then opened her thighs for him at his gentle nudging.

She cried out as he found her sensitive spot with his tongue. He circled it round and round, and she moaned her need. Her hands on his head were almost frantic now.

He teased her with strokes of his tongue, and she sucked in a deep breath, so intent on him that her eyes were squeezed shut. God, he loved making her feel this way.

Pleasing her aroused him, and he was hard, pulsing. A moment later, she jerked and gasped, and he knew she was there.

He rose, but before he could do more, she rolled onto her hands and knees. His heart, already thudding in his chest, began to pound. He clasped her hips in his hands, his heart racing, then remembered the condom. In seconds, he had it on, then slowly eased into her hot depths.

She shoved her hips toward him, taking the last inch of him, and he groaned, the feeling so intense he almost came.

Her long hair hung down, sprawling over the pillow. Its wildness aroused him. Her face showed the same abandon when she glanced back at him. "Hurry, Mav!"

He pulled out and thrust in hard, then did it again, beginning his rhythm.

She tilted her hips, giving him perfect access to her depths.

He threw back his head, pounding against her as she moaned her pleasure with every thrust. His passion grew, mounting like flowing lava, the heat burning up from his core. His muscles clenched with the fury of his thrusts as raw ecstasy overwhelmed his senses. He cried, "Jaz!" and froze, his body clenched like a statue, everything but her driven from his mind.

She pulsed around him still, and he stayed with her until her body finally quieted. She sighed, and he lay down on his side, pulling her close against him. She stroked his thigh, seeming moved beyond words.

He kissed her temple and brushed her hair back from her cheek. Then he drew the covers up over them.

She tugged them over her shoulders and snuggled closer to him.

After a while, he said, "Are you warmed up?"

She nodded. “You’re an amazing lover, honey.”

His heart leapt. She’d called him “honey”! “Thanks. You inspire me.”

She chuckled and then sighed deeply, seeming completely satisfied.

He kissed her temple again. “I’ll be right back.” He got out of bed, disturbing the covers as little as possible, and jogged to the bathroom. He returned a few minutes later, and said, “Do you need to go?”

She sighed softly. “Yes, but I hate to get out of this warm bed.”

“Here, I’ve got your robe. Climb out on this side, and I’ll help you put it on.”

She did it quickly and then disappeared down the hall. When she returned a few minutes later, she all but dove into bed. “It sure doesn’t feel like eighty degrees in this house. I wonder how cold it is outside?”

He picked up his phone and checked. “Wow, it’s forty-two degrees, and the wind’s howling. No wonder it’s cold.”

She snuggled against him, and he wrapped his arms around her. After turning off the bedside lamp, he said, “Feeling tired, honey?”

She breathed out a soft breath. “I’m perfect, Mav. I don’t have words to tell you how I feel. All I can say is it’s wonderful.” She kissed his chest, her lips velvety-soft, and then she encircled his waist with her arm, tugging him closer to her.

His heart felt so full he could barely breathe. “Goodnight, sweetheart. I hope you have happy dreams.”

“I’ll dream of you,” she whispered.

He kissed the top of her head. “I’ll dream of you, too,” he said softly. Too emotional to say more, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the beauty of the moment, of holding the woman he loved in his arms as he drifted off to sleep.





# Chapter Fifteen



A week after starting her treatments again, Jaz crawled into bed as soon as she got home from work. She was constantly nauseated, although thankfully not enough to throw up. Yet it was still bad enough that it robbed her of any interest in food. Thank goodness she had the anti-nausea medication, though. She hated to think how bad she'd feel if she didn't.

Despite that downside, she was incredibly happy. She shared Mav's bed every night, and falling asleep in his arms was something she craved. She thought about it all day and dreamed of Mav constantly. They made love every night, unless Mav deemed her too exhausted. He was so darn protective of her. Then he'd rub her back until she fell asleep. She still didn't know what she'd ever done to deserve him.

That was the rub. She *must* make sure that she didn't take advantage of him. For that reason, she kept her true feelings hidden. Of course, he couldn't help but know that she cared for him; and that was fine. But he couldn't know that she loved him. She was sure that if he ever found out, he'd feel like he had to do something about it, and there was no way she was going to let him sacrifice himself for her. Mav deserved better than that. He should fall in love with a woman of his own choosing—do marriage the right way. Staying with her out of some sense of obligation was something she'd never let him do.

No, she had to keep things casual for his sake. But that hurt terribly. Every time they made love, she wanted to cry out her feelings for him; tell him that she loved him with every fiber of her being. He looked at her with such tenderness in his eyes that she was sure he felt the same way.

Then she'd force herself back to reality. That tenderness was for his best friend. He was just taking care of her while she was sick. That's who Mav was. Nothing they did meant

that he loved her. Mav was the kindest man she'd ever known, and she wasn't about to take advantage of him.

If sharing herself with him made him happy, then she'd continue to do that. But tying him to her? No. That wasn't going to happen.

Exhausted, she turned onto her side as tears leaked from her eyes.

Working her forty hours each week was getting harder and harder. She tucked the other pillow to her stomach and closed her eyes. She still had to pay her bills. No way could she lose her apartment, because soon she'd be moving back into it. Her doctor had hoped that three, or possibly four, rounds of chemo would be sufficient to treat her lymphoma. Although there was a small chance that she might need radiation afterward, she chose not to think about that yet.

Eventually she must have drifted off to sleep, because suddenly she heard Mav calling, "Jaz, I'm home!"

She rose and hurried to the living room. Smiling, she held out her arms, and he pulled her into a hug. She asked, "How was your day?"

"Well, it's a lot better now that I'm home." He drew back, and his eyes raked over her. "How are you? Did you take a nap?"

She felt suddenly guilty. "I fell asleep. I haven't started dinner."

He frowned and shook his head. "How many times have I told you not to cook? That I'd get takeout or cook when I get home? I don't want you tiring yourself out."

He dropped his briefcase by the recliner and put his arm around her shoulders. "Let's see what I can find in the kitchen. It may be time for me to make another grocery run."

Again, she felt guilty. Buying groceries was another thing he insisted on doing. Not only paying for them, but actually going to the store. "Mav, I feel so useless around here. You do everything."

He kissed her temple. “And that’s the way it’s going to be until you finish your treatments and get your strength back.” He grinned. “Better get used to it, honey.”

She couldn’t help but smile back. He was so damned adorable when he smiled like that.

He opened the fridge door and rummaged inside. “I can make dinner tonight, but we need to make a list. How about you write while I tell you what we need?”

“Okay.” She grabbed the magnetic notepad from the door and the pen that hung there. “Ready.”

He began pulling dinner ingredients from the fridge as he told her what he wanted from the store. Then he pulled out a longneck and popped the top off, taking a long swallow. “Mmm. That’s good. Want one?”

How could he be so cheerful and energetic at this time of day? “No thanks, but you enjoy.”

He chuckled. “More for me!” Then he went back to their list as he retrieved a pot from under the cabinet.

Suddenly he turned around, clasped her face in both hands, and planted a quick kiss on her lips.

Taken by surprise, she laughed. “What was that for?”

He grinned. “Because I’m happy. I love coming home to you when I get off work.”

Suddenly she didn’t care about the future or what it held for them. Now was too wonderful. She closed her eyes. *Thank you, God, for this time, for Mav. Just help me be strong enough to leave him when it’s time.*



Days later, Mav studied Jaz’s face across the dinner table. He’d stopped for Italian food on the way home. It was the end of week two of her second round of treatment, and she didn’t look good. She appeared exhausted, and, so far, she’d only taken a few bites of her food while he was almost done with his.

He'd brought a different kind of food home every night this week, hoping to find something that tempted her appetite. His strategy hadn't been very successful. Her mild nausea took the edge off her will to eat, although she tried hard to get some food down. She dutifully took bites, but the look on her face each time told him how unpalatable everything was for her.

"Honey, won't you please consider taking a leave of absence from work? You can't keep on like this." His pleading tone brought a worried look to her face.

"Mav, I'm sorry. I just can't do that. I've got to pay my bills." When he began to argue, she held up a hand. "I know, I know, you want to help me financially, but I don't want you to do that. You're doing so much for me already. I just can't accept any more."

"Jaz, you can call it a loan and pay it back a little at a time. I don't care as long as you take time off."

She shook her head. "I won't be able to pay it back very easily. This is just the way it has to be." She reached for his hand. "Mav, please try not to worry. People go through chemo all the time."

With barely contained frustration, he said, "Not working full time at such a physically demanding job. Not everybody does that, Jaz. Come on, be reasonable."

She sighed and slowly added food to her fork. "Let's not argue, please, Mav."

He closed his eyes. She was right. This was going nowhere and was only making her feel worse. "Okay. I can see you won't change your mind." The corner of his mouth lifted. "But I'm still going to worry."

She chuckled. "I don't expect anything less of you."

They did the dishes together and, after their showers, went to bed early in his room. They were watching an English MI6 spy series that they were both enjoying. However, halfway through the first episode, he noticed her eyes drooping. It wasn't even eight o'clock yet. He tightened his arm around her and began caressing her arm the way she loved.

She sighed, and her eyes closed. He kissed the top of her head, an aching tenderness sweeping through him. Soon her slow, steady breaths told him that she slept.

He turned off the TV and, in the sudden dark, closed his eyes, content to find his own way to dreamland with her in his arms. Quiet joy rippled through his chest as he considered that he could be with her like this every night. He stubbornly refused to consider her wish to divorce him. He'd find a way around that. He couldn't—*wouldn't*—lose her. Not now. Not ever.



Two days later, Mav looked across the break-room table at Mark. “Tell me again why you don’t drink coffee in the afternoon? I can’t function without it, myself.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “You don’t eat right, bro. That’s your problem. It’s 12:30 p.m., and look at you adding more caffeine to your system. I won’t do that to myself. A little in the morning, and that’s it for me. I eat healthy, and my body shows it. It’s good to me because I take care of it.”

Mav grinned. He loved baiting his friend. “So, what? I look like a slob?”

Mark grimaced. “Unfortunately for my theory, you don’t, and you know it. But just because you look great on the outside doesn’t mean you’re good on the inside, man. I’d be glad to tell you what you can do to clean up that system of yours.”

Mav raised a hand. “Some other time. I don’t think I’m up to a lecture on healthy eating right now. I just ate, and I don’t want to get sick.”

Mark laughed. “You’re awful.”

Mav’s phone rang. It was a number he didn’t recognize. “Mav Decker.”

“Uh, hi, this is Todd Hendrick, Jaz’s boss? You’re her husband, aren’t you?”

Mav's heart exploded into a gallop. He fired back, "Yes, what's happened?"

"Jaz is in my office. She fainted a few minutes ago, and she wouldn't let me call an ambulance. I think you should come get her."

"I'll be right there. Tell her I'm on my way." Feeling suddenly lightheaded, he rose from his chair.

Mark stood up too. "What's wrong?"

"It's Jaz. She fainted at work. Would you let the captain know that I'm taking the rest of the day off and why?"

"Of course. You just go."

Mav raced to his desk for his keys and was out of the building in seconds. He should have known that this was coming. She hadn't eaten enough to keep a small child going in weeks. Something had to change, and he wasn't taking no for an answer. Not this time.

His thoughts spun in circles as he drove to the café. What could he say to convince her that she had to quit work? He knew that she'd be stubborn about it, despite what had just happened.

When he arrived, he shoved the door open.

A man who must be Hendrick rushed over to him. "Follow me. She's through here."

They went behind the counter and through the double steel doors into the back. Hendrick led him to a closed door on the right.

Inside, Jaz sat opposite a desk. Her head was down, her eyes closed.

She turned when he said, "I'm here, honey. Let's go home." Her face was drawn into tired lines at the corners of her mouth, and she was as pale as he'd ever seen her. "Can you walk, or should I carry you?"

She frowned. "God, don't carry me. Just put your arm around my waist. I'll be fine."

He helped her stand and felt her wobble. *Dammit!* He put his arm around her, taking most of her weight, and walked her down the hall and through the café. Jaz kept her eyes down, focusing on her feet.

He lifted her into the truck, and she leaned against the back of the seat, closing her eyes with a deep sigh. “Thanks, Mav. I appreciate the help.”

“Oh, honey,” was all he could say. His mind was too jumbled up with what he wanted her to do and what he might be able to say that would change her mind about working.

It was a quiet ride home.

This time he didn’t ask. He carried her into the house, and she didn’t complain. He took her straight to her bedroom and laid her on the bed. Before she could move, he took her shoes off and then her jeans.

She helped some, then waited as he unbuttoned her shirt and cuffs. “Mav—”

“Shh.” He lifted her shoulders and took her shirt off, then unhooked her bra and slid it off her shoulders. After looking into a couple of drawers, he returned with a nightie and helped her put it on. Then he covered her with the sheet and comforter.

Satisfied, he brushed her hair back from her face and sat on the edge of the bed. With a stern look, he said, “This won’t happen again. You’re taking off work. Now.”

She frowned and opened her mouth to speak.

He held up a finger. “I won’t accept any objections, Jaz. You could have hit your head when you fainted and been seriously injured. This has gone far enough. I mean it.”

Her eyes began to tear, and he slipped his arms underneath her, pulling her to his chest. “Honey, I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you. Don’t you understand that?”

He felt her nod.

“Please, please, don’t go back to work.”

After a moment she whispered. "I have to."

His heart fell. What more could he do? She was a grown woman. He couldn't prevent her from going.

Then she said, "But I'll ask if I can work part-time. Just three days a week."

He ran his fingers through her hair and thought about that. It was better than a full five days. It was probably the best that he could get from her. "All right. Why don't you call now? Strike while the iron's hot."

She chuckled. "You just don't quit, do you?"

"Nope." He handed her purse to her.

She took out her phone and put in a call to her boss.

Mav listened as Todd readily agreed to her going part-time during her treatment. He said that he'd work on her schedule and that she should take the rest of the week off to rest. He then added that she should plan on returning on Monday.

Mav gave her a high five. "I have to admit that you've got a great boss. I didn't expect him to give you the rest of the week off. What a nice guy."

Jaz dropped her phone on the bed with a sigh. "He really is. I'm lucky to have him."

Mav clasped her hand and met her gaze. "There's just one more thing, and I don't want you to argue. I'm going to supplement your income for what you're losing out on. You can call it a loan if you absolutely have to, even though I'd rather just give the money to you."

She bit her lip and closed her eyes.

She looked so vulnerable it broke his heart.

Then she nodded. "Thanks, Mav. I'd appreciate that. I've got to keep my apartment. It won't be long before I move back into it."

His heart wrenched, and he sucked in a breath. He looked into her eyes to see if that idea bothered her at all. Her



expression was resolute—calm, even. God, maybe it *didn't* bother her.

“I’m going to bring you some soup and crackers, and I want you to eat them. Okay?” He stood up and waited for her to answer.

She nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

While he was heating the chicken noodle soup, he wondered at her response. Did she really not care about leaving him? It killed him to even think about it. The idea of their future divorce was so painful he thrust it from his mind every time he thought about it.

A few minutes later, he returned to her room with her tray.

Her eyes were closed. Surely she hadn’t fallen asleep so quickly?

He said quietly, “I’ve got your soup ready.”

She slowly opened her eyes and nodded. “Thanks.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and decided to feed her himself, not trusting her to eat much on her own. After setting the tray on her lap, he took a spoonful of broth and noodles and raised it to her lips.

She gave him a half smile. “What am I, a baby?”

“Hey, I’m allowed to baby you when you’re sick, woman.”

She laughed. “Okay, okay. I’ll let you have your way.”

He fed her spoonful after spoonful, even when it became obvious that she wasn’t interested. She needed her strength. Finally, he took pity on her and put the spoon down. “You’ve had enough, I think.”

She grimaced. “A while ago, mister.”

He chuckled. “Thanks for cooperating.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Sure. Thanks for feeding me, cowboy.”

He stood and picked up the tray. “Why don’t you lay back and try to sleep? I’ll leave the door open in case you need anything.”

“Thanks. A nap sounds good.”

He returned to the kitchen and rinsed the bowl, putting it into the dishwasher. He couldn’t lose her. She had to eat, and she had to rest. Working less was a start, but he didn’t think that was enough to turn her around.

And that reference of hers to leaving him filled him with dread. How could he go on without her? Yet he couldn’t make her feel beholden to him because he’d helped her. She had to stay because she wanted to. Because she cared deeply for him.

He walked into the living room and gazed blankly around. If she left, how could he bear to live in this empty house alone?



## Chapter Sixteen



Jaz flipped on the TV and propped herself up with her pillows. It was the middle of her third week of treatment, and Mav was out of town. She missed him terribly, her nights so lonely she barely slept.

Mav had left her fresh, prepared meals from the grocery store, and she'd promised him that she'd try really hard to eat them. She'd heated one in the oven again this evening and had forced herself to finish most of it.

This was the fourth night since Mav had given her a kiss goodbye, and she felt stretched to the limit, unable to make it until he returned home. He texted her throughout the day and called every night, but that wasn't nearly enough. Only having his arms around her would assuage this need she felt.

She threw her arm across her eyes. How would she ever stand it when she moved back to her own place? It was too terrible to contemplate.

Her phone rang. It was Mav. Tears sprang to her eyes for no reason other than that she was so relieved.

"Hey, Mav. How are you?" She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Instantly, he asked, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

She felt guilty for worrying him. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just glad to hear your voice."

Voice gentle, he said, "Honey, I'm glad to hear you, too. I missed you today, like I do every time I'm gone."

Was he just saying that to make her feel better? She sniffed again. He'd do that. That was the kind of man he was. "So, how was your day?" She needed to get off this sad track. He didn't need to be upset when he called her.

“Busy. Crazy, really.” He went on to tell her in more detail, and she closed her eyes, losing herself in the sound of his deep voice and in the way he spoke about his job. It was obvious that he loved his work.

“So, how was your day?” he asked.

She’d worked and was deeply exhausted. “Just a regular day. It was busy, and I was glad to get home.”

“You doing okay? Did you eat your dinner?”

She smiled. She could have bet a million dollars that he’d ask that and won. “I’m fine and already in bed—and, yes, I ate all but a few bites of my dinner. It was the baked pork chop one, and it was really good.”

She heard him breathe a deep sigh of relief.

“Good. I’ll get that one more often, then.” He was quiet for a moment. “I wish I was there, Jaz. I really do miss you.”

Warmth swept through her. Maybe he really did mean it for the reason she hoped. “I wish you were here, too.”

“I think one more day here is all I’ll need. I might be able to leave tomorrow afternoon. We’ll see. If not, the next day for sure.”

She was so relieved she almost couldn’t speak. “Really?”

“I think so. We made some real progress today.”

“Just let me know. I’ll cook dinner.”

“Don’t you dare, woman.” His tone was teasing, but she figured he really meant it.

“Damn. Okay, meanie.”

He laughed. “All I want you to do when you’re not working is rest. Remember that.”

She sighed. “God, I miss you.”

“Oh, honey.”

She imagined him running his fingers through his hair like he did when he was thinking. Then he began to talk. After a few minutes she realized that he was just doing it for her

benefit, so that he wouldn't have to say goodbye. She blinked back tears. What an incredible man. She sniffed again.

He stopped midsentence. "Are you crying, sweetheart?"

*Damn.* "I'm fine. I'm just so thankful. You're amazing, Mav, and I don't deserve you."

"The hell you don't," he said firmly. "You deserve the best this world has to offer, and don't you forget it." He paused. "Honey, I want you to believe me on that."

Her heart melted. When he called her "honey" or "sweetheart", it turned her insides to mush. She wiped her eyes. "Thank you. I can't express what having you in my life means to me."

A few minutes later, he said goodnight. A terrible emptiness filled her again.

God, her life would be like this when she went back home. Her tears returned then, and wild sobs racked her body.



Mav tucked his shirt into his Wranglers, excited about Jaz's test results. She'd completed her second full round of treatment, and her doctor had run a PET-CT scan and blood work. Her lymphoma was responding well to the treatment.

A few minutes later, Mav walked into the living room. To celebrate the good news, they were going out to dinner and a movie. Jaz felt that she was up to it, so he'd gone along with her plans. She'd chosen a love story for the movie and Chinese food for dinner.

She came out a couple of minutes later, and he smiled in appreciation. She wore a black, mid-thigh-length dress with sheer long sleeves. Her legs had delectable curves.

"You look fabulous."

"Thanks, Mav."

She had a black dress coat draped over her arm, and he helped her put it on.

Later, at the restaurant, she surprised him by eating all of her meal. She seemed excited for the first time in a long time.

“Jaz, I’m glad to see you so happy tonight,” he told her.

She smiled at him as she laid her fork across her plate. “I do feel happy. I guess because I’m two-thirds done with my treatment, and I’m doing so well. At least, I hope I only have one more round to go.” She took a sip of her Coke and sighed. “Of course, I have to be realistic. I won’t know for sure until the next tests are run, but tonight? I feel great about my chances.”

He reached across the table and clasped her hand. “I do, too, honey. You’re going to be just fine.”

During the movie, she snuggled against him. He tucked her close, the smell of her perfume intoxicating. The movie didn’t really interest him, but he tried to pay attention for her sake. During the sad part when it seemed that the lovers would lose each other, he heard her sniff. Smiling, he kissed her temple, glad that she was so deeply immersed in the movie.

Of course, the lovers ended up together with their happily ever after. As the credits rolled, he led her out of the darkened theater.

“Wasn’t that a great movie?” she asked excitedly as they headed down the hall to the lobby.

“It sure was. What a good ending.”

“Oh, it was. I’m so glad we came tonight,” she said.

The evening was a total success. Now he just had to get her home so she could rest. At least she hadn’t worked today.

On the drive home, she talked about her favorite parts of the movie. He spoke up in all the right places, and she seemed satisfied that he’d enjoyed himself, too.

When they walked into the house, instead of going to her room to change, she turned and threw her arms around his neck. “Mav, thanks for a wonderful evening.” Then she kissed him, a long, slow kiss that made him hard in an instant.

“Well, if that’s my thank-you, I’ll take you out more often.” His lips still tingled as she laughed and headed for her room.

He took off his clothes and slipped into bed, anxious for her to join him.

She came in a few minutes later and slid into bed beside him. Instead of snuggling onto his chest, though, she straddled his hips, a mischievous smile on her face. “I’m making love to *you* tonight, cowboy.”

“Huh?” This was completely unexpected. She should be exhausted after their big evening.

“You heard me.”

Then he took a good look at what she was wearing, and his jaw went slack. Her sheer black nightie left little to the imagination. He also realized she wasn’t wearing panties.

*Damn!*

He clasped her hips, his heart beginning to pound. “Jaz, are you up to this?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Will you quit asking me that?”

“Sorry. How about, ‘I’m all yours.’”

She laughed. “That’s much better.”

She leaned down and kissed him, her tongue tracing his bottom lip. It felt so sensual that he shivered in reaction. She slipped her tongue into his mouth, stroking his cheek, then sucking on his tongue.

God, he’d never imagined she could be like this. He moaned and ran his hands up her back.

She kissed the tip of his nose and each cheekbone, then clasped his face in her hands. Her pupils were dilated, and she said softly, “You’re mine, and I’ll do what I want with you.”

This was just like one of his fantasies. He whispered, “Give it your best shot.”

She slid down and took his nipple in her mouth. He gasped, the sheer pleasure of it taking him by surprise. She



stroked it with her tongue, and a shock of desire shot through him. He cupped her butt in his palms, and it fit perfectly. She moved to the other side and teased his other nipple. He was more prepared this time, yet still he gasped. God, she felt good.

He ran his fingers through her hair, loving how easily the silken strands slipped through his hands.

Jaz slid off him and settled at his side.

He was intrigued: what would she do now? His breaths came quickly, she'd aroused him so much. Her hand trailed down his belly, and his muscles tensed.

Then she touched his hard length. She held him tightly, and he moaned. She stroked him slowly up and down, and he gritted his teeth, the sensation so overpoweringly sensual that he worried he might come. Her hand moved faster, and he bit his lip to keep from crying out.

He whispered, "Baby, be careful."

He heard a low chuckle, and her hand continued its up-and-down motion. God, he couldn't take much more.

Suddenly she stopped, and he sucked in a breath. Then, a second later, her hot mouth enclosed him, sinking down and down until she took as much of him as she could.

"Honey, Jaz, you feel amazing." He felt suspended in time, waiting for her next move.

She rose, her lips tight around him, then descended again.

His hands found her head, and he clasped her gently, needing the connection. Every outside stimulus disappeared. Only her mouth remained. His focus narrowed, and he thrilled at the gift she was giving him. Watching her move on him aroused him—and yet sent such a wave of tenderness through him that it took his breath away. She was thanking him in her own way, and it touched him to the core.

He sucked in a breath as she quickened her motion. He was so close. Too close. He tugged on her shoulders, but she resisted. "Jaz, honey, stop." He pulled again. "Stop, please."

She sat up, her eyes questioning.

He reached for a condom from the drawer in the nightstand. “I want you, honey. Is that okay?”

She sat back on her heels. “Whatever pleases you, sweetheart.”

His heart leapt. She very seldom used an endearment, and it went straight to his heart.

He quickly slid the condom on. “Tell me how I can please *you*, honey.”

She shook her head. “No way. Tonight’s about you, mister.”

He chuckled. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“All right. Stand up and put your hands on the bed.”

She did—and God, he almost came right then. Her ass looked so perfect in that position.

He eased himself inside her hot, wet center, and she sighed.

“You feel good, Mav.”

He moved slowly at first.

She stood on her tiptoes, angling him where it felt best for her.

He smiled and moved faster. He held her hips tighter, thrusting harder, the sound of their bodies colliding increasing his pleasure. She moved her hips, rising to meet him. God, he was close, but he wanted this to last. Clenching his teeth, he kept up his rhythm.

“God, Mav, this is so good!” Her voice was ragged with passion, and it did him in.

He cried, “Honey!” and thrust once, twice more. Fire erupted inside him, robbing him of breath. He clutched her to him, frozen, unable to move. He pulsed inside her, wishing that the condom wasn’t between them. Wishing that their

marriage was real. Suddenly realizing that he wanted a child with Jaz.

Oh, God, he loved her so much. What was he going to do?

A moment later, Jaz rose and turned around. Smiling, she put her arms around his neck. "That was great."

He struggled to tamp down his deep emotion. Forcing a smile, he said, "Great? No, that was fantastic. Thank you, honey. Now, you really do need to rest."

"Yes, sir."

He drew her back to bed and covered her up.

She curled up against him and sighed. "I'm going to sleep like a baby tonight."

He kissed the top of her head. "Good, sweetheart. I'm glad you're off tomorrow. Sleep in, okay?"

She yawned. "Okay, boss."

He chuckled. "Smart-ass."

"Yep."

When he returned a few minutes later, he took her in his arms again, and her hand slowly caressed his chest. Lord, he loved it when she did that.

He closed his eyes as her hand continued to move. He wouldn't think about his love, about the future. Of what would happen next. She felt too good; and tonight had been magical. That was all that mattered. At least for now.



# Chapter Seventeen



Jaz dumped the remains of her dinner in the trash. She'd eaten most of it, not because she was hungry, but because she wanted to be truthful when Mav called and asked her. He'd been out of town nearly two weeks now—the same amount of time she'd been taking what she hoped was her final round of chemo.

God, she missed him. He texted every few hours and called every night, but she still longed for him so desperately her stomach stayed tied in knots.

Of course he told her that he missed her too, and that made her feel better. She grimaced. She knew that she was way too heavily invested in their relationship, but she had no idea how to stop herself from loving him.

She strode to the living room, but it seemed terribly empty without Mav. The whole house made her achingly lonely. She wanted to call Sam and tell her how worried she was about moving back to her apartment, but Sam would just tell her to let Mav know that she loved him. Despite how many times Jaz had told her why she couldn't do that, Sam still thought telling him was the best idea.

She'd say, "Be honest with him. Let the chips fall where they may."

And Jaz'd say, "No, I don't want him to stay with me because he feels obligated to when he finds out I love him. Mav would do that. He's just that self-sacrificing."

And then she and Sam would go round and round about it. No, she just couldn't go through that again tonight.

Maybe a hot bath would help. She went into the bathroom but just stared at the tub. It was totally unappealing, and she didn't start the water. Instead, she went to her bedroom and turned on the TV. Propping the pillows behind her, she flipped

from channel to channel, hoping to find something to distract her. However, after ten minutes it was obvious that TV wasn't the answer to her mood.

Before she could get up and wander the house again, Sam called.

“Hey, what’s going on with you?” Jaz asked her. She wanted Sam to talk about herself instead of asking about Jaz’s life.

“Oh, no you don’t. I’m fine. The question is, how are you? I haven’t seen you in a while. I hate it that our shifts don’t overlap anymore. I’ll bet you’re worn completely out. You’re what? Two weeks into your treatment again?”

“Yeah, I am, and you’re right. I’m exhausted. But, hey, I have the right to ask how my bestie’s doing, Sam, so fess up. What’s going on with you?”

Sam laughed and launched into a quick conversation about her dating life, then added a few pieces of news from work. “Satisfied now?”

“Yes, I am. Thanks for the update. I’m glad you called. I was climbing the walls.”

“Mav out of town?”

“Yeah, he’s been gone quite a while, and it’s really getting to me.” Jaz tried to keep her voice light, but some of her desperation leaked through.

“I’m sorry, Jaz. I know I’m beating a dead horse here, but please won’t you tell him how you feel? It’s the right thing to do, honey.”

Jaz sighed. She really didn’t want to get into that discussion. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good! I’ll shut up now.”

Jaz chuckled. “Thanks, Sam. I know you care about me, and that’s why you worry. It’s just that I have to do what I think is right.”

“I know. Hang in there.”

“I’ll let you go, Sam. I think I might take a shower or something. It beats anything else I can think of.”

When she hung up, though, the last thing she wanted to do was shower.

Thankfully, her phone rang again. It was Mav. Her pulse began to race, and she said, “Hey, Mav. I’m glad you called.”

He laughed. “Of course I called. I always do, don’t I?”

She sighed, feeling ridiculous. “Yeah, you do. I was just missing you.” The understatement of the year.

“Oh, baby, I was missing you too.”

“Baby”? She liked that. “How was your day?”

“I have some really good news. I think I’ll be able to come home sometime tomorrow. Everything went great today.”

She bit back a loud woo-hoo. “That’s great, Mav. I can’t wait to see you.” Again, understatement. She was dying to see him. And she didn’t work tomorrow. She could look her best when he arrived. She’d found herself slacking off in that department since her treatments had sucked the energy from her.

“So, how you holding up this evening?” Mav asked after a pause.

Should she be honest? Yeah, maybe. “I’m out of sorts, if I’m being truthful. I’ve been wandering around the house like a lost puppy. Totally pathetic.”

He chuckled softly. “A lost puppy, huh?”

“Yep. You should be totally disgusted with me. I’m the luckiest woman in the world, and I’m moping around here like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Lucky? You have lymphoma, honey.”

She sighed. “True, but I also have you.”

“Aw, sweetheart, yes you do—and don’t you forget it. I’ll be home before you know it, and everything’ll be better.”

He talked for a while longer, doing his best to cheer her up, and she did her best to act cheered up. Actually, she did feel better after the call. Knowing that Mav would be home tomorrow meant an end to her loneliness.

One thing she'd said was right, though. She really was pathetic these days. Where was the independent woman she'd always been? All she knew was that Mav somehow completed her. She was only half a woman when he was gone. Right or wrong, that's the way it was.

She went to bed without a shower, dread her constant companion. How could she live as half a woman for the rest of her life? That's what she'd be when she walked through her apartment door again.



Jaz sat in her doctor's office waiting for him to come in. Although Mav was in town, he'd been unable to accompany her, due to an interagency meeting that he couldn't miss. She wrung her hands in her lap, then cleared her throat. A moment later, she began tapping her foot. What was taking her doctor so long? This appointment was when she'd find out if she needed more treatments or if she was free of the lymphoma.

God, she wished Mav was here. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Of course she understood why he'd had to miss her appointment. She was just so anxious. Having him beside her always made her feel calm.

The door opened, and Dr. Hubble strode in. "Hello, Jaz. Good to see you."

He quickly took a seat at his desk and opened her file. "Your tests results are in." He read for a moment and flipped through several pages. When he looked up, he smiled. "Your treatments have done their job. I'm prepared to discharge you from further chemo."

Her heart flooded with joy. "Oh, thank God!"

He held up a finger. "But I want you in for regular checkups. Those are critical. Do you understand me, Jaz?"



When I tell you to come in, you do it.”

She nodded. “I will, Dr. Hubble. Don’t worry.” Her heart beat so hard it was making her ears pound. She’d done it! She’d beaten lymphoma. “Does this mean that I don’t need to do radiation?”

“I don’t see any need for radiation at this time, Jaz. The chemo has been very effective. Thankfully, we caught you at an early stage. I want you to continue to do your self-checks, though, you hear?”

His firm tone left no doubt in her mind as to how important those checks were. “I will. I promise.”

He smiled and closed her folder. “Okay, stop at the desk and they’ll schedule your follow-up.” He rose and held out his hand. “Congratulations, Jaz. This makes me very happy.”

She shook his hand. “Thanks, Dr. Hubble, for everything you’ve done for me.”

She was thrilled and couldn’t wait to tell Mav. When she got home, she changed into comfortable clothes and put a roast in the oven. As she peeled potatoes and carrots and then cut up two onions, however, she gradually lost her enthusiasm.

She had no reason to live with Mav anymore. Her treatments were over. She hadn’t cried when she’d cut up the onions, but now her eyes streamed with tears. It was time to leave, and she was totally unprepared.

She just had to bear it. That was all. She wiped her eyes and sniffed several times. She’d thought about the possibilities last night, and something had become clear to her. Even though Mav called her “sweetheart” and “honey” and made love to her so tenderly, he’d never once told her he loved her.

Tears poured from her eyes again. That right there told her more than anything he said or did. If he loved her, he surely would have told her. No, Mav cared about her because he was a good person. She had to leave. He had to be free to find a woman he could truly love.

Sobbing uncontrollably, she tossed the knife into the sink and ran to her room, crawling under the covers and turning

onto her stomach.

She wasn't sure how long she cried, but eventually her heaving stopped. She rose to a sitting position and wiped her running nose with the back of her hand. God, she hated crying.

In the bathroom, she took a long look in the mirror, not surprised at how awful she looked. Mav couldn't find her this way.

She rushed back to the kitchen, cut up the vegetables and added them to the roast, then headed back for a long shower. She let the hot water scour her face, and the pain felt good.

When she finally got out, she felt ready to face anything. Her courage had returned, and she was determined to look her best when Mav came home. After dressing with care, she put her makeup on, using plenty of concealer around her eyes.

She was in the kitchen when Mav walked in and called, "Sweetheart, I'm home."

Her heart nearly broke when he called her "sweetheart", but she swallowed hard and yelled, "I'm in the kitchen."

She was at the sink, washing up her dishes from cooking, and he wrapped his arms around her waist as he nuzzled her neck from behind. "Something smells good."

"It's a pork roast with potatoes and carrots. I hope you'll like it."

"Mm, I'll love it." Then he turned her around. "Tell me about your doctor's appointment."

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Then she forced herself to go on. "It went great. I'm done with my treatments. I just need to go in for regular checkups."

He picked her up and swung her in a circle. "Honey, that's fantastic news!" Then he kissed her, his lips gentle." When he met her gaze, he said, "I'm so happy, sweetheart."

"Me too. I was so nervous while I waited for Dr. Hubble to come in. Every worst-case scenario went through my mind."

He brushed a lock of hair back from her cheek. “It was all I could think of this afternoon. Our meeting didn’t break up until late, or I would’ve called.”

“It’s all right. You’re home now.”

He took her hand and led her back to his bedroom. “We need to plan a celebration.”

As he unbuttoned his shirt, she took a deep breath. She had to tell him, but her mind had gone blank. Everything that she’d planned to say had disappeared.

“Um, Mav? We need to talk.” Her hands started to shake, and she clasped them in front of her. A cold sweat broke out on her neck.

He looked up, examined her expression, and frowned. “Honey, what is it?”

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.



Mav took a step toward Jaz, his heart pounding. Something was wrong. “Jaz, what is it? What’s happened?”

She licked her lips. And then licked them again. “Everything’s happened. What I mean is—” She paused and took a deep breath. “Mav, now that my treatments are over, I’m going to move back to my apartment.” She looked down and twisted her interlocked hands. When she looked up again, she said, “Like, right away.”

He grabbed her shoulders, barely restraining himself from shaking her. “What the hell, Jaz? You can’t do that. You’re still weak. You need to get your strength back. Don’t move, especially not now.”

He knew his voice sounded desperate, but he didn’t care. She couldn’t just leave, not like this.

“Mav, it’s what we agreed, remember?”

He felt his eyes begin to water, and he clenched his teeth. God, he couldn’t lose her. “Jaz, be reasonable. Take some time. Rest, relax, let me feed you up. You need to build your

strength back up before you try to go it alone.” He took a deep breath and cupped her cheek, looking into her eyes. “Please, Jaz?”

He sensed her wavering, and she leaned toward him. “Oh, Mav.” Her voice was soft and tender. “Then she leaned back. “No, I have to do this. It’s what’s right. You’ve given so much to me, and it’s time to stand on my own two feet.”

She clasped his hands and removed them from her shoulders. “I’m off the next two days. Would you please help me move my things home tomorrow?”

Shock worked its way all the way down to his toes. He shivered. She really meant it. He couldn’t talk her out of it. “Of course. If that’s what you really want. I’ll call and take the day off.”

She cupped his face in her hands, her eyes bleak. Why were they bleak? “Thank you, Mav.”

She left his room then, and he dropped onto the bed, his legs suddenly too weak to bear his weight. He put in a quick call and left his captain a voicemail, letting him know that he was taking the next day off.

He couldn’t move. Couldn’t think past the thought of losing Jaz. He had no idea how long he’d been sitting there when he finally stirred and got undressed. When he stepped into the shower, he set the water so hot he could barely stand it. The pain felt good. It matched his mood. He stayed until the water chilled. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d run the water tank cold.

But numbness wouldn’t come. His heart felt broken in two. He’d given his heart to Jaz, and now she would be taking it with her. Tears filled his eyes, and he quickly wiped them with the back of his hand. How would he get through this? Why didn’t she love him? Why didn’t she want to stay?

He put on a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants and headed for the kitchen. He found Jaz there, staring out the window. He didn’t know what to do. Normally, he would have put his arms around her, but suddenly that didn’t feel right.

He had no idea how to act, what to say or do. “Jaz?”

She turned, and he could tell right away that she’d been crying. He rushed to her and took her into his arms. “Honey, I’m here.”

She pressed her forehead to his chest. “Thank you for everything, Mav. You’re the most amazing man on this earth. I want you to know that.”

He stroked her hair, not knowing what to say. He just didn’t understand. Why was she leaving? “How long before dinner’s ready?”

“About thirty minutes. I didn’t get the roast in soon enough. I... I got distracted.”

Had she been crying this afternoon? Was that what had distracted her? “It’s okay. Let’s go sit down. Did you set the timer?”

She nodded.

“Okay, come on.”

He led her to the couch and put his arm around her as she sat down next to him. She snuggled against him as she had so many times before. He couldn’t stand not knowing why she was doing this. “I don’t understand, honey,” he said, his lips pressed to her hair.

After a long moment, she whispered. “It’s the right thing to do. I have to set you free.”

Now he was *really* confused. “But I *am* free, Jaz.”

She found his hand and squeezed it, hard. “I don’t want to talk about it, Mav.”

God, this wasn’t making any sense, but he felt her desperation. He couldn’t push her any more. “Okay, honey. Okay.” He stroked her hair with gentle fingers, and he soon felt her relax. They stayed cuddled together until the timer went off.

He helped her stand, and she gave him a lopsided smile. “Thanks. I feel better.”

He patted her back. "I'm glad."

Dinner was quiet. He really didn't know what to say. He desperately wanted to talk about their situation, but Jaz had made it clear that she didn't. About halfway through, he said, "This is delicious. I like how you seasoned everything."

She gave him a wan smile. "I learned it from a cookbook. Can't go wrong that way."

"Well, you did good, honey." He realized that he'd called her "honey", and suddenly that felt false. Maybe she didn't want him to use words like that with her anymore.

They both did the dishes, as was their habit, and when they were finished there was an awkward silence. Finally, he said, "Do you want to watch some TV?"

She stuck her hands in her back pockets and looked at the floor. "Um, maybe I should pack."

God, was she going to sleep in her own room tonight? Suddenly he couldn't bear it. "Jaz, I'll help you pack in the morning." He clasped her hand. "Be with me tonight."

She looked into his eyes, and he sensed the same desperation he was feeling. "Okay. We could do that."

He drew her close, and she wrapped her arms around his waist.

Then she headed for her room to change, and he turned off the lights and locked the doors, trying to wrap his head around the fact that this was his last night with her.

He stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed. A few minutes later, she walked in. He held out his arms, and she slid into bed beside him. As she laid her head on his chest, joy filled him, but it was tainted with a deep sadness.

Their lovemaking was slow and tender and yet filled with desperation. They took their time, each remembering what the other enjoyed most and giving infinite pleasure.

When they'd finished, he felt cherished. He'd remember this night forever. Before Jaz slept, he desperately wanted to tell her that he loved her. But he didn't want her to stay with

him out of some misplaced sense of obligation. She had to love him for her own reasons. And he just wasn't seeing that. She wanted to leave him. If she loved him, she would stay.

Long after she fell asleep in his arms, he lay awake, heartbroken and unable to face the life ahead of him.





# Chapter Eighteen



Breakfast was a solemn affair. Jaz could barely swallow the food she forced herself to eat. She'd always known that this day would come, but now that it was here, she was devastated. She'd awakened before dawn while Mav slept and had begun packing her things. By the time he'd stopped by her room, she was mostly done.

He'd looked at what she'd accomplished, his face a mask of despair, and said, "I'll start on breakfast."

He barely ate. Her heart, already aching desperately, stabbed with pain when she saw him push his plate away unfinished. She said, "Mav, I'm sorry."

"Why are you leaving, then?" His voice was harsh with pain, and he immediately added. "No, I'm sorry, Jaz. I don't understand why you're doing this, but you obviously have your reasons."

He scraped his plate into the trash and rinsed it.

She sat stunned, wishing she could take his pain away. She hated seeing him like this. But there wasn't anything she could do. This was the only way she could set him free, the only way he could be truly happy—and she'd do anything for that.

She finished the last of her packing quickly, and Mav loaded everything into his truck. While he was busy with that, she stripped the bed and put the sheets in to wash, then made up the bed with fresh ones. Taking a last look around, she was satisfied that the bedroom looked just as it had when she'd arrived. The same, that is, except for the beautiful vase of flowers. Tears came then, and she quickly rubbed them away.

Mav came back in and stopped at the door.

She turned. "That's it, then."

His face was lined with grief, and he only nodded.

God, this was awful. She said quietly, “Why don’t I follow you, then?”

“That’s fine.” He turned and walked down the hall.

He waited until she started her car before pulling out onto the road.

She couldn’t bear to look back at the house, so she kept her eyes straight ahead as she drove off. Pain stabbed her chest, and she began to cry again.

Mav backed into her parking space when they arrived at her apartment, and it didn’t take long to unload her stuff.

She faced him in her living room, her hands in her back pockets. He stood, looking lost and forlorn, waiting for her to speak.

She knew what she had to say, and she tried, but the words wouldn’t come. She started to cry.

He strode forward and took her into his arms. He didn’t say anything, just held her so fiercely that she could barely breathe.

At last, she freed herself and met his gaze. She had to do this. “Mav, you can divorce me. You’ve done everything you need to do. I’m okay now.” Every word had cost her, had drained her of strength. She backed toward the sofa and sat down.

“Dammit! I don’t want a divorce!” His fierce tone tore a hole in her heart. Hurting him like this devastated her.

She had to do this. She just had to. “Mav, you didn’t even think of asking me out until I got sick. You know that’s true. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

His face torn with devastation, he took a step forward. “Jaz, no. I—”

She raised her voice. “Mav, just leave. Please!” If this went on any longer, she’d break down. She’d give in, and it would be so unfair. She couldn’t—wouldn’t—do that to him.

His eyes reddening, he strode for the door. A moment later, the truck engine roared to life. God, he must be furious. He raced out of the parking lot, and she didn't blame him. Of course he didn't understand. But she was doing it all for him. For his happy future. He'd find a woman to love for the right reasons, not out of pity. And then he'd have lots of children and live happily ever after.

She envisioned that family, and her throat closed. She couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow. After a moment of panic, she sucked in a breath. She was doing the right thing—and despite her love for him, she had to find a way to be happy with that.

She stretched out on the couch and threw her arm over her eyes. How long would this desperation last? Every moment was torture. Unbearable. And how would she be able to handle seeing Mav in the café day after day when her love was eating a hole in her chest?

She began to cry again, hopeless and suddenly overwhelmingly lonely. This was what she had to look forward to. God help her.



Mav sped home, ignoring the speed limit, hearing over and over Jaz's loud voice as she told him to leave.

He strode into the house and stopped cold, staring around the living room. His heart broke. The emptiness was too overwhelming to bear.

He put in a call to Mark. “Do you have time to talk, bro?”

“Let me get to the break room. What's up, Mav? You sound like somebody died.”

Although Mark was joking, he couldn't know how close to the truth he was. That was exactly how Mav felt. He was suffering the sudden death of his relationship with the woman he loved.

Overwhelmed, he sank into his recliner. He didn't think he could ever sit on the sofa again. “Mark, Jaz went back to her

apartment today. I just got home from dropping her off.”

“What? How come? I don’t understand.” Mav heard the break-room fridge open. His friend was probably getting out one of his bottles of vitamin water.

“That makes two of us. She found out yesterday from her doctor that her treatments were finished, and she hit me with this last night. She said that she wants to set me free. I mean, what the hell does that even mean?”

“My God. Did you ask her?” Mark sounded as confused as Mav felt.

“Of course I asked her, but she wouldn’t explain, and now she doesn’t want to talk about anything anymore. She practically yelled at me to leave her apartment a little while ago.”

“Wow, bro. That sounds awful.”

“It was. She wouldn’t let me talk. I don’t understand what’s gotten into her. I really thought she cared about me. And the thing is, she was crying.” He paused, seeing her face full of tears again. “What do you make of that?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I sure didn’t see this coming. Although she did tell you that your marriage was only good until she finished her treatment, didn’t she?”

Mav heaved a sigh. “Yeah, but I was hoping we’d gotten past that. We were sleeping together, and I really thought she cared about me.”

After a few seconds, his friend said, “Maybe she does. Listen, Mav, you’ve got to tell her you love her. It’s the only way to know what’s going on for sure. No more beating around the bush.”

“How can I do that now? It’s obvious she doesn’t love me. I mean, she hotfooted it away from me as soon as she got the all-clear. I don’t want her to come back to me out of some misguided sense of loyalty because I helped her through her lymphoma treatment. She’s already told me how thankful she is. And I’ve seen the guilt on her face when I’ve helped her

these past months. I won't have her with me out of some sense of guilt because I've been there for her."

Mark sighed loudly into the phone. "But what if it's not that? Don't you think it's worth a chance? What if she's waiting for you to take that first step? What if she wants you to declare your love so she's sure about where she stands? There's a chance that's it, right?"

Mav mulled that over. Could Mark be right? He went to the fridge and popped open a longneck, despite it only being one o'clock. "I don't know. Telling her's a risk. But honestly, I hadn't really looked at it from that perspective."

"Well, would you just consider it? I think you should, bro. Jaz is worth it. I really think she's the one for you."

"Thanks for hearing me out, Mark. It was great talking to you. I think I'm going to ask the captain for some days off, go up to the ranch for a while. I need to get my head straight."

"Sounds like a great idea. Call me when you get back. I'm worried about you."

After making the call to his boss, Mav threw some clothes into his suitcase and headed out the door. Before he left, he texted his mom, letting her know that he'd be there late that evening and would be staying for a few days. Although he called his parents once a week, he hadn't ever told them that Jaz had said that their marriage would be over once her treatments were done.

Feeling better than he had all day, he backed out of the drive. Going back to his roots always grounded him, and that's what he desperately needed right now.



Mav walked softly through the rustic living room and into the kitchen. He immediately saw the note his mom had left on the fridge door.

*Son, your dinner's inside. I know you're gonna be hungry. Your bed's all ready for you. I'm so glad you're home! See you in the morning. Mom*

He grinned. His momma sure did know him. He was starving. He reached inside and pulled out a platter loaded with fried potatoes covered in white gravy, green beans and ham, and a thick steak, along with a dinner roll. His stomach grumbled loudly as he stuck it in the microwave.

He hadn't been able to get Jaz off his mind on the long drive to his family's North Texas ranch. Thoughts of her still plagued him as he took his first bite of steak. He was torn up inside. Nothing felt right. Maybe his mom's home cooking would help.

He tried to imagine what Jaz was doing. Was she as upset as he was? Was she lying awake thinking of him? He didn't wish that on her. She desperately needed to rest. To recuperate from her treatments and to regain her strength. He hoped that she'd gone to bed early and was sound asleep.

He imagined her face as he'd seen it so many times while she slept, and pain stabbed his heart. He'd never have that chance again. Thoughts like these tormented him as he finished his dinner, barely tasting his mother's homemade meal.

He sighed. He had to stop this. After a final bite of steak, he scraped the last few scraps of food into the trash and rinsed his plate, promising himself to do better at breakfast. His mother's cooking deserved it.

Grabbing the handle of his suitcase, he traipsed up the stairs as quietly as he could. His old bedroom was much as it had been when he'd been in high school, although he'd gotten rid of most of the knickknacks that had accumulated over the early years.

He quickly undressed and climbed into bed. In the darkness, Jaz's beautiful face came to him. In this, his first night without her, it was more than he could bear. He turned over and squeezed his eyes shut. He had to handle this aloneness somehow. It would be his life from here on out.

A tear leaked from his eye and ran into the other one. Then, from nowhere, came the quiet sobs that he'd held back for so long. He'd lost her. Jaz didn't want him. She was gone.



In the morning at breakfast when his parents asked about Jaz, Mav told them that her treatment had gone well but stopped there. He didn't feel like sharing about their split. It was too painful to get into.

He'd be helping his brother Paul on the ranch today, so they left as soon as they'd finished eating. North Texas was experiencing a cold spell, so Mav bundled up in the heavy coat that he kept permanently at the house.

The first thing they did was grab a round bale with the hay truck and head out to one of the pastures. On the way, Paul said, "Okay, now tell me what's really going on between you and Jaz. Something is, or you wouldn't look like a lost little waif."

Mav rolled his eyes, chuckling softly. Paul knew him better than anyone else in his family. "A lost waif?"

"Sure. You look like something's eating you up inside, brother. Spit it out."

Paul stopped at the pasture gate, and Mav got out and opened it. After Paul drove through, Mav shut it again. When he got back into the truck, Paul said, "I'm still waiting for an answer. What's going on?"

The cows heard the truck engine and started heading their way. Paul drove into the pasture toward the remnants of the last bale.

Mav cleared his throat. There was no getting out of this. Paul would bug him until he talked. "Jaz left me yesterday. She'd told me in the beginning that she'd do that when her treatments were finished, but I'd thought we were beyond that." He swallowed, his throat suddenly tight. "She told me to divorce her."

That word was so hard to say. So terrible to think about.

"What? I thought you all were getting along really well."

"Huh! I did too!" Mav couldn't keep the indignation out of his voice. He went on to tell the whole story, then got out of

the truck as Paul backed up to the spot where he planned to lower the hay.

Paul parked the truck, then worked the remote and lowered the bale to a few inches above the ground while Mav took his knife and slit the mesh enclosing the hay before dragging it off the bale. When he'd finished, Paul lowered the fork the rest of the way down. The cattle had arrived by then and were yanking mouthfuls of the good, green hay from the bale.

When he climbed back into the truck, Mav tossed the mesh onto the floorboard while Paul pulled slowly away, the bale dropping from the hay fork as the truck moved.

Paul waited until Mav had opened and shut the gate again before he continued the conversation. "I think you should be honest with Jaz. You love her, don't you? I know what you just said, but you may just *think* you know what's going on in her head—or should I say her heart? You don't often go wrong when you're honest with folks."

Mav looked out his window. That was two people who thought he was wrong. Maybe he was. He'd really have to think hard about his position. But, no matter how he felt, he couldn't hurt Jaz. He couldn't trap her into a relationship that would make her unhappy.

"I'll think about it."

Paul increased his speed, and dust spewed behind them. Despite the cold temperatures, the fall had been a dry one, something the ranchers had all struggled with. He and Paul fed bags of cattle cubes at the next three pastures, and Mav enjoyed the physical activity. Somehow it cleared his head like office work never could. By the time lunchtime rolled around, the knot in his belly had eased.

Paul slapped him on the back as they poured out the last bag of feed. "Bet you've been missing Momma's cooking, brother."

Mav smiled. "Hell yes, I have."

"Let's go eat."



He slung his arm around Paul's shoulders. "I've missed you, big brother."



At breakfast the next morning, Mav was surprised when his mom said, "Son, you've got to tell Jaz you love her."

He looked at Paul, who just grinned and shrugged. Normally, his brother was at his own house on the property with his wife and two-year-old daughter, but he had been taking his meals at the ranch since Mav's arrival.

Before Mav could say anything, his mother went on, "You can't just assume that you know what someone's thinking *or* feeling, honey."

Mav swallowed the bite in his mouth as his knee jumped up and down in a nervous rhythm. "I assume my blabbermouth brother told you my reasons for not doing that?"

His mom smiled at his description of Paul. "Yes, he told me, and I just don't agree. Son"—she reached across the table for his hand—"you can't leave any stone unturned when you truly love someone."

"Even if you might hurt them by telling the truth?"

His mom shrugged. "What if you hurt them much worse by keeping quiet?"

He scooped a bite of fried egg onto his fork. "I hear you, Mom."

"Good. Please think about it. I want you to be happy, son. You deserve it."

When he and Paul headed outside to the ranch truck, Mav said, "Ever heard of the word, 'traitor,' brother?"

Paul burst out laughing. "Come on, sorehead. I'm just worried about you."

Mav climbed into the truck. "I know, I know. And thanks. It's just I wasn't expecting to get blindsided at breakfast."

Paul grinned. “You should have. You know I could never keep a secret.”

Mav cracked up. His brother was right. Paul had always told on him if he thought it was for Mav’s own good.

Paul clasped Mav’s shoulder, giving him a little shake. “I’m glad you came home, little brother. You needed to clear your head, and the ranch is the best place to do that.”

They worked hard that day, feeding and working a herd in one of the pens. Mav enjoyed working with cattle and had missed it. He hadn’t been home since Christmas, something that had surprised him when he’d figured it out.

Yet, despite being busy, he found that Jaz still occupied his mind. On the way back to the ranchhouse, he took out his phone and texted her. Maybe Mark and his family were right.

Paul noticed and asked, “Jaz?”

Mav nodded.

“Good!”

*How are you, Jaz? Been thinking of you.*

She texted right back:

*I’m okay. How are you? I’ve been thinking about you too.*

His heart jolted into a gallop. She’d been thinking about him? Great.

*I’m good. I went home to the ranch. I needed to think.*

She sent:

*Oh, I’m glad. You needed that. You need to find a happy life.*

He frowned. What did she mean by that?

*I was happy with you, Jaz. I thought you knew that.*

She sent right back:

*I know, but you need to find your future. I don’t want to hold you back from that.*

Pain stabbed him. What the hell did she mean? Dammit!

*Jaz, you never held me back. Why would you think that?*

She didn't answer for a long time. Then she sent:

*I'm glad you're with your family. It's always good to go home. I'm happy for you, Mav. Take good care of yourself. Please.*

God, he wanted to scream. Why wouldn't she answer his question?

*Jaz, how are you feeling? Are you getting some of your strength back?*

She answered:

*I'm hanging in there, and I know I'll be feeling better soon.*

What the hell did that mean? Was she sick? Dammit! He couldn't stand this beating around the bush.

*Are you sick, Jaz?*

He waited and then waited some more.

*I'm not sick, Mav. Please don't worry. You've done enough worrying about me already. Thank you for all you've done for me. I appreciate you so very much. Please, be happy. Be free.*

He stomped his boot down hard on the floor mat.

Paul looked at him strangely. "What's up?"

"I could strangle her is what's up!" Mav said through gritted teeth.

"Whoa."

Then she texted again:

*You take good care of yourself, Mav. Be happy. I'll think of you that way.*

Son of a bitch! So that was it? He tossed his phone into the cup holder on the console.

"I'm guessing that didn't go so well," Paul said quietly.

"It sounds like she wants to get rid of me or something. I just don't know." Mav ground his teeth, his heart breaking

even though he was furious.

“Mind if I look?”

Mav passed Paul his phone.

His brother read while glancing up at the pasture road. Then he handed it back to Mav. “I can see why you’re confused.” After a few seconds, he said, “But I think she cares about you, and maybe she’s having a hard time of it.”

“Seriously? I don’t know how you got that out of it.” Mav stared stonily out the window. His chest felt like an elephant was sitting on it. To him, it sounded like she wanted to get rid of him.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. His heart ached so badly he could hardly think. He imagined his life without Jaz; then, even worse, he imagined her with another man. That’s when he decided to head for bed. He couldn’t keep his mask of indifference on any longer.

His mom gave him a hug when he got up from the couch. “Honey, remember what I told you. You haven’t lost yet.”

“God,” he gasped, his voice breaking, almost in tears. He tore out of her arms and strode to the stairs.



# Chapter Nineteen



Jaz threw herself down on the sofa after her last text to Mav. It had taken everything she had to write so dispassionately. She'd wanted desperately to tell him how she felt. She'd missed him so badly that loneliness was destroying her from the inside out. She couldn't eat, could barely swallow. This was much worse than during her treatments.

Yet, she couldn't let it break her. She had to do what was right for Mav, and falling apart would spit on his gift—her chance at life. He'd been so kind, so generous. More than anyone could ever ask for. She owed him.

But it was time to let him go, to let him build a life that would make him happy.

She wanted to call Sam, but that wouldn't help. Sam would just tell her to let Mav know that she loved him.

Instead, she crawled into bed, despite it still being light outside. She flipped on the TV, but the screen just blurred in her vision. Her chest ached, her heart a black hole eating her flesh an inch at a time. Soon there'd be nothing left of her.

Mav dominated her thoughts, even though she thrust him out time after time. It did no good. Nothing she tried helped. He was there, in her mind, in her heart, surrounding her.

At last, just after ten, she gave in and texted:

*Goodnight, Mav. I hope you sleep well tonight.*

He sent right back:

*Goodnight, honey. I miss holding you in my arms.*

She cried then, deep, wrenching sobs. God, if only she was wrapped in his arms.



Mav got back to Austin a day earlier than he'd planned. His captain had called, and Mav had to go out of town on a drug case that was developing fast.

After Jaz's first text a few nights before, he'd begun texting her goodnight every night, and she'd responded, giving him hope. He kept the texts short, but he just couldn't let a day go by without talking to her.

He'd really been considering what Mark and his family had said. Maybe it was worth the risk of telling Jaz that he loved her.

The captain had said that Mav would probably be gone a good while this time, and he was glad. He needed something intense to take his mind off Jaz and his incredible loneliness.

He packed his suitcase again for a long trip, then sat on the bed and texted her:

*I've been called out of town, and it looks like it's going to be pretty involved. I'll probably be gone quite a while.*

She sent:

*Will it be dangerous?*

After a few seconds, she sent again:

*Forget that. Your work is always dangerous. Please be careful. I worry about you.*

The corner of his mouth lifted. She still worried about him?

*I'm always careful, but for you, I'll be extra careful.*

She texted:

*LOL. Thanks. Let me know when you get back to town, okay?*

God, he missed her so much. Why, oh why couldn't things work out between them?

*Of course I will. Take good care of yourself.*

She sent:

*Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.*

He smiled. That's what she always said.

*Talk to you soon.*

She texted:

*Bye, Mav. Thanks for getting in touch.*

He shoved his phone into his shirt pocket, feeling warm clear through.

At the door, he took one more look around the living room, glad to put the lonely house behind him.



Jaz walked into her apartment after her morning shift at work but didn't go immediately into her bedroom to change. Instead, she went to the fridge and poured herself a calming glass of wine.

It had been more than twenty-four hours since she'd heard from Mav, and she was worried sick. She knew his work was dangerous, and there was probably nothing wrong. Most likely he was somewhere with no service or maybe in a situation where texting wasn't a safe option.

Still, this wasn't like him. After a couple of long swallows from her stemless glass, she went in to change into some sweats. It was a surprisingly mild afternoon, and some time on her porch should help her sense of unease.

She'd just taken her shirt off when her phone rang. Relief swept through her as she went to her purse to get it. However, she didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Is this Jasmine Decker?"

Her heart froze. Few people knew her by that name. Fear stabbed her heart. "Yes, who is this?"

"I'm Captain Ron McCuarry of the Texas Rangers. Mav's boss."

Her heart began to pound in earnest, and she sat down on the bed, her legs giving way. "What's happened? Is Mav all right?" She couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow.



“Mav’s been injured, and you’re listed as his primary contact. He’s at the hospital and being prepped for surgery as we speak.”

She had to force the words out. “Injured? How?”

Speaking calmly, the captain said, “He’s been shot. I’m sorry, I don’t have many details at the moment.” Then he told her the name of the hospital. The town was about three hours away.

She didn’t remember the rest of the conversation, but she suddenly found herself dressed, packed, and walking out the door.

Mav had been shot! Oh, God. He had to be okay. He had to come through this. She plugged the hospital address into her phone before leaving the driveway, her mind in chaos. Then she thought to call Sam. “Mav’s been shot! Can you let Todd know that I’ll need some time off? I’m on my way to the hospital now.”

“Oh my God, honey. I’m so sorry. Listen, you don’t worry about a thing. Give me an update when you have time. I’ll take care of things here.”

“Thanks, Sam. I will.”

That was her last coherent thought for over an hour.

Finally, with her heartbreak eased, she began to think. Mav was a strong, healthy man. He’d come through this. She wiped her face, realizing that she’d still been crying.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, she grimaced at her reflection. She looked horrible, but at least she’d thought to pack her makeup. She still had an unbearably long way to go. If only she could get an update on his surgery, but that was impossible. Driving five miles over the speed limit made her feel a little better.

By the time she drove into the hospital parking lot and found a space to park, she was in a near panic. What if Mav was out of surgery and she wasn’t there? He would think nobody cared about him.

She strode up to the information desk and found out where to go. On the surgery floor, she took a deep, relieved breath when she found that he was still in the operating room. Giving them her name, she asked to be notified by his doctor as soon as Mav's surgery was done.

As she turned to find a seat in the waiting room, a Texas Ranger walked over to her and introduced himself. "I'm Cory Benson. I heard you asking about Mav. I was with him when he got shot. Are you his wife?"

She shook the hand he offered. "Yes, I'm Jaz. His captain called me. Can you tell me what happened?"

"You know that this case is about drugs, right?"

She nodded. "He said as much."

"We had a group of cartel members pinned down when two of them worked their way behind us." He paused. "Are you up to hearing this? I don't want to upset you."

She touched his arm as they sat down beside each other. "Please, tell me everything."

He pressed his lips together and then nodded. "Mav took one in the lower back below his vest and went down. I popped off a few shots, holding them off, and then dragged Mav to cover."

She bit her lip hard. He'd been shot in the back? God, would he be paralyzed?

"We had an ambulance on standby, and I called it in as soon as the shooting stopped. They brought Mav here, and he's been in surgery for..." He looked at his watch. "It's been almost three hours."

She shivered, suddenly cold straight through. Shock was hitting her hard now, and dizziness brought a wave of nausea with it. The idea of Mav being paralyzed didn't seem real. He was too strong, too athletic.

Cory covered her hand with his. "Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here with you. Can I get you some coffee? You look like you could use a cup."

“Yes. Thank you.” Closing her eyes, she said a prayer. Surely God could intervene.

She was still praying when she heard Cory’s boots on the tile floor. She opened her eyes and reached for the Styrofoam cup he handed her. “Thanks.”

“I put creamer in it. I wasn’t sure if you took it black or not.”

“That’s fine.”

She took a scalding sip. It must have come out of one of those machines. She sat quietly, unable to converse. Her entire being was focused on coping with her shattered emotions.

As if understanding the state she was in, Cory sat silently beside her. He’d made a cup for himself and took occasional sips.

A doctor walked in and said, “Decker?”

She sprang to her feet. “I’m his wife.”

The doctor walked over to her, his face creased with lines of exhaustion. “Your husband’s out of surgery, and it went well. I was able to remove the bullet without destabilizing the spine.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” he said quickly. “First, he lost a lot of blood. We had to give him several transfusions.”

Her heart fell. “You said ‘first.’ What else is wrong?”

“The bullet lodged right next to his spine. There’s a lot of swelling in the area. We won’t know until we do some tests if there’s been any injury to the spinal cord.”

Tears filled her eyes. Her voice shook when she asked, “What kind of tests?”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Let’s let him wake up, and we’ll go from there, okay?”

She nodded, her fear so strong that her throat spasmed closed. Why wouldn't the doctor tell her what kind of tests he wanted to run? Why wouldn't he be up-front with her? She had a right to know!

But the doctor had already turned away, removing the mask from around his neck where he'd lodged it to speak with her.

Cory, obviously noticing her distress, put his arm around her shoulders. "I think it's good news, Jaz. He got the bullet out, and the only worry now is some swelling."

She nodded, her mind spinning. "Yeah, I guess so."

Cory stayed with her while she waited to be called back to stay with Mav. She appreciated having him at her side. He stayed quiet, yet sat so close that their shoulders brushed, lending his physical as well as emotional support.

Finally, a nurse came to get her. She jumped to her feet.

Cory rose and handed her one of his cards. "Please keep in touch. I want to know how Mav is."

"Of course—and thanks for staying with me, Cory. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"It was an honor, Jaz." He shook her hand and stayed as she hurried after the departing nurse.

Mav was barely conscious when she entered his room. The nurse closed the glass door behind Jaz as she walked over to his bed. Mav's eyes were half closed, his mouth slack.

She gently clasped his hand. It broke her heart to see him this way. She whispered, "It's Jaz. I'm here, Mav. Your surgery went well, and I'm going to stay here with you in the hospital."

She felt a flicker of movement in his fingers. She leaned over and swept a soft kiss across his lips.

His eyes closed then, and she felt that he knew she was there.

In a little while, his breathing slowed, and she sensed that he slept. She moved the room's only chair up to the bed and then took his hand again.

His nurse came in when an alarm started going off. She put on another full IV bag, smiled at Jaz, and left the room.

Sometime later that evening, a new nurse came in. Speaking quietly, she said, "We have a kitchen on this floor if you'd like some coffee. Are you planning on staying the night?"

Jaz whispered, "Thank you. I think I'd like a cup. I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open. And, yes, I'll stay here tonight."

The nurse smiled. "I can get you one of our sleep chairs if you like." Then she added. "I'm Jennifer, by the way. I'm his nurse on this shift."

"Jaz. I'm his wife. Thanks, Jennifer, but I think I'll stay here by the bed in case he wakes up. If he's still in here tomorrow, I'll take you up on that offer." She'd dearly love to lie down, but more than that, she wanted to be at Mav's side if he opened his eyes.

"I'll be in here for a couple of minutes if you want to go get your coffee," Jennifer said softly.

Jaz nodded and slipped out the door.

In the small kitchen, it looked like someone had just made a fresh pot. She poured herself a large cup and put several pods of creamer in it. It was still too hot, so she added a few more.

Mav hadn't moved when she returned to the room. Jennifer finished her brief exam and waved as she left.

Jaz clasped Mav's hand again and sat down in the chair. Her back ached from the awkward position holding his hand put her in, but her legs already hurt from standing. She'd worked a full shift at the café before she'd received the call from his captain.

The blood pressure cuff came on, and Mav's bottom lip moved when it tightened on his arm. She said, "Mav, I'm here. Everything's okay."

His eyelids rose a fraction and then closed again.

She slumped down in the chair, letting her head rest on the seat back. It was a stretch for her arm, but, for now, it felt good to relax her neck.

At about two in the morning, the nurse came in and changed his IV bag again. Jaz guessed that they were replacing fluids from his blood loss.

Jennifer said quietly, "This is the last bag for now. We'll see how he does after this." Patting Jaz's arm, she added, "His blood pressure's good, so that's a plus. Hang in there."

"Thanks." Jaz was too tired to smile but nodded her appreciation.

It was time to stand again. Her arm ached something awful from reaching up from the chair to hold Mav's hand. When she clasped it again, he opened his eyes and mumbled, "Jaz?"

She leaned close. "I'm here, Mav. Everything's okay. You're in the hospital, and your back surgery went great."

He sighed and gave her hand a weak squeeze. Then his eyes closed again, and he was out.

Encouraged, she stood by his side, her eyes roving over his face for the smallest movement. Was he close to waking? Would she be able to talk to him?

But he didn't move. At last, when her legs couldn't bear her weight anymore, she sat down, still clinging to his hand. Closing her eyes, she prayed again for the best outcome—for Mav to be perfectly healed from his gunshot trauma.

It suddenly occurred to her that she had no way to contact his parents. She desperately hoped that his captain had. Surely Mav would be more cognizant of his surroundings in the morning? She'd ask him for their number and call them right away to bring them up to speed.

She left for more coffee at five. Jennifer worked twelve-hour shifts, so she was still on. Jaz saw her in the hallway and waved. She ached all over and felt grimy. A shower sounded amazing, but who knew when she'd next get one?

The floor had quieted, the sounds of Mav's monitors the only thing that she could hear. The long night had taught her something. She could no longer face her life without Mav. What she'd do about that wasn't clear.



When the sun rose, bringing light and warmth into the room, Mav opened his eyes. Jaz held his hand, standing next to his bed with her eyes closed. She looked more exhausted than he'd ever seen her.

He squeezed her fingers. "Jaz?" He was shocked at how hoarse his voice sounded. What had caused that? Had they intubated him?

Her eyes flew open. "Mav? You're awake."

His lips twitched in an attempt at a smile. "Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for coming."

"Your captain called me yesterday afternoon. God, Mav, I've been so worried."

He tightened his hold on her. "Honey, don't be." He took a good look around the room and felt dizzy. "I'm in intensive care?"

"Yes. Do you remember what happened?"

He thought for a moment. "I was shot."

"Yes, in the back. The doctor was able to get the bullet out just fine. It lodged next to your spine."

His heart started to pound. "Next to it?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

He clenched his teeth. "What aren't you telling me?" God, talking was taking everything out of him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

When he opened them again, she said, “There’s a lot of swelling around the area, and your doctor said that he wants to run some tests to see if there’s going to be any impairment.”

Shock blew through his system. “Impairment? Do you mean like paralyzed?”

She gripped his hand. “No one said anything about you being paralyzed, honey. Calm down.”

His breath exploded out of him. Thank God. He squeezed his eyes shut, drained and out of breath.

She caressed his cheek. “Relax now. Everything’s going to be okay.”

He looked into her eyes and remembered what he’d decided as he’d lain bleeding and waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

He drew her closer to him. “Jaz, this has made me realize something.”

“It has?”

He brushed his thumb across her hand in the only caress he could manage. “I can’t go one more day without telling you that I love you.”

Her eyes widened and then filled with tears.

“I love you with everything I am, and I don’t want to lose you. But Jaz?”

She sniffed and wiped at her tears. “Uh-huh?”

“You don’t have to love me back. You don’t owe that to me just because I helped you.”

She leaned over the bed and kissed him hard on the lips, her tears falling onto his cheeks. “Oh, you silly man, don’t you know that I love you too?”

She smiled that wonderful smile at him, and he felt as though his heart might burst with joy. He pulled her close and kissed her then, gently and with all the love in his heart.



She opened her eyes and wiped her cheeks. “I’m so happy, Mav.” Then she chuckled softly. “I certainly didn’t see this coming.”

He took her hand again and closed his eyes. God, she loved him. Everything was going to be all right.

Then he heard her say, “Mav, I don’t know if anyone has called your parents. I’d be glad to if you can give me their number.”

His eyes flew open. “Oh Lord, we’d better do that. Mom’ll be furious.”

He gave her the number, and Jaz talked to his mom for a while. Then she gave the phone to him, and he said, “I’m fine, Mom. Don’t worry, Jaz is taking good care of me.” He gave the phone back, too tired to say more.

After a while, he regained some strength, and they began to talk. He asked Jaz why she’d wanted to set him free, and she said that she hadn’t wanted him to feel like he had to stay with her because she loved him. And then she asked him why he hadn’t told her that he loved her, and he told her that he hadn’t wanted her to stay with him because she felt she owed him since he’d taken care of her while she was sick. They both shook their heads and laughed at how wrong they’d been about each other.

He reached for her hand again. “Jaz, I guess it goes without saying that I don’t want a divorce.”

The corners of her mouth lifted. “I don’t either.”

“Honey, I’d like to have a real wedding with our family and friends there and renew our vows. Can we do that?”

Tears filled her eyes, and she slipped her arms around his neck. “Oh Mav, I’d love that.”

Before they could decide anything more, Mav’s doctor walked in. He shook Mav’s hand. “It’s good to see you awake. How do you feel?”

Mav looked at Jaz and smiled. “Better than I deserve.”

The doctor chuckled and loosened the covers around Mav's feet. Taking a pen, he stroked it up Mav's right foot from his heel to his toes and asked, "Do you feel that?"

"I sure do."

"Good." He repeated the motion with Mav's left foot. "How about that?"

"I feel that, too," Mav said, excitement creeping into his voice.

"Okay, wiggle your feet up and down and then back and forth."

Mav did that easily.

The doctor re-covered his feet. "I'm happy with your movement, but we still need to check some things out. You might need physical therapy after the swelling goes down around your wound site. Bullets can cause all sorts of invisible damage."

Mav frowned. What was this 'invisible damage' stuff about?

The doctor patted his toes. "Not to worry. This is good news. It'll take some time for that swelling to go down. Be patient. We'll get you into a regular room later on today, though, okay?"

"Thanks, doc." A regular room sounded good. It would be much more comfortable for Jaz, and it made things seem more normal, less dramatic.

After the doctor left, Jaz gave him a hug. "Mav, this is fantastic! You're going to be fine. I just know it."

"I think so too, honey. Now, back to these wedding plans. How soon can we do this?"

She grinned and shook her head. "Well, don't you want to be on your feet by then, silly?"

He drew his brows together. "Oh, yeah. I kinda forgot about that." He grabbed her hand again. "You start planning, though. Just don't set a date yet. And I'll pay for everything."

You and Sam go shopping and pick out a beautiful wedding dress. I'll give you my card. And I'll wear a tux. Mark can be my best man." He grinned. "This is going to be great!"

She leaned down and kissed him, hard, and he suddenly felt himself respond despite his injury. This was the woman he adored, the woman he loved. He clasped her head in his hands and kissed her back, making it count.

When he finally let her go, she rose and looked into his eyes. "I love you, Mav, and I'm so happy that I can say that now."

"Me too, honey. Me too."



# Chapter Twenty



Jaz met Sam's gaze and smiled as the pastor picked up his Bible. Although it wasn't usual to have members of a wedding party present at a vow renewal ceremony, Jaz and Mav had decided that they wanted their best friends with them on this special day.

They'd decided to have the wedding in Mav's hometown in North Texas. Several of his Ranger friends had driven up, including Cory, as had Mick, Mav's colleague from the FBI. And Jaz's foster parents had thrilled her by coming up as well.

Mav's mom, Jan, had been invaluable in helping Jaz plan the wedding here at the church he'd attended growing up. His parents still went on Sundays unless something at the ranch intervened.

Julie, Mav's sister, and her fiancé, John, had driven in one weekend when Jaz and Mav were at the ranch for a planning session, and Jaz had immediately liked her. She'd helped Sam get Jaz dressed this morning, and having the two of them with her had settled Jaz's wedding-day nerves.

As the pastor began to speak, Mav clasped her hand. She glanced up at him, her heart so full of joy that her eyes began to fill.

The pastor's clear voice said, "We're gathered here in the presence of God, family, and friends to renew the vows of holy matrimony with Maverick and Jasmine. Marriage is an honorable estate, and today it's their wish to reverently, soberly, and with God's blessing reaffirm their commitment to make their marriage bloom and grow. Today, they'll acknowledge God's greatest gift; another person to share with, change with, be joyful with, and to stand with as one when trials and tribulations enter their lives. It's fitting, therefore, that we should begin by asking for God's blessing on this marriage."

As the pastor prayed, Jaz said her own prayer, asking God to help her be the perfect wife to Mav. To help her love and support him in the way he deserved. Then she opened her eyes, gazing at the beautiful stained-glass panes that encircled the small church. Bright sunlight shone through them, sending a rainbow of colors throughout the chapel.

Roses in her chosen colors of red and cream graced the pews in small bouquets, and a large vase of them sat on a table on the dais. She could smell the strongly scented red ones from where she stood, and she inhaled deeply.

The pastor finished his prayer and began the service again. “Marriage is a joyous occasion. It’s connected in our thoughts with the charm of love, the warmth of home, and with all that’s pleasant, as being one of the most important events of our lives. Its sacredness and unity are the most significant and binding covenants known in human relations.

“Maverick and Jasmine, let me charge you both to remember that your future happiness is to be in mutual consideration, patience, kindness, confidence, and affection. It’s the duty of each of you to find your greatest joy in the company of the other; to remember that your love pledged today must remain undivided for a lifetime.”

Jaz leaned her head against Mav’s shoulder, feeling the weight of the pastor’s words and the knowledge that she would give everything of herself to fulfill that duty.

The pastor’s directions to them continued. “It’s your duty, Maverick, to be to Jasmine a considerate, tender, faithful, and loving husband; to support, guide and cherish her in prosperity and trouble; to thoughtfully and carefully enlarge the place she holds in your life; to constantly show to her the tokens of your affection, to shelter her from danger, and to love her with an unchangeable love.”

The pastor then turned to Jaz. “It’s your duty, Jasmine, to be to Maverick, a considerate, tender, faithful, and loving wife; to comfort, guide and cherish him in prosperity and trouble; to give to him the unfailing evidence of your affection; and to continue making the place he holds in your

heart broader and deeper; to support him, value him and work with him to make your marriage the very best that it can be.”

She squeezed Mav’s hand, loving him so much right then that her heart seemed near bursting.

“I call your attention,” the pastor said, “to the seriousness of the covenant you’re about to declare before God. The vows you’re about to take aren’t to be taken without careful thought, for in them you are committing yourselves exclusively to one another for as long as you both shall live.” He put his notes inside his Bible and closed it.

“If you’re ready to assume the obligations and duties before God as I’ve defined them, unite your hands and pledge your love and your lives to each other.”

Mav smiled down at her, and they turned to face each other.

The pastor said, “Maverick, please state your vows to Jasmine.”

The love in Mav’s eyes made her legs suddenly weak. Then he began. “Jaz, today we’re beginning our lives together all over again. I promise here, before our family and friends, to be your faithful husband. I choose to live with you as your lover, your confidant, and your best friend, loving you when life is peaceful and when it’s painful, during our successes and our failures. I’ll honor your goals and your dreams, trying always to encourage you. I’ll strive to be honest and open with you, sharing my thoughts and my life with you. I’ll love and cherish you from this day forward, for ever and ever.”

She leaned toward him, wanting desperately to take him in her arms, but she still had her vows to say.

“Jasmine, please state your vows to Maverick,” the pastor said.

She took a deep, steady breath and began. “Because of you, Mav, I smile, and I laugh, and I dare to dream. You’re the love of my life, my soulmate. I’ve experienced your love and kindness and especially your strength. I’ll strive not to ever take you for granted. I love you, honey, and my heart is

yours.” She smiled up at him. “Will you exchange your heart for mine? Will you be my family, Mav, forever?”

His hands tightened around hers, and he whispered, “Oh, honey, of course I will.”

The pastor spoke again. “You’ll now exchange rings as a symbol of the lifelong commitment and abiding love which you as husband and wife have promised to each other.”

Mav had insisted that they exchange rings again. He’d bought her a beautiful diamond wedding set and wanted to give it to her during the ceremony.

“Maverick, please place the ring on Jasmine’s finger and repeat after me: ‘I give you this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness.’”

Mav slipped the rings onto her finger and tenderly said the words, his eyes brimming with love.

“Jasmine, please place the ring on Maverick’s finger and repeat after me: ‘I give you this ring as a sign of my love and faithfulness.’”

As she said the words and slid Mav’s gold band onto his finger, an overwhelming wave of love swept through her. She smiled up at him and mouthed, “I love you.”

He smiled and gripped her fingers before they turned back to the pastor.

“Eternal God,” he began, “help Maverick and Jasmine to fulfill the promises they’ve made here today and to reflect your steadfast love in their commitment to each other. Give them kindness and patience, affection and understanding, happiness, and contentment. May their family and friends continue to support them in difficult days so that their love for each other may continue to grow as long as they both shall live.”

He smiled at them then. “Maverick and Jasmine, having witnessed your vows before God and all who are assembled here, I now reaffirm you as man and wife. Maverick, you may now kiss your wife!”



Mav threw his arms around her and kissed her, tenderly and sweetly at first and then with wild abandon. “Oh, honey, I love you so much,” he said in her ear when he finally released her.

She cupped his face in her hands and said quietly, “Thank you for today. I’ll never forget it, sweetheart.”

He smiled and put his arm around her waist as the organ music played. Their friends and family clapped as they strode down the aisle.

But they still had the wedding reception to attend. It was being held in the American Legion hall, the biggest room available in the small town. The whole Decker family had decorated it the day before, and Jan was proud of how it had turned out.

Outside the church, well-wishers called to them as Mav helped Jaz into his truck. Her beautiful, full wedding gown didn’t make that easy, but with Mark’s help, they managed.

They’d be driving to Abilene for the night after the reception and had an early morning flight to Dallas, where they’d make their connection for their honeymoon. Mav had surprised her with plane tickets to Belize. She’d wondered what he had planned when he’d asked her if she had a passport. She didn’t, but, thankfully, she’d had time to get one before the wedding.

Mav reached for her hand as they drove off. “Jaz, I can’t tell you how happy I am.” He squeezed her fingers and smiled. “I mean it. I’ve never been this happy in my life.”

Did he really mean that? After all, he’d been married before. “Never?”

He brought her hand to his lips. “Never, sweetheart. I’m so happy I could bust, and I can’t believe that I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

A love so strong it took her breath away swept through her. She took off her seat belt and moved over next to him. “Mav, I’ve never felt like this before. I’m so full of joy I just don’t know how to talk about it. I don’t have the words to express

the incredible feelings inside me. You're all I think about, all I'll ever want, honey." She leaned her head against his shoulder and clasped his thigh, getting as close to him as she could. "You're everything to me. I'll never love anyone else."

He kissed the top of her head. "I guess it's a good thing we're married, then, huh?"

She smiled. "It's a good thing."

No; it was the very best thing, and she looked forward to every day of forever.



# Chapter Twenty-One



Mav glanced ahead, enjoying the sight of Jaz's slim figure astride the bay mare walking ahead of him along the banks of the Mopan River. This was the first of their planned excursions, and they were headed to one of the many Mayan sites that the people of Belize counted as their heritage.

He and Jaz had arrived the day before and had spent a wonderful evening on the beach. Their condo was just thirty steps from the sandy oceanfront and was set alongside a string of restaurants and bars that they planned to visit during their five-day honeymoon.

Jaz turned around and waved. He called, "Hey, cowgirl. Having a good time?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't call myself a cowgirl, but I love riding. I'm so glad I married a real cowboy. I can't wait until we visit your ranch again. Isn't this fun, though?" She gestured around her. "I never imagined that I'd be riding to see a Mayan ruin on my honeymoon."

Their guided horseback tour to the Mayan site would take the better part of the day. They'd driven their rental car here, as this particular excursion was quite far from where they were staying.

When they finally arrived at Xunantunich, they dismounted and turned their mounts over to their guide. Jaz clasped Mav's hand, her eyes filled with excitement. The site was surrounded by a large area of manicured grass. The Belizeans were obviously proud of the beautiful Mayan ruin and maintained it well. Other tourists wandered the area as Jaz led him toward the tall set of wide stairs leading up to the top of the pyramid-shaped ruin.

They spent over an hour exploring the site. The huge, faded grey rocks were a mystery. How had the ancients gotten

them to this place? How had they stacked them so perfectly and so high?

Up on one side of the ruins, ancient Mayan carvings gave them a beautiful spot to take pictures. They had the place to themselves for a moment, and Mav pulled Jaz into his arms, kissing her long and slow. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, slipping her tongue into his mouth in the way he loved.

His heart raced. He was happier than he'd ever been in his life, and he couldn't believe that he could love her now and for the rest of his days.

When their guide finally called them to make the return trip, they took a last, long drink from their water bottles and mounted up.

They kept the same, leisurely pace back to the stables. Mav, used to riding for work at the ranch, actually enjoyed the slow pace, maybe because he was sharing the time with Jaz, and she was having such a great time.

When the horses neared home, their paces picked up. He grinned. Horses were the same everywhere. At the barn, they dismounted, and he tipped their guide generously.

Jaz walked over to him, her gait looking a bit stiff. "How you holding up, honey?" he asked.

"I'll be able to tell I spent the day on horseback when I get up in the morning." She slipped her arms around his neck and gave him a tender kiss. "Thanks, Mav. This was fun."

He hugged her close. "There's a lot more fun to come, honey." They were going snorkeling in the shallow part of the barrier reef tomorrow. The boat that was taking them out would drop them off at a point where their brochure said that there would be hard and soft corals, sponges and turtles, and over five hundred species of tropical fish.

The third day, he and Jaz would spend relaxing on the beach. Then, the day after that, he'd scheduled a hiking tour through the jungle where their guide would point out the birds, wildlife, and plant species. He and Jaz both were excited about

that excursion. Their last day, they'd spend on the beach again, soaking up the rays, drinking island drinks and wishing they could stay forever.

Jaz slept on the drive back to the condo. He kissed her awake when they arrived, and she smiled that smile that went straight to his heart.

They were both starving, so, after quick showers, they headed to one of the beach restaurants for dinner. Jaz ordered one of the rum-spiked fruit drinks she'd come to love, and he ordered a beer as they looked at their menus. In the end, they asked their waiter to recommend a good local dish so that they could experience Belizean cuisine.

Their spicy meal included fish fresh from the sea and was accompanied by warm corn tortillas. Jaz spread her tortilla with butter and rolled it up into a cigar, moaning with pleasure as she took her first bite.

He grinned. The woman did know how to enjoy her food nowadays.

After dinner, they strolled along the beach, which was crowded with tourists like themselves. He kissed Jaz's temple. "Shall we stop at one of the bars, or are you too tired?"

She leaned her head against him. "Unless you want to go, I think I'd rather go back to the condo. I'm exhausted."

He sighed out a relieved breath, glad that he didn't have to face the loud music he could hear coming from the various places they strode past. "Sounds good to me."

When they walked up the beach steps to their place, he was relieved that he hadn't mentioned a possible dip in the pool. The area was crowded with other guests. What he wanted most was quiet time with Jaz, time to hold her in his arms and to make love to her. He couldn't get enough of that, more than ever since they'd had a real wedding. To him, she was more precious than she had ever been before.

They changed out of their clothes and dressed for bed. Jaz wore one of the tiny nighties she must have bought for their

honeymoon, as he'd never seen it before. Made of red lace and a soft satiny material, it made his mouth water in anticipation.

He'd bought a bottle of good bourbon the day before, and he poured a glass for each of them. As they settled against the pillows, he raised his glass. "To the woman I love more than anything in the world."

She gave him a slow, sexy smile and clinked her glass with his. "To the man who swept me off my feet. I'll love you forever."

"Aw, honey." He leaned over and kissed her softly. "Forever isn't long enough to love you."

She chuckled. "Is there anything longer than forever?"

He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I don't know. I just know that I'm never going to stop."

He took a sip from his glass and settled back. This place wasn't fancy by any means, but it was spacious and met their simple needs perfectly. And he loved that they only had to descend some stairs to relax on a beautiful beach.

Jaz clasped his hand, rubbing her thumb across it, sending tingles racing up his arm. Her long, shapely legs caught his attention, and his gaze followed them up to the hem of her nightie resting at the top of her thighs. His pulse picked up as he imagined what he wanted to do with her tonight.

"I love being here, and I'm excited about all the things we're going to do, but I'm also looking forward to getting home," she said softly.

"You are?" That surprised him.

"Uh-huh. I'm feeling this incredible nesting urge now. I don't know, it's like I want to buy new drapes or decorate or *something*. I'm not sure."

His heart melted. She wanted to make his home hers now. How incredibly sweet. "Honey, you can do anything you like. You've got my credit card in your name now; just shop for what you want and put everything on it."

She turned over and gave him a hug. “Oh honey, that’s great! I have some ideas that I’d really love to try.”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. He couldn’t wait to see what she came up with. “You just have fun, sweetheart.”

She returned to her place on the pillows and took a swallow of her bourbon. “Now I wish I didn’t have to go right back to work when we get home.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. You don’t really need to work anymore, you know. I have a good salary, and my house’ll be paid off in a few years. I’ve been making extra principal payments since I first bought it. We can easily afford for you to stay home.”

She frowned, but before she could speak, he said, “I know, I know, you like your independence—and I respect that, but really, sweetheart, being a housewife is a full-time job too. And one of these days, we’ll have children. I hope you’ll want to be a stay-at-home mom then.”

She sighed. “You know my doctor said that I had to wait at least six months after my chemo to get pregnant.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Yes, he did, and we’ve waited. But you need to build your strength up.”

She didn’t say anything, and he brought her fingers to his lips. “I won’t put any pressure on you, don’t worry. I just want you to think about it, okay?”

She nodded. After a little while, she said, “Maybe I could go to part-time again.”

“That sounds great, honey. You’d have four days off then.” He was elated that she’d considered his suggestion. He’d rather that she didn’t work at all. Although it had been seven months since she’d finished her chemo, she still tired so easily. It wasn’t that he wanted her dependent on him; of course he didn’t want that. He just wanted her healthy and strong, and he wanted to take care of her.

“Have you ever thought about what you’d like to do if you had spare time on your hands?” he asked.



She took another swallow from her glass. “You know I like to read, but you mean something else?”

“Yes. What sounds like fun to you?”

She thought for a while, running her fingers up and down his thigh. That didn’t help his concentration any. As he waited for her answer, he felt himself harden.

“Well, I’ve always wondered if I’d like yoga, but I’ve never had the time or energy to take a class. Everything I’ve read about it says that the stretching is really good for your body, and I’ve thought it might help my sore muscles from working.”

“That’s great. What else sounds interesting?”

She glanced up at him. “Dang, this is hard. I’m not used to thinking about doing fun stuff for myself.”

After a minute or so, she said, “I’ve always wished that I could take a ballroom dancing class. I love dancing the Texas waltz when I go country dancing, and it’s always made me want to know more about real dancing.”

He groaned. “That means I’ll have to take the class, too, doesn’t it?”

She laughed. “You don’t know ballroom dancing either?”

“Nope. Just country dancing. So, when do we start, partner?”

She put her glass down and straddled him. “Honey, I’ll find something as soon as we get home. I’ll ask Todd when I get back to work about going part-time again. I’m sure he’ll agree. Sam and I are his most dependable employees.”

He pulled her into a hug. “Sweetheart, you’re amazing.”

She kissed him with a gentle sweep of her lips. “No, you’re amazing, cowboy. You’re always thinking of new ways to make me happy. I don’t deserve you.”

He got rid of his drink and rolled her onto her back. “Do too. You deserve that and more.”

She giggled when he tickled her waist.

“One of the admins at work takes yoga. Do you want me to ask her where she goes?”

She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he sucked in a breath, loving the way that felt. “Would you please? I’d love to start right away if I can find a time that works.”

He leaned down and kissed her so softly it made his lips tingle.

She breathed out a sigh. “I love it when you kiss me like that.”

He had one thing in mind now: making love to his gorgeous wife. “I’ll remember that,” he whispered, and trailed tiny kisses down her neck to her breast, sucking her nipple through the soft lace.

He helped her slip out of her nightie and he stripped off his boxers.

She took his head in her hands as he circled her nipple with his tongue, feeling it harden as he took it into his mouth. She whimpered her pleasure as he took in more of her breast, sucking harder. She ran her fingers through his hair, something that made his pulse race as his excitement grew.

He cupped her breast, loving the fullness of it, wishing he could take it all in. She raised her knee, and he knew what she wanted. He slid his fingers between her legs. She was hot and wet. He moved down, kneed her thighs apart, and knelt between them.

She whispered, “Yes, Mav.”

Lifting her hips, he tucked a pillow underneath her. She sighed, reaching for him as he bent to her. She was beautiful; perfect in every way. He slipped his tongue inside her, and she clasped his head. He glanced at her face. Her eyes were half closed, her face suffused with pleasure as he slid his tongue up to her sensitive spot and stroked it up and down.

Then he lost himself in giving her what she needed, stroking and delving, working his magic as she gasped and moaned and moved beneath his tongue to increase her pleasure.

Suddenly she spurted and cried out, grabbing him hard.

He sat up and pulled her to the end of the bed. “Stand up, honey.”

In a daze, she complied, placing her hands on the edge of the bed. God, he loved looking at her that way.

“Mav, hurry!” she cried and pushed back at him.

He grasped her hips and thrust inside her.

She groaned and ground against him, wanting more.

He pulled out and thrust in again, and then again. His heart beat so hard he could barely breathe. “Jaz, I love you!” His body pounded into her, thrust after thrust.

She pushed against him, wanting him deep inside her.

Pleasure built inside him, so deep, so strong, and so clear it was close to pain. Suddenly it burst, running through him in waves that took his breath away. Mouth open, he gasped, clutching Jaz to him. She was still, lost in her own pleasure.

A moment later, she reached back, cupping his butt. “Hey, sexy, how come you feel so good?” Then she collapsed onto the bed.

He laughed and picked her up. “Come here, you.” He kissed her, then settled her in the middle of the bed. “How come *you* feel so good?”

She sighed loudly. “I’m just perfect that way.”

He laughed again. “Yes, you are.”

He came back to bed a few minutes later and, after her own trip to the bathroom, she snuggled onto his chest. “Is it just me, or does making love feel better now that we’ve renewed our vows?”

He stroked her back. “It’s not just you. I’ve been feeling different ever since the ceremony. It’s like...” He paused while he tried to think of just the right words. “It’s like everything is perfect now. There’s something about being blessed by a man of God and having our friends and family present that makes me feel that I’m truly married forever.” He thought a little

more. “I mean, I loved you like that before, but now I feel *married* like that. Does that make sense?”

She rubbed her hand back and forth across his chest in the way that he loved. “I think it does, Mav. I’ve been feeling something just like that. Having everyone we love there made it seem real, like we’re bonded forever now. It’s like the pastor said: now we know we can count on our family and friends to support us when we go through hard times.”

He kissed her fingers as a rush of tenderness filled him. “I loved that you asked me to be your family in your vows. I know that you don’t really have family besides your foster parents, and I’m so honored that you asked me to be yours, honey.”

“I meant it. You’re my most important family now, and I feel like your mom and dad are my family, too. And Julie? Her too.”

He hugged her tight. “We *are* your family, honey. You’ll never be alone again.”

And neither would he, thanks to his beautiful wife. He turned off the lamp, and darkness filled the room. He wished that they could hear the waves, but the sound of the air-conditioning drowned them out. He felt Jaz sigh, and he ran his fingers up and down her arm. That always put her to sleep.

His life was perfect now. And he hoped that Jaz’s would be too. Maybe soon he could talk her into quitting work entirely. But now, at least, she’d have time for her yoga and dance lessons. He smiled to himself at the thought of taking ballroom dancing lessons. But, hell, he’d do anything if it made her happy.

She slid her leg over his, and he breathed out a contented sigh. *Goodnight, sweetheart. I’ll love you for ever and ever, honey.* And she would love him forever, too. God was good.



# Epilogue



Mav threw the small children's saddle up on Grant, an old, retired ranch horse. They were visiting the ranch for a few days, and Mav had caught the old gelding up from the pasture and spent fifteen minutes grooming him here in the barn.

The new saddle gleamed in the sunshine coming in through the wide barn doors. He glanced toward the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jaz and their two-year-old son, Rory, coming this way.

They'd waited the requisite time before trying to get pregnant, and then they'd been lucky. Jaz had gotten pregnant almost immediately. Still, she'd been a nervous wreck during her pregnancy, afraid that somehow the chemo had altered her body in some way and that there would be something wrong with the baby.

But Rory was a perfect little boy. Full of sunshine and laughter. As Mav had hoped, midway through her pregnancy, Jaz had quit her job at the café. Now, she was a stay-at-home mom and loving every minute of it.

Having never had the kind of mom she should have, Jaz read books and went online to find out how to be the best mother she could be. She still worried constantly about crib-death, but Mav hoped that fear would go away as Rory got older.

He bent to clean out the old horse's hooves, something that hadn't been done in a while since he'd been out to pasture. By the time he'd finished, he heard the crunch of Jaz's boots on the gravel outside the barn.

"He looks like a nice horse, honey," she said as she held Rory's hand in a firm grip. Little monkey that he was, he was trying to wrangle his hand free.

Mav grinned. "I'll bet you'd like to ride this horse, wouldn't you, Rory?"

Rory had his daddy's blue eyes and dark-brown hair. He wore a little felt cowboy hat as well as blue jeans and boots. His T-shirt said "Daddy's little cowboy" and had a picture of a boy riding a bucking horse front and center. "Uh-huh," he said and yanked his hand out of Jaz's grasp.

Mav left Grant tied to the post and went over and picked Rory up. "How about I lead you around then, buster?"

Their hat brims touched, and Mav grinned. He was so proud of his little guy he could just pop.

"You going to stay in the corral or walk on the drive?" Jaz asked.

"We can ride on the drive, I think. The old guy's gentle. He won't spook."

"You and Rory go on ahead. I'll bring the horse," Jaz said and let them pass.

Mav bounced Rory up and down, making him giggle. He adored his son. In his whole life, he'd never imagined the depth of love that he'd have for his own child. It took his breath away and scared him to death. He didn't know how he'd ever live if something happened to Rory.

They watched Jaz lead the horse out of the corral.

Rory said, "Pretty horse, Daddy. I wanna ride."

Rory had been an early talker, and his high little voice sent such a wave of joy through Mav that he hugged him to his chest. "Well, I'm going to put you up on that pretty horse right now, honey."

Jaz held Grant while Mav carefully lifted Rory high and settled him into the saddle seat. Then he took Rory's hand and wrapped it around the saddle horn. "You hold on tight to this, big boy. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy." Rory grinned hugely and thumped the horse with his heels.

Obediently, the old horse started off.

Startled, Mav grabbed the back of Rory's jeans. "Whoa, there, buddy. I didn't say to go yet. Grant could have taken off with you."

Rory didn't seem the least bit repentant, and just laughed.

Jaz grinned, walking backward and still holding the lead rope as she led the horse. "I see he's a chip off the old block."

Mav shook his head. "I think I just got several gray hairs. Damn, what's he going to be like as a teenager?"

Jaz chuckled. "Just like you, I imagine. Get ready, honey."

"Oh hell." Mav sighed and then grinned at her. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Yep, he sure is. And so's his daddy." She reached for his hand. "I sure love you and I'm glad he's like you. He'll grow up into a strong, loving man who takes good care of his family, just like you."

Mav didn't want to let go of the little stinker, or he'd kiss her right then. "Thanks, sweetheart."

He patted Rory's back. "Having fun, buster?"

Rory nodded his head, the cowboy hat coming loose.

Mav tugged it down again and grinned. "Stop the horse a sec, will you honey?"

Jaz did, and he said, "Come here, beautiful," and opened his arms.

She held onto the lead rope but rushed to his embrace.

He kissed her neck and said, "Honey, thank you for my family, for my Rory, and for making me the happiest man in the world. I love you, sweetheart." Then he took Rory down and hugged him too.

He'd never want anything more than what he had right now, right here.

Jaz kissed him and whispered, "I'll love you forever, Mav."



And everything was perfect.

## SNEAK PEEK – THE COWBOY TEXAS RANGERS UNEXPECTED LOVE

Jack McCullough paced back and forth across the living room as the front door shut behind his most recent nanny applicant. He sighed in despair as he contemplated the similar aspects of the six women he'd interviewed in the past two days. They'd all seemed nice and professional and yet that very professionalism had made him uncomfortable. One had actually arrived in a two-piece skirt suit. Another had talked about how important proper discipline was for children approaching their terrible twos.

The nanny he eventually hoped to hire must have a sunny and bright disposition. And she had to be loving while caring for his eighteen-month-old daughter, Lily. It was the love part he'd sensed that these ladies had been missing and that was the rub. Lily's mom, his ex-wife Sarah, who happened to be a CIA operative, had accepted a two-year posting in the Middle East, and this meant that Lily would need a mother-figure as her caregiver.

He traveled frequently with his job as a Texas Ranger, so the nanny position was a live-in arrangement. This made it doubly important that he find the right match. The woman would share his home.

He glanced at his watch. The next applicant was due in a few minutes, and he had hopes for her. Unlike the other veteran nanny applicants, this woman was an artist with volunteer experience with children. She sounded quite interesting, and he hoped that these differences might mean that she was more like the vision he had for Lily's caregiver.

Tired of pacing, he sat down on the couch and checked his emails in an attempt to distract himself.

When the doorbell rang, his pulse began to race. This might be it—the answer he'd been waiting for. He opened the door and the corners of his mouth lifted at the woman's appearance. "Please, come in. You must be Emily Anderson." She looked to be in her late twenties and wore a brightly colored blouse with sleeves gathered at the wrist, blue jeans,

and red, ballerina-type shoes. She was an extraordinarily beautiful blonde with ice-blue eyes and, although not very tall, her slender figure was perfectly curved.

She stepped inside. “Yes, I’m Emily.” After offering him her hand, she said, “Nice to meet you.” She appeared nothing like the others and her happy smile made the knot in his chest relax immediately. Could this be the one?

He took the recliner, letting her have the couch. As he opened the folder with her resume in it, he said, “I see you have a background in art. What made you want to be a nanny?”

“I’ve always loved children and I’ve volunteered with them in one way or another since high school. I know I can use my art to enrich children’s lives. If you hire me, I’ll definitely find ways to do that with Lily.”

He liked the sound of that. “But didn’t you ever want a career in art?”

She pursed her lips. “At one time I considered it. However, I think more with my heart than my pocketbook. I worked in a gallery for several years while I pursued my own art in New Orleans, and I realized just how cutthroat the art world can be. That’s not who I am.”

He liked how she’d phrased that. She thought with her heart, huh?

“I love photography and that’s what I’ve been doing for the past couple of years. I recently moved home with my parents. They live just outside of McAllen.”

“I’m impressed with your volunteer work with the children at the homeless shelter in downtown New Orleans. I can only imagine how hard it was to see kids in that kind of environment.”

Her brows drew together. “Yes, their situation was tough, but I loved it that I could help them have fun. I found a sponsor for their art supplies through the gallery where I worked, and we made some nice things together. I tried to be sure that our projects could be completed in one session

because the kids never knew where they'd be from one day to the next. That part really broke my heart."

Emily sounded like such a special person. "This is a live-in position. Do you foresee any problems with that? Of course you'll have the weekends off. You'll leave Saturday morning and be back Sunday by five."

"No, that's no problem at all. It was in the information I was sent."

He nodded. "Did you also see the part about the additional time you may have to spend with my daughter if I need to travel out of town? It might mean giving up your weekend off if that happens. Several of the other applicants weren't comfortable with that aspect of the job and it's a critical part of this nanny position."

She shrugged. "Of course covering for you on weekends is fine. I'm here to care for Lily when you can't, after all."

He relaxed for the first time since finding out that Sarah was going overseas. "Tell me, how would you discipline an eighteen-month-old?"

Emily frowned. "First of all, I think "discipline" is the wrong word. With a child Lily's age, you talk to her and then redirect her. She's too young for real discipline. And I think if I provide a fun, enriching environment and make sure that she's rested and well-fed, we should get along pretty well."

"Would you like to meet Lily?"

"Of course!" She rose from the couch with an eagerness that made him grin.

"I'll be right back. She's in her room with a babysitter I use from time to time."

He walked back into the living room a moment later with Lily in his arms. As he approached Emily, he said, "Lily, this is Emily. She's going to be your helper from now on."

Emily smiled at Lily and patted her leg. "Hey, little one. You're adorable."

Lily stuck her finger in her mouth and eyed Emily.

“Do you like to color, or do you like to paint better?” Emily asked.

Lily gave her a tentative smile.

“Painting’s fun—even painting with your fingers.” Emily said.

Lily slowly reached out her hand.

Emily took it and gave it a little shake. “We could be friends, you and I.”

Jack was impressed that Emily had let Lily approach her in her own way. Adults often forced themselves on children, attempting to hold them before children were ready for that kind of connection.

A smile tugged at his lips. “Emily, would you be our nanny? I think you’ll be perfect for Lily.”

Emily smiled. “I’d love that. Thank you, Mr. McCollough.”

“Call me Jack. Can you start on Monday? Does two days give you enough time?”

“That sounds great.”

Lord, that smile of hers beamed with kindness.

“Why don’t you come back Sunday afternoon to move your things in?” he said. “If you like, you can spend the night then too.”

“That sounds great,” Emily said.

“If you want to take a look at your room, it’s the first door on your right down the hall.” He motioned in that direction and Emily nodded her thanks before heading that way.

He still couldn’t believe his luck. Emily was the answer to his prayers.

A couple of minutes later, Emily came striding back. “What a great bedroom. I’ll be very happy here. So, I’ll be back at, what, five Sunday afternoon?”

“That’s perfect.”

When she'd gone, he paid Katie, the sitter, and sat with Lily in the rocking chair in her room. The easy back and forth motion was something that had always soothed his nerves.

He put in a call to Sarah who had just arrived at her posting a few hours earlier.

She answered with, "Everything ok, Jack?"

He could hear voices in the background. "It's more than okay. I think I found a perfect nanny. She starts on Monday." After asking her if she had a few minutes, he told her all about Emily. Sarah had been worried because she'd had to leave the States with the issue unresolved.

"Jack, I'm so relieved and thrilled that this woman seems so kind. It's what I'd hoped for."

"I know. Me too. And she doesn't mind at all that I might be called out of town sometimes. She's everything that we wanted in a nanny."

"Good job, Jack. I knew you could do it. Listen, I've gotta go. I'm on site and I've got a meeting in five. Thanks for calling."

He'd been worried when he'd found out about her Islamabad Station posting. That part of the Middle East was a hotbed of terrorist groups and other jihadist activity.

Lily scooted out to his knees and said, "Bounce, Daddy."

He chuckled. It was one of her favorite games. He complied, giving her a lively ride. Everything was going to be okay now, and he had a beautiful woman named Emily to thank for it.

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Until next time, may all your dreams be of cowboys!

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## About the Author

Nobody knows sexy Texas cowboys like Janalyn Knight. She grew up competing in rodeo, later working on a ten-thousand-acre cattle ranch, and these experiences lend an authenticity to her characters and stories. Janalyn is an avid supporter of the Hill Country Horse Refuge and absolutely owns the title of wine drinker extraordinaire. When she's not writing spicy cowboy romances, she's living her dream—sharing her twenty-acres of Texas Hill Country with her daughters and their families.

Read more at [Janalyn Knight's site](#).