

Chase's Return

T. E. Killian

Chapter One

Tiffany Cameron awakened on the first Monday in February feeling as if she had a hangover. She'd never had a hangover in her life but she'd heard other teachers describe them enough for her to know that was how she felt. But it definitely wasn't a hangover though, especially since she'd never taken a drink of alcohol her entire life.

She had cried herself to sleep the night before. And it wasn't because she'd just celebrated—if you could call it that—her fortieth birthday on Saturday. No, it wasn't that at all. It was the fact that her mother had waited until the day after Tiffany's birthday to tell her that she had breast cancer.

Her mom had breast cancer! It was enough to frighten her almost out of her wits. Her mom was too young to die. She was only sixty-six after all. Anymore, that was not considered to be old, was it?

She thought about lying right where she was in her bed for the rest of the day, but she couldn't and she knew it. She had to get going so she could get to school at her normal time of seven-thirty, which was an hour before school started.

She dearly loved teaching but today she just had no energy. She would just lie here for a few more minutes, and then she'd get up and get going. But, as was usually the case, someone else had a different idea.

Suddenly, there was a huge orange cat leaning over her face beginning to lick her cheek.

"Garfield! Get off me."

She tried to shove him aside but he was too heavy. "All right. All right. I'll get up now."

As soon as she said that, his face disappeared from her vision and she heard a loud thud when he hit the hardwood floor of her bedroom.

She finally pulled herself out of bed, went to the back door of her apartment, and let the cat out. She sometimes wondered whose place this really was. Not only that, but Garfield acted as if he owned her too.

"That settles it. I'm calling a realtor today to start looking at houses. And if I can't find one with a cat door, then I'll just have one put in. That's final."

The cat raced out the door not paying her a bit of attention. So what else was new?

That was when she remembered that today was the grand opening or reopening of Candy and Ryan's new café downtown. She rushed into the bathroom and jumped into the shower.

As she was starting to dress afterward, she heard Garfield wanting in. She let him in and finished quickly. And that was some feat with her long blond hair usually taking a long time to dry. Today, she simply put it up in a ponytail to dry on its own and rushed off.

If she hurried, she'd have just enough time to get to the newly remodeled and expanded café. Candy O'Reilly had moved to town last August to open a specialty coffee and pastry shop. Now, six months later, Candy was married to Ryan Maxwell, the owner of the café across the street from her shop. Ryan also just happened to be the mayor of Clear Creek.

Not only that, but Candy was now one of Tiffany's two best friends.

The grand opening was actually the reopening of Candy and Ryan's new combined shop, which now took up Ryan's old café and the shop next door, which had held an antiques shop before. Candy's old shop was now a hairdresser's shop.

She parked on a side street off Main Street and rushed around the corner and into Maxwell's Café and Pastry Shop just as several other people were entering too.

She paused just inside to look around. Of course, even though Candy had given her and their other friend, Sabrina, a tour last week, it still surprised Tiffany at how much the place had changed. Sure, the side that had been the original Maxwell's Café before hadn't really changed that much.

But they'd taken out most of the dividing wall between the two retail spaces and the new area was almost a mirror image of the other side. The new side was where Candy had her specialty coffee machines and her pastries on display in large cases that ran the width of the back of the large room.

She went in and took a seat on a vacant stool at the counter in front of the display cases. Candy Maxwell saw her right away and stopped in front of her on the other side of the counter.

"Good morning Tiffany, I'm so glad you could make it this morning."

Tiffany tried to grin up at Candy, which she would have had to do even if they'd both been standing. Candy was four inches taller than Tiffany's five three. Just then, Sabrina Elliott, their other friend slid onto the stool next to Tiffany. At five ten, Sabrina dwarfed both of them.

People always commented on how the three of them looked together. They were sometimes called 'The Blond Stair Steps.'

Candy called out, "Oh my!" and leaned forward, placing her elbows on the counter in front of Tiffany. Then she reached out, placed her hands on Tiffany's shoulders, and stared into her eyes.

"Okay, Tiffany, give. You've been crying. Why?"

Sabrina leaned around to look too and said, "Yes you have. What's up girl? Spit it out."

Tiffany fought to keep her voice from cracking but didn't totally succeed. "My mom just told me yesterday that she has breast cancer."

She was suddenly smothered by the other two women. They placed their arms around her in one of their famous three-way hugs, which was complicated by Candy having to reach across the counter.

Candy was the first to speak. "What do the doctors say?"

Tiffany took the tissue that Sabrina handed her. "She said they told her that they're going to have to operate to take the lump out and they'll have to wait until after the surgery to decide on what kind of follow-up treatment they'll need to do then."

When both women kept staring at her as if expecting more, she added, "They did say that they thought they caught the cancer soon enough to get it all."

Ryan Maxwell, Candy's husband of three months stepped up behind his wife. He looked at Tiffany and then turned to his wife with concern on his face. She turned to him and whispered in his ear and he nodded his head as he looked at Tiffany.

Just then, Chase Devereaux walked up to where the group was. Tiffany took one look at her principal and burst into tears.

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Chase Devereaux was tired . . . physically. He'd gone fishing with his sons over the weekend. That usually didn't bother him. He'd always considered that to be the good kind of tired.

He was also tired mentally or emotionally. For six months now, he'd been living with the threat hanging over his head that he would have to go to court over a complaint that one of his female teachers had made against him. It had been a long emotionally draining time for him. He was more than ready to get it all over with . . . one way or another.

He forced himself to get up and start getting dressed. That was when he remembered that this morning was the grand opening of Ryan's new café or were they calling it something else now? No, he was sure that the word café was still in the name.

He stepped out into the hall and called out to his sons. "Drew, Tyler, we need to get going. Remember, we're going downtown before we go to school this morning."

Drew's door opened and his redheaded son, who looked just like him, stuck his head out and said, "What for?"

"Don't you remember that Ryan is having the grand opening for his new café today and I promised him that we'd stop in for breakfast this morning."

"Oh. I forgot."

With that, Drew's head disappeared into his room.

"Tyler, are you up yet? You need to start getting ready?"

He heard a muffled reply from his younger son and knew from experience that it wasn't enough. He opened the door a crack to see that Tyler had indeed pulled his pillow over his head.

Chase called out loudly, "Come on Tyler, you need to get up and get going."

When no sound or movement came from the bed, Chase raised his voice, "Now!"

That brought Tyler up and out of bed. Chase just stared down at his brown haired son who looked so much like his mother. After a moment, Chase went back to his room to finish getting ready.

As they entered the café, Chase saw Ryan over on the new side of the expanded room. He headed that way and didn't say anything when his sons went over to talk to Ryan's niece and stepdaughter who were at the left-hand counter.

He noticed that Ryan was standing behind the counter with his new wife, Candy. That was when he also noticed the two blond heads in front of them. He always smiled when he saw the two women together. Sabrina Elliott was at least seven inches taller than Tiffany Cameron.

Just as he stopped behind the women who were sitting at the counter, Tiffany turned and before he could say a word, she burst into tears.

Now what! What did he do now? She was one of his teachers. Was she going to file a complaint against him too? That was all he needed.

Candy and Sabrina grabbed Tiffany and lead her into the back of the café and out of sight.

Chase looked over at Ryan who just frowned and pointed to the stools just vacated by the women. So Chase perched on one of them.

As he was about to ask Ryan what in the world had just happened, Ryan said, "I'm sure you'll find out later. And being as you're her boss, you need to know anyway." He frowned and continued, "Tiffany just found out that her mother has breast cancer and is going to be operated on Friday."

Chase didn't know what to say. He had been the principal at the high school for ten years now and Tiffany had already been there for eight years when he came. So, he knew her as well or better than most of his teachers.

He liked her as a teacher. In fact, she was probably the best teacher he had on his staff. He always marveled at how well behaved her classes always were, especially considering the fact that almost all of her students were taller than she was.

He had always admired her as a person too. She had been newly divorced when Chase started there. Her husband, also a teacher, had left her for another teacher a few months before he came to town. The way she had handled all of that had impressed him greatly.

She had also been one of the many teachers who had attempted to comfort him when his own wife had died from breast cancer two years ago. So, if nothing else, he knew what Tiffany must be going through right now.

He looked up at Ryan and said, "I'll try to talk to her at school sometime today, see if she may need a some time off for a little while or something."

Ryan, who wasn't very tall but was still several inches taller than Chase had always seemed to relish looking down on him just as he was doing right then.

"That's good of you Chase."

As Chase gave Ryan his breakfast order, his sons joined him and gave him theirs too.

Tyler and Drew were both on his right and he looked up when someone sat on the stool next to him on his left. He was relieved to see that it was Hunter Billingsley, the police chief.

"Hey Hunter. How's it going this morning?"

Hunter looked at Ryan and then at Chase. "Yeah, I guess I've been worse, but I'm not sure when that could have been."

Ryan leaned over and looked into Hunter's eyes. "Did you get more news about your daughter?"

Hunter nodded. "Yeah, she got suspended from school again." He blew out his breath noisily. "That makes the second time this year."

Chase knew all about Hunter's sixteen-year-old daughter who lived with her mother in Little Rock. Hunter seldom saw her and Chase knew it really hurt the man.

Hunter broke the silence. "Give me one of those fancy things Candy has on special this morning."

He took a sip of the coffee that Ryan had set in front of him as soon as he had sat down.

As Hunter bit into the apple tart, Ryan turned to Chase and said, "How was your weekend fishing trip? You went to Taneycomo didn't you?"

Chase smiled, looked over at his sons who were both looking up at him from their breakfasts. "It was great, wasn't it guys?"

Both teenage heads bobbed as they returned to their meals.

When they were all three finished, Chase looked at his watch and slid off his stool. He'd hoped that Tiffany would have come back out before he left. He had wanted to see if he could judge her fitness to go in to work today. Oh well, he'd just have to catch her as soon as she arrived.

He turned to Ryan who had just come back to where they were. "Ryan, if you get a chance, would you tell Tiffany to take all the time she needs to compose herself. I'll be at her room ready to take her first class if she runs a little late, okay."

Ryan only nodded causing some of his brown bangs to fall over his forehead.

With that, Chase herded his sons out so they could all get to school on time.

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Tiffany was never more pleased to have two such wonderful friends as Sabrina and Candy. When she had broken down in the café, they had immediately taken her into the back, sat her down, and smothered her with care and understanding. Then before she knew what was happening, they were praying with her.

Once she was able to gain enough control to speak, she looked from one to the other of the dear women and said, "I'm so sorry. And poor Chase, he must think I'm crazy. But when I turned around and saw him, I just lost it. All I could think about was that his wife died from breast cancer and I just lost it."

Sabrina leaned over her again and said, "That's okay Dear, we understand and I'm sure that Chase will too."

About fifteen minutes later, Tiffany looked up to see Ryan standing there.

When she continued to look at him, trying to smile, he said, "Just wanted to let you know that Chase said he would be there to stay with your first class if you need to run a little late."

Tiffany smiled back at him. That made her feel a little better too. Yes, Chase must have understood all right. He was such a nice man and a great principal to work for or was it 'with' as he often claimed. She got a warm feeling thinking about him, but she'd have to quash that feeling . . . again.

She smiled up at Ryan and said, "Thank you. But I think I'll be able to get myself together enough to go on out to the school in a few minutes."

Neither Candy nor Sabrina gave her a choice. Ten minutes later, they both walked with her around the corner to her car and made sure she was okay to drive before they let her go. It sure did feel good to have such caring and considerate friends.

When she walked down the hallway to her classroom, which was only about fifty feet from the front office, she was sure that she felt good enough now to start her day off somewhat normally.

True to his word, Chase was standing in the doorway of her room as her first hour Freshman English students filed in past him. She smiled at him and said, "Thank you, Mr. Devereaux."

With the students within earshot, he also addressed her formally. "Good morning Ms. Cameron and you're welcome."

As she paused beside him, he spoke softly to her, "Are you sure you're okay now. I can stay a little longer or I can even call in a substitute."

She tried to smile at him again and said, "Thank you, but I don't think that will be necessary."

She made it two steps before she remembered. She turned back to him and said, "I would like to have at least Friday morning off if that's possible."

He smiled back at her and said, "Yes it is possible, and why don't you just go ahead and take the whole day off so you can stay with your mother after the surgery too."

She was starting to get choked up again, so all she could do was nod but she could see in his remarkable green eyes that he understood. With that, he closed the door as the bell rang and she was alone with her freshmen.

After such a bad start, Tiffany's morning went surprisingly well. It seemed as if her first three classes just flew by and lunch came quickly.

She hadn't felt like making anything for her lunch this morning so she went to the cafeteria and took a tray to the teacher's lounge.

As she was just finishing praying silently over her meal, she looked up to see Myrtle Ann Bradshaw toss a sack lunch down on the table across from Tiffany and sit down. Myrtle Ann's best friend Loretta Martin plopped down beside her.

Great! That was all she needed. She had grown up with Myrtle Ann and Loretta. She had simply never gotten along with either one of them, even though she had tried very hard to be friendly toward them. Tiffany had learned, the hard way, that there were just some people she would never be able to get along with no matter how hard she tried. And Myrtle Ann and Loretta were certainly two of them.

Everyone on staff knew that Myrtle Ann was a below average teacher who had discipline problems in all of her classes. They also knew that Myrtle Ann had filed a harassment complaint against Chase after he gave her a bad evaluation last semester. The whole staff seemed to be holding its collective breath for the next evaluation, which was due any day now.

Tiffany was more than a little surprised that Myrtle Ann seemed to be seeking her out just then.

“Well, Tiffany, I hear your mother is dying. Sorry about that.” And she didn’t sound sorry at all.

Tiffany prided herself on her self-control and the fact that she had hardly ever lost her temper. But right then, she was suddenly seeing red. She clamped her teeth tight and tried not to say anything. After a long moment, she was able to open her mouth to shovel some food in that now tasted like cardboard. She kept mechanically doing that, trying to ignore the other two women until Myrtle Ann finally gave up and the two of them left her alone.

After the other women left, Tiffany shoved her half-eaten lunch tray away from her and began to think. How could Myrtle Ann have known about her mom’s cancer? And most of all, who could have told her that her mom was dying? The doctors weren’t saying that. They thought they had caught the tumor early enough to be able to get all the cancer when they operated.

Chase! He was the only one at school who could have known.

She dumped her food in the garbage, placed the tray on a stack of trays on a table in the corner of the room, and rushed out of the lounge.

Later, when she thought about it, she didn’t remember the walk from the lounge down one long hall to another and down it to the front of the building where the administrative offices were. She was still so mad that she was having a difficult time keeping the tears at bay.

She stalked into the outer office, past a startled Patsy Fisher, the secretary, straight into Chase’s office, and slammed the door behind her.

It wasn’t until she was inside that she even looked to see if he was actually there. He was. He was frozen, half out of his chair as if he was coming toward her with an extremely puzzled look on his face.

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Chase had spent his morning doing his normal catchup on paperwork that always seemed to accumulate by Friday afternoon. And of course, he usually put all but the most urgent of it off until Monday. That had especially been the case last Friday, since he had even left early to go fishing with his sons.

He leaned back and thought about his sons. He wasn’t positive but he thought that finally after two years they were all three just about out of the funk they’d been in since Peggy had died. At least he hoped that was true.

There was a soft knock on his open doorway and he looked up to see Patsy standing there.

“Chase, you have a discipline case out here.”

He stood and said, “Bring them in Patsy.”

He almost fell back into his chair when Tyler walked in with a stubborn look on his face.

Patsy handed the referral slip to Chase and closed the door behind her.

As he deliberately lowered himself slowly into his seat, Chase said, "Have a seat Tyler."

Once Tyler was sitting on the edge of a chair facing the desk, Chase said, "All right, Tyler, why don't you tell me what happened?"

Chase looked down at the paper as he waited for Tyler to answer. It was from Myrtle Ann Bradshaw. Great! That was all he needed. He looked closer and saw that the word disrespect was circled in red.

"Well, Mrs. Bradshaw was saying bad things about you to the class and I told her she didn't know what she was talking about."

Chase could have guessed that was what had happened before Tyler ever spoke.

"And what did she say after you said that?"

Tyler ducked his head and mumbled.

"What was that Tyler?"

Tyler looked up at him then and said, "She said that I was just like you and then she started screaming that I was being disrespectful and she sent me in here."

"Tyler, did you say anything to Mrs. Bradshaw before she said those things about me?"

"No, Dad, I never say anything in that class unless she asks me a question and she didn't this morning."

"Okay."

Chase knew that if he sent Tyler back into that woman's class then this scenario would repeat itself over and over until he was finally removed.

He pulled a pad over and wrote a note to the counselor, folded it, and gave it to Tyler.

"Go see Ms. Underwood right now and she'll arrange to get you transferred to another science class."

As Tyler was walking through the outer office toward the counselor's office which was next door, Chase picked up his phone and alerted the counselor that Tyler was coming.

After that, Chase spent an hour getting the rest of his paperwork backlog finished and was beginning to feel good about it.

He had just leaned back in his chair and let out a huge sigh when he heard what sounded like several people walking heavily out in the outer office. Before he could get around his desk to investigate, Tiffany Cameron stomped into his office, glared at him, and slammed the door with a loud bang.

She stood there for a moment then when she seemed not to know what to do with her hands, plopped down in the chair Tyler had been in before.

Chase decided to wait her out. He wasn't sure what to think. She was angry and he'd never seen her angry before.

She placed her hands in her lap but she couldn't seem to keep them still there either. Wringing her hands repeatedly, she finally looked up at him. No, that was no look. It was more like fire flying in his direction.

"How could you?"

He didn't think he had enough information to be able to answer her, other than to ask her what she was angry about, so he waited some more.

Finally, she blew out a breath and said, "Myrtle Ann sat across from me just now at lunch."

Chase groaned. He knew that whatever Tiffany said next wouldn't be good. So he mentally hung on and waited.

He didn't have long to wait. She blew out another breath and said, "That woman announced rather proudly to me that she'd heard that my mother was dying."

She glared at him now as if that explained everything and he should now know exactly why she was angry with him. And that revelation had just hit him. That was what this was all about. Tiffany Cameron was extremely angry with him. But why?

“How could you?”

He opened his mouth to ask what it was she thought he’d done when she continued. “How could you have told anyone here that my mother was dying?”

At the shocked expression he knew must be on his face, she said, “You’re the only one here who knew about her cancer. It had to be you.”

Chase had to think quickly now. Finally, he knew what he was being accused of and had to find a way to get her to see that he hadn’t done it.

That was when he had a thought.

“Tiffany, I think I can explain this if you’ll just answer one question first.”

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes again. Suddenly, something came over him. He didn’t ever want to see tears in her eyes again. Where had that come from? She was a teacher. He was her principal.

When she nodded, he said, “Who is your mother’s doctor?”

He wasn’t sure she was going to answer at first then she spoke softly. “Dr. Hogan.”

He tried not to smile for fear of further inflaming her. “Isn’t Myrtle Ann’s sister a nurse in Dr. Hogan’s office?”

It took a few seconds but when what he had just said sunk in, Tiffany’s face turned white then red with a deep blush.

She jumped up and said, “Oh Chase, I’m so sorry to have accused you of something so underhanded. I know you wouldn’t do anything like that.”

He did smile then. “That’s okay Tiffany. I know you’re under a great deal of stress right now, consider this whole little incident forgotten, okay.”

She tried to smile at him then as she sat back down. “Oh Chase, it’s so nice of you to overlook my absolutely horrible behavior just now”

He didn’t know why but it bothered him to see her so embarrassed so he tried to change the subject.

“Tiffany, I don’t want you to think I’m trying to tell you what to do so I’ll just say it this way. If you would like to take the rest of the day off, I’ll be happy to cover for you.”

She stood again and said, “No, Chase, you’ve been so kind already in overlooking my behavior. I think I’ll be okay the rest of the day now. I have a planning period next then only two more classes after that.”

He stood then, made his way to the door, and opened it. “All right Tiffany if you’re sure. But please, just forget this ever happened.”

“You’re so kind Chase. I won’t forget this.”

She stood and took one step toward the door and burst into tears again. This time, Chase sat in the chair next to her in an attempt to comfort her. He looked up at a sound in the doorway and was relieved to see that Patsy was pulling another chair up on Tiffany’s other side and quickly had her arms around Tiffany, speaking softly to her.

This was just one more time that Chase was thankful for his matronly, warm-hearted secretary. She had helped him out in so many similar situations that he couldn’t count. She had also been at the school for a long time when he came ten years ago.

Chase thought about letting Patsy, who he knew was much more capable than he was, continue to comfort Tiffany and step out of the office. But when he started to rise, something compelled him to stay.

What was he supposed to say? That was when he thought about Peggy and how she had asked him once, not long before she died, to be sure and encourage any woman he could not to be like she'd been but for them to get regular checkups.

"Tiffany?" She turned her tear-soaked eyes toward him. "I think I would like to give you a message from my wife, Peggy."

Both women gave him puzzled looks.

"You know that she died from breast cancer but what you may not know is that by the time she went to a doctor for it, it was too late. There was nothing they could do to save her."

He felt his own eyes moistening. "Well, she made me promise shortly before she died that I would take every opportunity to encourage other women not to wait like she did."

Tiffany continued to stare at him so he said, "You said the doctor thinks they caught your mom's cancer soon enough to save her. Don't even compare her to Peggy. Your mom has a very good chance but Peggy never did."

She dried her eyes with the tissue that Patsy gave her and stood.

"Oh thank you Chase. That is exactly what I needed to hear right now. Thank you."

With that, she was gone leaving him with confused thoughts and emotions. Emotions? Yes that was what she had just stirred up in him. But why? How?