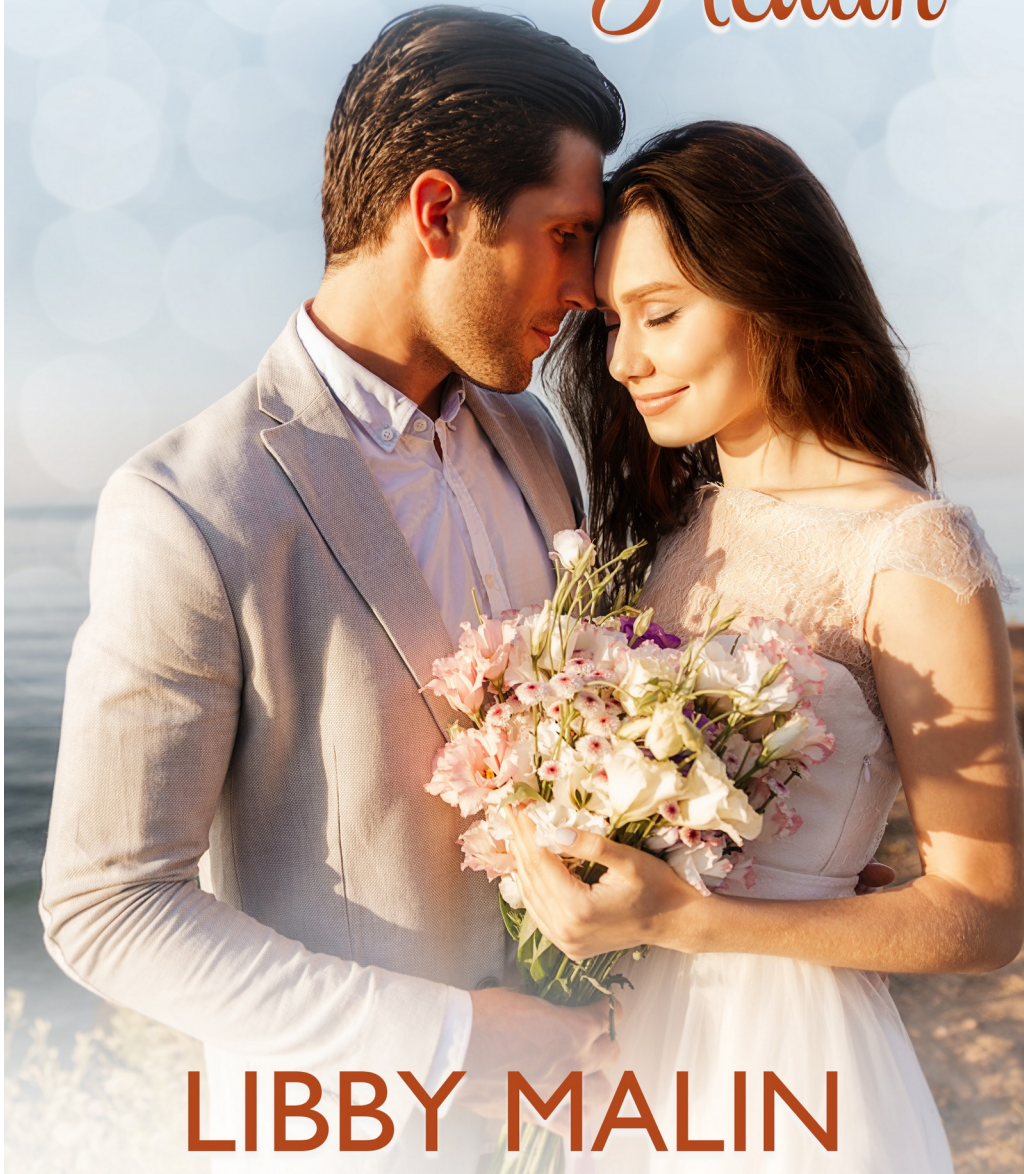


IN *Sickness*  
...AND IN *Health*



LIBBY MALIN

*Excerpt from “In Sickness and in Health” by Libby Malin*

He was making her an offer: marriage, perhaps for a short time, depending on his prognosis, during which she'd live a life of luxury and leisure except tending to him. Not as nurse or maid, mind you, but as companion and dear friend. As helpmate. As hand-holder. He'd hire nurses and maids, and all Ava would have to do was manage them. He'd expect fidelity during the marriage, and she heartily concurred. Once married, she'd live up to the vows and she'd expect the same as him.

Once married—yes, she said that. She spoke with the same level of sincerity and seriousness. She told him he wasn't crazy, that she was the one who'd originally floated the idea, and that she wasn't about to laugh at him for taking her up on it, especially given his current situation.

They talked, in fact, as if this were a business deal. But even so, she found herself staring at him, her heart breaking thinking of the loneliness he'd probably felt after his parents passed, and then being alone again in the doctor's office, getting bad news.

She'd felt lonely during her DC ordeal, and she'd not faced anything as grave as this.

She, too, began to feel that her “inspiration” the night she'd arrived at the beach—to marry a rich man, and the call it had prompted her to make—was some sort of quirk of Fate, leading them to each other, if only for a short time.

This, too, nudged their interaction into overdrive. There was something about a possible death sentence that made everything more intoxicating, that made colors more saturated, emotions more pronounced. Why, she might even say she loved John. Loved him as a human being in need. And who was to say: perhaps she'd fall in love with him, too. She'd always liked him. Well, in that impersonal way of high school kids. But they'd not moved in the same social circles much, so she'd just not had the chance to interact with him. After the beer-soaked proposal at the pool party, she'd even crushed on him. Until she realized he wasn't going to ask her out. She had to admit she'd found him attractive when he'd landed on her doorstep the other day. Very attractive. And if he'd taken measures to start dating, she would have responded positively.

She squared her shoulders when they arrived at the medical center in Wilmington. Step one: be that helpmate he required. She'd signed up for that task for this day. Maybe that was the way to approach all of it, just in twenty-four-hour segments, one day after another, not looking farther than evening.

The day was tedious and stressful, and if anything was going to test her inclination to say yes, it was the frustration and boredom of medical testing. The check-in and directions to the right office. The endless papers to fill out, the same ones for the radiologist as for the medical center in general. The signature on the privacy papers—yes, she agreed when

John asked if he could put her down as someone the doctors could talk to. The showing of his insurance cards, the looking up of said insurance program, the checking of blood pressure and pulse, several times, once for each location they moved to, from office, to waiting room, to private waiting area of the scan area.

The sitting around sea-green waiting rooms flipping through last month's *People* magazine waiting nearly two hours for a scan because there was a technical issue with one of the two machines in the medical center, and because it turned out John was, in fact, claustrophobic, and they'd had to pull him from the room, give him a Valium, and wait for it to affect him before putting him back in the schedule. Oh, and there were more checks on his BP and pulse then, too.

All of this was done, of course, with stiff smiles on their faces, little reassuring grins as if to say, "This is going okay, isn't it? Just a few little bugs here and there, but it's so ordinary, so normal to have these speed bumps, so comforting to feel irritated at this, this small thing..."

Although she'd done nothing but sit and read the entire afternoon they were there, she felt as if she'd run a marathon when they finally slipped out of the building and breathed fresh air. Her muscles ached, particularly those around her mouth and eyes.

"If I heard 'Strangers in the Night' one more time, I would have screamed," she said.

"Your voice would have been covered by the racket I'd make heaving a chair at the speaker system," he said, as they made their way to his truck in the multilevel parking lot.

"At least they turned off the TV," she said. "Watching bodies being cut up in the morgue on *CSI: Miami* just doesn't seem like suitable fare for a hospital waiting room, you know?"

At that, he chuckled. So did she. And the tension of the day led them to full-out laughter as the aches left them and they relaxed, and that led to him touching her arm when they reached his vehicle, and she leaned in, and he wrapped her in a hug. And they shared their first kiss.

Not bad. Not bad at all, she thought, as his warm lips pressed against hers and he deepened the kiss. She liked that he didn't wear aftershave, and she breathed in the clean scent of his soap, something that had a tinge of coconut oil in it, she thought, reminding her of suntan lotion and the sea.

They stayed locked in an embrace, his forehead pressing on hers, for a few moments. "Thanks," he breathed. "It really made a difference, having someone—you—with me."

She squeezed his arm. "I was happy to do it. Really." The tedium of the afternoon lifted, the fatigue memory misting away as well. She felt good. About herself. About life. About everything. And especially about being with John. This *was* Fate bringing them together.

“I think I’m awake enough to drive,” he said, but she shook her head.

“Nope. I take my duties to my future fiancé very seriously. I will drive us home.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up a bit, and she thought she noticed a visible relaxing of his shoulders. Good. She was glad if she could give that to him.

They both got in, and he leaned his seat back, confirming her belief that he really did need to unwind.

She started the engine, and after a few jolts as she got used to the brakes and action of the accelerator pedal, they were on the road south to Bethany Beach.

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*Read the entire story of Ava and John's journey to love through bad and good health by heading to [Amazon and picking up a copy of "In Sickness and in Health"!](#)*