

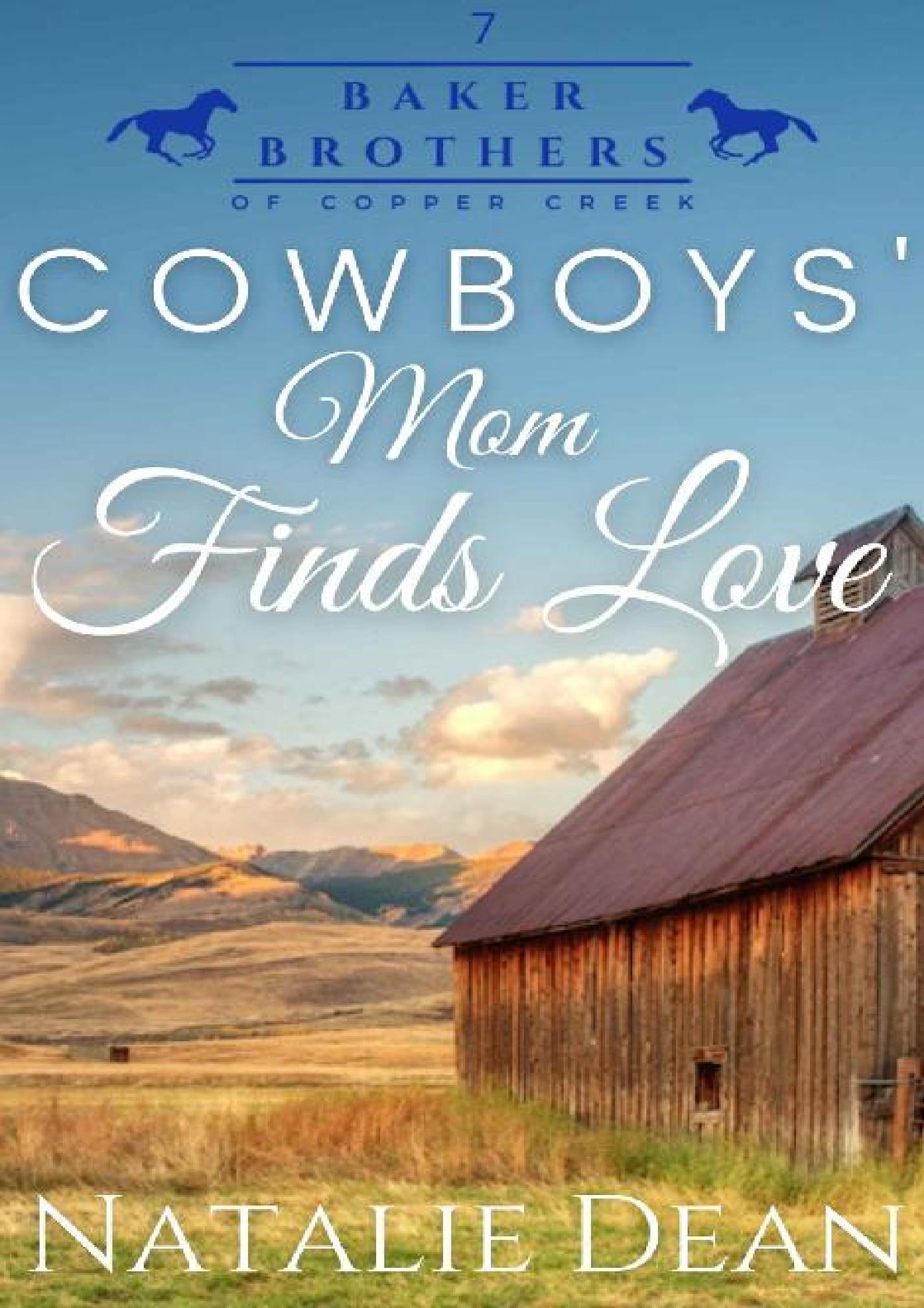
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BAKER  
BROTHERS  
OF COPPER CREEK



# COWBOYS' *Mom Finds Love*



NATALIE DEAN

# COWBOYS' MOM FINDS LOVE

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BAKER BROTHERS OF COPPER CREEK BOOK

7

NATALIE DEAN

KENZO PUBLISHING

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## **DEDICATION**

*I'd like to dedicate this book to YOU! All of my wonderful readers that have been following my stories over the years. We're embarking on a new journey through Copper Creek. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as you've loved the Millers!*

*Thank you to my biggest fans.... There's a lot of you! Jess, Bernie, Wren, Judy, Sherry, Vicci, Phyllis, Debbie, Indra, Jennifer, Carol, Jeanette, Margaret, Paul, and I know there's more I didn't list. But thank you all!*

*And I can't leave out my wonderful mother, son, sister, and Auntie. I love you all, and thank you for helping me make this happen.*

*Most of all, I thank God for blessing me on this endeavor.*



*AND... I've got a special team of advance readers who are always so helpful in pointing out any last minute corrections that need to be made. I'm so thankful to those of you who are so helpful!*

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# 1

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## *Liz*

**B**ittersweet. That was the perfect term for the last two years. At this moment, as Liz stared at her youngest son, who was dressed in a tuxedo and fidgeting with his bowtie while he waited for his bride to make her entrance, she couldn't help but be overwhelmed with emotion.

Jack should have been here. He should have been here for each and every one of their sons' weddings—and to see the fine women they fell in love with. He should have been around to meet his first granddaughter. As thrilled as she was that all her sons were able to find their happily ever after, there was still a void within her heart that would never be filled again. Jack had been her whole world. Now her world seemed much less bright.

The only way she could describe her emotions was by comparing them to adrenaline. It was as if she'd been running on an empty tank of gas from the moment she'd last seen the love of her life before he was laid to rest. She'd been strong for her sons—she had to be. Each one of them needed a strong mother to pull them out of the hole they'd all been thrown into.

Now they each had their own soul mates, and she could finally rest. She'd climb under a rock and allow herself to fully grieve over what she'd lost.

“It’s finally over.”

Liz jumped, looked over at Michael Donahue and smiled, brushing the tear from her cheek. “Sheriff, I’m so glad you were able to make it.”

The man settled into the chair beside her. Several of the guests were quickly finding their own seats as the music shifted into a beautiful ballad. Michael leaned closer to her and nodded to Finn. “What do you think? Is he gonna make it?”

Her gaze flew to where Finn stood. He couldn’t seem to stand still, but she’d seen that look on his face before. His jaw was set and his shoulders were straight. She nodded, a small laugh escaping her lips. “I *know* he will. He’s been in love with Christine for so long there’s no way he’s going to let anything come between them.”

The look on Michael’s face when he glanced back at Finn mirrored her own feelings. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap and pretended to examine her cuticles.

“You must miss her—Ellen. It’s been what? Five years now?”

He glanced at her wistfully and nodded. “Five *long* years.”

“Does it ever get easier?” Her face flooded with heat, but not from embarrassment. It was something else she couldn’t put a finger on. Lately, every day seemed to weigh on her more and more like she was supposed to do something that she couldn’t remember. There was something pushing her toward a goal, but what, she couldn’t understand. It was easier to just pretend the grief had finally found a place to settle in her chest. It would pass. She had to believe it would. There were no other options.

“Never.”

His one word answer startled her. She glanced at him then, finding the familiar pain she experienced on a daily basis.

Michael offered her a sad smile. “He will always be with you. The loss you felt—still feel—will never go away. You’ll just learn how to cope with it more and more each day.” His

brows creased. “But it seems like you are already on that course.”

Liz’s face burned and she looked away. The laugh that came from her throat was forced and void of warmth. “I have good days and bad days. I’m sure you can relate.”

“Most definitely.” There was something in his voice that offered her comfort. It was small, but it was enough to push her through this moment of missing Jack.

Her grip on her hands tightened further and she nodded, though for what, she wasn’t sure. She was still the mother of the groom and needed to be his support today.

The *Bridal Chorus* started and just like that, all her own wedding memories flooded her mind. She sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. This was silly. She’d been to several weddings since Jack passed. This one was no different.

A warm hand grasped her own, and her eyes flew down to find Michael extracting one of her hands to hold. He squeezed her hand reassuringly and turned his attention to Christine as she passed their row.

The sharp ache in her chest eased somewhat, and her gaze darted to meet his. Michael gave her a short nod with an encouraging smile. He released her hand and pushed his into the pockets of his suit pants.

Christine and Finn said their beautiful vows. Little JD held up the pillow with the two rings secured to it. The crowd erupted into cheers the moment the pastor told the happy couple to kiss.

Finn’s bright eyes met hers as he grabbed Christine’s hand and held it up triumphantly in the air. They ran up the aisle among several happy guests. Liz took in a shaky breath and righted her shoulders. She’d learned to take one day at a time. She’d nearly perfected it.

There were just days like today when she felt Jack’s absence more sharply. She’d make it through. At least that’s what her head was telling her. But the emotion that bubbled just beneath the surface seemed to have different plans. If she

wasn't careful, it would overflow and she'd have to explain to her sons that she really was okay; she was just missing their father.

Slowly, she moved from the row into the aisle. Michael fell into step beside her. He didn't speak to her, though if he had, it would have been hard to hear him over the excited chatter and the music that now played. They wandered toward a large area that had been staged for the evening. A dance floor surrounded by columns that rose high enough in the air for lights to be strung from one side to the other. The lights crisscrossed above them, giving the illusion of thousands of lightning bugs.

The dance floor was constructed of wood and rose about three inches above the ground. Liz stepped up onto the platform, but the toe of her dress shoes snagged against the edge, causing her to lose her balance.

She let out a gasp and braced for a fall that didn't come. Michael's hand had shot out and grabbed her upper arm. A sharp pain emanated from where he'd managed to grasp her, but it was nothing compared to the pain she might have endured if she'd landed on her face. Her wide eyes met his and she let out a breathless, "Thank you."

"Of course." Michael helped her get balanced on the platform and then escorted her toward the table where the bride and groom sat. There were no fathers sitting at the table. Liz's heart twinged. Both the bride and groom had lost their fathers. It didn't quite seem fair.

Michael pulled out her chair and gestured for her to sit. He gave her a little wave before heading for his assigned seat. Liz's eyes followed him. He'd always been such a nice man. And during the big fiasco with Ian and Jess, he'd taken on more than his job had required.

"Seems the sheriff might have a crush." Finn leaned toward her, his voice low enough that only she could hear it.

Liz snorted. "On who, me? If that's what you think, you are sorely mistaken."

“I don’t know,” he teased. “He seemed to be enjoying your company quite a bit during the ceremony.”

She elbowed him, taking care not to look in Michael’s direction. “Michael Donahue and I are friends. Nothing more.”

Her son raised a brow and gave her a knowing grin. “Sure. Whatever you say, Mom.”

Liz rolled her eyes and focused on adjusting the cutlery that sat before her. “Before you go making assumptions, remember what assuming does.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered.

“Besides. I’ve had my turn at love. I’d much rather play the part of adoring grandmother.”

Finn shook his head and his focus shifted in the direction where Michael had gone. “Just because you were able to find the love of your life once, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take a chance on love again if you are given the opportunity.”

She shot him a surprised look. Where had that come from? “You don’t have any skin in that game, dear. You pined for the same girl for nearly a decade. I would wager you believe in soul mates more than the average person. Besides, since when do children push their widowed parent toward another relationship? Shouldn’t you be telling me that you don’t want another dad?”

He made a face that brought a smile to her lips. “*Mom*, I wasn’t suggesting that you get *married*. I just noticed that he seems to have a crush on you.”

Liz shifted toward him and patted his cheek. “I appreciate your concern, but how about you worry about yourself and your new growing family. I’d wager you don’t have any idea what you’ve just gotten yourself into.”

Finn chuckled. He was her more agreeable son despite the stigma that went along with his red hair. He turned toward his bride and pulled her in for a quick but passionate kiss, and Liz was dragged back into her thoughts.

Jack's face returned to the forefront of her mind and that twinge she'd felt earlier came back with a vengeance. The empty ache seemed to be hitting harder today. But she refused to let it affect the beautiful celebration that was happening before her.

Her jaw tightened and she lifted her gaze as the guests continued to find their seats. Surprisingly, this wedding was larger than the triple wedding they'd planned. There were several tables draped with white and pastel tablecloths. The hydrangea centerpieces and floating lights gave the space a fairytale-like feel.

It was nothing like the wedding she'd had.

Visions of her wedding in the city poured over her. A younger version of herself danced with a handsome man in a cowboy hat. Darn that hat; he wouldn't go anywhere without it. But she'd been doomed from the moment she'd laid eyes on him. The tall, dark, brooding cowboy who swept her off her feet when she'd attended a country dance with a friend.

Goosebumps rose on her arms as she recalled the way he'd spun her across the dance floor like they were in some kind of fancy ballroom and not an open barn that had been converted for a dance. His warm touch on her shoulder, the soft timber of his voice—he could make the world disappear. It was almost like she could hear him speak quietly near her ear.

"Mom," Finn murmured.

She jumped and turned wide eyes toward her son.

His hand touched her arm and she blinked before turning toward him. "It's time for our dance." His brows were creased with concern.

Liz forced a smile and rose from her seat. "Of course." Finn held out his arm for her and she accepted, turning her happy smile to the onlookers who probably saw right through it. She fought off the blush that threatened to erupt all over her face as her son brought her to the dance floor and the music started.

The concern on her son's face was still present. The creases on his forehead and the way he frowned at her were reminiscent of his childhood. She brought her hand up to his cheek and offered another more genuine smile. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

"Are you sure? Because it looks like you need to take a break and head inside or—"

"It's just one of those days. You have them too. I'm not going to ruin your special day because I'm suddenly feeling sad. I miss your father, that's all."

His jaw tightened. He didn't believe her. Great. Knowing Finn, he would end up fixating to the point that he wouldn't be able to enjoy the evening.

"Honestly, Finn. I'm *fine*."

The music shifted and the DJ's voice came over the speakers. "Now all of the guests of the bride and groom may come to the floor."

Finn walked Liz to the side of the dance floor, right up next to Sean, who placed his arm around her shoulders. His tall frame was so much like Jack's that it did nothing to quell the ache she couldn't seem to shake today. Not even watching Finn dance with his beautiful bride seemed to help.

Guilt flooded every crevice of her body, from her stomach to her heart. What had gotten into her? Why couldn't she just push through it like she always did? Something had to be wrong with her.

Sean held out his hand in front of her. She stared at it, then lifted her gaze to meet his. The corners of his lips quirked. "Care to dance?"

## 2

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### *Michael*

*M*ichael's phone buzzed and he pulled it from his pocket. Copper Creek was a quiet place, but Jess and Ian had proved that wouldn't always be the case. The sleepy town was growing, which meant there would be more crime, among other things.

The message on his screen wasn't urgent. At least not enough to pull him away from the Baker wedding.

"Don't you know you have to turn those things off if you want to enjoy your night?"

He jumped like he was a child who'd been scolded for sneaking cookies from the cookie jar. Adeline Callahan—now Baker—settled into the seat beside him and smoothed out her dress.

"You should know better. I thought the Bakers were like family to you." Her teasing tone did nothing to ease the guilt that crept into his chest. "They were—are my friends. And just because you're my goddaughter doesn't mean you can chastise me like that."

She snickered. "Me? Chastise you? I wouldn't dream of it." She ran a hand through her curled hair and shifted her focus to the dance floor. The smile on her face spread wider, and he followed her focus to where her husband danced with

her new mother-in-law. “This family is pretty amazing. I can see why you had a crush on Liz in high school.”

He stiffened, his gaze swinging back to meet hers. “Who told you that?”

Adeline rolled her eyes. “Just because you’re my *mother’s* cousin doesn’t mean my dad doesn’t talk. You know, I’m beginning to think that Dad had something against the Bakers because Jack ended up with Liz and you didn’t.”

Michael’s gaze swept back to the dancing couple. It was uncanny how much Sean resembled Jack. But he held no hard feelings. He’d been too slow to act on his high school crush and Jack came out the winner. Then he’d met Ellen and that was that. He shot a stern look in Adeline’s direction. “A crush is fleeting. Now all there is between us is a good friendship.”

Adeline’s knowing smile only put him on edge. She nodded to the newlyweds. “Finn and Christine were best friends before they finally got together.”

He folded his arms across his chest and frowned at her. “Adeline Baker, am I mistaken or are you trying to set me up with your new mother-in-law?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Would that be so bad? *You’re* single. *She’s* single...” She set her bright eyes on him. “Maybe you have a second chance with her.”

Michael held up both hands, shaking his head vehemently. “I’ve had my fun. I’m happy with my life the way it is. I don’t need some nosy young lady to play matchmaker. And I definitely don’t need to develop feelings for a woman who I will inevitably lose.”

Adeline’s smile disappeared and a small frown replaced it. “Ellen had cancer and she battled it for years. Liz—”

“Lost her husband in a horrific accident and neither one of us needs to experience that heartache again.” His voice was firm, unyielding. But even as he argued with her, he couldn’t help it. His gaze dragged toward Liz where she moved across the dance floor with her eldest son.

No. Second chances were for the young. He was set in his ways, and it was likely that she was as well. He gave a sharp nod and pressed his lips together. He had great instincts, and his gut was telling him that a friendship was all that they'd ever have.

Feeling eyes on him, he shot another look at Adeline. The smile had returned.

“Stop it,” he muttered.

“Stop what? I didn’t say anything,” her voice sang as she settled against her chair. “But if I were to say something, it’d be to go ask her to dance.”

He gestured toward Liz and Sean with exasperation. “She’s already dancing.”

Adeline lifted one finger and looked up to the sky as if she could see something that was about to happen up there. At that moment the song ended and she gave him a smug look. “If I were you, I’d go ask her to dance—”

“But we’re just—”

“Friends can dance, too.” She rested her hands on her stomach and offered another smile, this one more genuine and sweet. “Come on, Michael. You deserve happiness, too.”

He threw his hands in the air. “I’m perfectly happy, Adeline. I don’t understand why you think I—”

“Are you though? You’ve been alone for what? Eight years?”

“Five.”

She sliced her hand through the air. “I bet it feels a lot longer for you than that. The point is, everyone deserves to have somebody to love. And the funny thing is that we tend to find them in the strangest of places.” She pushed away from the table and flashed him one more smile. “Just think about it. I’m going to ask my husband to dance because that’s what would make *me* happy.”

His gaze followed her as she wandered toward the dance floor. She cut off Liz and Sean’s exit and gave Liz a hug

before stepping around her.

Liz was still as beautiful as she'd been when they were in high school. She still had that infectious laugh that could fill him with warmth. And her smile made it hard to remember what he was thinking about.

But they'd both had their turns at love, and she'd lost Jack only two years ago. She most definitely wouldn't want some guy hitting on her in her current state of grief. It had taken him this long to finally not feel the twinge of loss any time someone brought his dear Ellen up in a conversation.

He grumbled and settled against his chair as his gaze shifted toward Adeline. What did she know? She was still young and bright-eyed. She hadn't experienced real loss. She had her whole life in front of her. He'd leave the optimism to the younger generation.



IT HAD BEEN a week since the wedding and Adeline's words had managed to stick with him. He deserved happiness. What did that mean when he was already content with the way his life had turned out? If he were asked, he would have said that it was more than fulfilling. He'd been able to spend a good twenty-five years with his wife. And he still had a job where he excelled.

Michael sat at his desk in his office and grabbed his coffee mug. He had let his goddaughter get into his head—make him second-guess how he felt about his life. Well, he wasn't about to let that happen again. He and Liz rarely crossed paths unless they bumped into one another in town or if there was a legal problem out at the ranch.

He took a long swig of his coffee and placed his mug back down on his desk. The intercom on his phone crackled and his secretary spoke through the fuzz. "Sir, there's a problem out at the Callahans."

Michael leaned forward and pressed the button to respond. "Send Deputy Anderson." As much as he'd hate giving the job

to a deputy, he wasn't quite in the mood to see Adeline yet. All it would take was for her to make a leading comment about Liz in front of her father or Sean, and he'd have to come up with an excuse as to why he couldn't entertain such an idea without it sounding like he had zero interest.

He *did* have zero interest, right?

"Sir," his secretary came through once more, "Anderson is currently helping a woman with a flat tire just off the highway. Is there someone else?"

Michael sighed. "Nope. Tell the Callahans I'll be right over."

"Yes, sir."

The static cut out and Michael grabbed his cowboy hat and jacket, then headed out of his office. He'd just have to avoid Adeline if she was there.

The familiar drive out to the Slate Rock Ranch was quick. The green colors had made their appearance after the winter and everything was growing. Wild flowers sprouted along the side of the winding road. Traffic was a breeze. It would have actually been nice to run into something—anything that would have prevented his quick arrival. But then he had to remind himself that he was coming to the Callahans' ranch, not the Bakers. He had nothing to be anxious about.

He pulled his Tahoe onto the property and climbed out of his vehicle. Before he could shut the door, Zeke strode toward him. His brows were low and the set of his jaw indicated his patience had worn thin. The second he was beside Michael, he waved his arm to indicate that Michael should follow him. "Our tractor was vandalized."

Michael pulled out his notebook from his pocket and a small pen. "Do you have a timeline you think this occurred in?"

Zeke led him around the back of a large storage shed to where he kept their farming equipment. They stopped by a large tractor and his friend pointed out the problems with the machine. The back tire had a blade stuck in the middle of it.

Zeke glowered at the knife as if by doing so he'd be able to figure out who stuck it there.

Michael wandered closer to the knife and examined it from a couple different angles. Then he took some pictures. Finally, he put on a set of gloves, pulled the knife from the tire, and placed it in an evidence bag he had with him.

"Well?" Zeke asked.

Michael pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Zeke, there's nothing much I'll be able to do about this. We can check for prints on the knife."

"What do you mean there's nothing much you can do about it?" He threw his hand in a gesture toward the tire. "That clearly happened on purpose, and I can assure you that none of us did it."

"Do you have any security cameras installed? We could look at the footage," Michael said.

"No, we've never needed them."

Michael sighed. "Do you by chance have a disgruntled employee that you fired?"

To his credit, Zeke's brows shot up. "Of course not. There has to be someone going around town doing this stuff. The other day I heard that the Pratts had something similar happen. Someone cut the wires of the fence that surrounds their property and half a dozen cattle got out before they found it. And over at the Taylors, they spray-painted an inappropriate image on the side of their barn."

"It sounds like some kids are just messing around."

"Just messing around? Do you know how much this is going to cost me? And that isn't even considering if they come back to do it again and again."

He held up his hand and chuckled. "Easy, Zeke. I didn't say I wouldn't look into it. Like I said, it's probably some kids messing around. They'll either get sloppy and get caught... or they'll get bored and stop doing it. I'll have my deputies look into it and let you know."

The look on Zeke's face clearly showed his displeasure. He grunted and spun on his booted heel to head from the area.

Michael dropped down onto his haunches and examined the ground around the tractor. The ground wasn't muddy enough for the culprit to leave any footprints behind. Spray painting graffiti was one thing. Damaging property was a whole other issue.

He took off his hat and glanced around the area. This didn't seem to be an easy target. Anyone who was going to target the Callahans would have done so because they were upset with them somehow.

His teeth ground together as he folded his notebook and stuck it back in his pocket. He headed back toward his Tahoe, climbed inside and put the evidence bag on the passenger seat. He pulled up his computer and typed in a few notes for the case and was about to start the car when someone knocked on his window.

Michael glanced over and let out a groan. He rolled down the window and muttered, "Adeline. What can I do for you?"

She smiled brightly. "Are you headed over to the Baker's ranch?"

His brows creased. "Why would I do that?"

Adeline held up her phone displaying a message from Sean.

*SOMEONE HIT US TOO. Will you have the sheriff stop by here next?*

MICHAEL'S BROW ARCHED. Adeline withdrew her phone and put it back in her pocket. "I guess they're getting bolder." A smile played at her lips as if she were in on a secret joke.

He leaned back in his chair and studied her. "How long has this been going on?"

She shrugged. “All I know is what Dad tells me. So are you going to head over there?”

Her intent was clear. She wanted him to spend some face time with Liz. Michael heaved a sigh. “What happened?”

“Hmm?”

“What is so important it requires a sheriff to check it out?”

Her wide brown eyes blinked at him innocently just like they always had when she was younger. “Oh, I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“Adeline,” he warned, “I know what you’re trying to do  
—”

“What I’m trying? I didn’t vandalize any property. I promise.”

He shook his head as he shoved the key into the ignition. “I told you. I’m not interested in some matchmaking situation between myself and Ms. Baker. I’ll go over there to investigate whatever it is, but that’s it.”

She grinned. “Oh. I wasn’t suggesting you see Liz, but now that you mention it, I’m sure she’d be happy to visit with you.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “I mean it, Adeline. No more matchmaking.”

Adeline crossed her finger over her chest and stepped back as he put the vehicle into drive and pulled around the wide driveway. He peeked at the rear-view mirror to find her watching him drive away, but her phone was to her ear.

*Sure.*

There was no way she planned on dropping this.

# 3

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## *Liz*

*L*iz pulled her horse around the curve of the trail and the barn next to her home came into view. Jack had built it with his own two hands. It was something that he'd been the most proud of. Granted, he had the help of several folks in town, but he'd designed the whole thing from start to finish.

She stopped at the crest of the hill and admired the tall, white structure. It would forever be something that would remind her of him. The first night after the roof had been placed, he'd insisted on sleeping in it. She'd been pregnant with Sean at the time, and somehow he'd managed to make it romantic.

A sigh escaped her chest; the melancholy cloud still hovered overhead from the wedding. If she didn't figure out a way to get out of this funk soon, there was no telling how it would affect those around her.

Liz filled her chest with a deep breath and released it, then headed for the barn. She swayed gently in the saddle as a spring breeze ruffled her hair. The scents of the wildflowers that grew all around her filled her senses.

But all at once the tranquility came to an end. Sean stormed out of the barn, a stern look on his face. He pointed toward the barn and growled, "Someone stole half of our tools."

Her gaze shot to the barn and back to Sean. In moments she'd climbed down from her horse and hurried in the direction he'd pointed. "How many?"

"Several."

Great. After the fiasco with their finances a few months ago, they couldn't afford another mishap. The last thing she wanted to do was call up Zeke Callahan and tell him they needed assistance with replacing a few things.

Her strides were short but quick and she made it to the wall where they stored everything they used on a daily basis. Just as Sean had reported, there were at least ten, if not more, missing. She glanced at him as he arrived at her side. "And you're sure they aren't being used by the hands? Maybe your brothers?"

He shook his head, though the stern expression wasn't as severe. Instead, he kept glancing over his shoulder toward the barn entrance.

"*Sean*. Are you certain?"

Her son nodded his head, folding his arms. "Yes. And this isn't the only thing that's happened. Apparently, there was a knife that put a hole in Zeke's tractor tire."

She gasped. "When did that happen?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I don't know, but the sheriff was called out there so I told Adeline to have him come out this way."

Liz nodded. "That's a good idea. We need to get on this right away." She moved closer to the wall, her fingers tracing over the tools, old and new, that She and Jack had purchased for the ranch over the years. It was funny how things like this made her so nostalgic.

Footsteps echoed down the aisle and she turned to find Michael headed toward them. The belt around his hips made him appear far bulkier than he'd been at the wedding a week ago. The lines around his eyes were more pronounced, too. He looked as tired as she felt.

He touched the brim of his hat before he pulled out a little notebook and pen. “Adeline told me you need to report an incident?”

“Yes—” Sean stepped forward, but she interrupted him.

“There were several tools stolen and there could be more missing.” All business, she withdrew from him and pointed at the wall. “I’m sure I need to file a report to the insurance company, but I’d like to make sure we file with you as well. Sean said there was some vandalism out at the Callahan ranch?”

Michael nodded and flipped through his notebook. “Someone slashed a tire on a tractor. Apparently there have been more issues with a few other farms. If I were a betting man, I’d say this is the work of some bored teenagers who just need to be put to work until they’re too tired to do any of this nonsense.” He offered her a warm smile, and she couldn’t help but return it with one of her own.

“Well, I don’t have any pictures, but I’m sure Sean can give you a list of the items that are missing.” She turned toward Sean only to find that he’d slipped out of the barn. “Or I suppose I will have to tell you.” Warmth spread through her face and she gestured toward the entrance. “How about I fix us some lemonade. There’s no reason for us to stand in this dusty place.”

“I’d like that. Let me take some pictures first and look around.” Michael tucked his notebook in his pocket, took out his phone and snapped some pictures, then they moved through the barn. His steps crunched against the straw beneath their feet.

Dust particles whooshed around her as she walked quickly toward the entrance. Horses nickered when she walked by. She could almost pretend that Jack was still with her.

Michael fell into step beside her and they headed for the house. “How are things settling in?” His low voice wrapped around her, sending off all sorts of strange emotions. The memory of how he’d held her hand at the wedding flooded her mind and she took a small step away to keep their distance.

“I believe they are going well. Sean opted to move out and stays at Slate Rock, but he checks in over here when he isn’t working at that country club. Finn and Christine are looking for a house down that way because Christine got a promotion. I believe Ian, Brock, Cal and Tate want to build here. It’s been...” She let out a long breath. “...a lot lately.”

They reached the front door and Michael chuckled as he held the door for her. “I believe it. It seems to have all started when Ian and Jess found each other.”

Liz made a face. “Maybe I should be blaming them, then?” She laughed along with Michael. It had been a while since she’d honestly felt happy enough to do so. There were moments, but they were moments she could appreciate.

She led him toward the kitchen and headed straight for the fridge. The glass pitcher of lemonade looked almost full. Strange. She could have sworn that they’d used most of it last night for dinner. Maybe one of the girls had made some more.

Liz retrieved two glasses from the cupboard and filled them nearly to the top. When she turned around, she sucked in a breath and the glasses slipped from her fingers. From behind, Michael looked almost exactly like Jack. From the color of his black cowboy hat to the way he sported his jeans. Even the color of his shirt matched the ones Jack favored.

Michael whirled around the moment the glass shattered on the tile. He lurched forward. “Don’t touch anything.”

She let out a strangled laugh. “I’m more than capable of cleaning up broken glass, Michael.” Gingerly, she picked up the largest pieces of the broken shards. Her face burned hot as the two of them worked together. Clumsy. Or maybe it was something else. Either way, this wouldn’t have happened if she’d been more attentive.

Liz grabbed an old dishtowel and gathered the liquid and the smaller pieces of glass together. The towel would have to be thrown out after this. She didn’t trust that the shards would all come out.

At some point Michael retrieved a garbage can, broom, and dustpan. Together they managed to get the rest of the glass picked up. His hand brushed over the top of hers, and goosebumps rose along her arms. She lifted her gaze to meet his. “What a mess. I’m so sorry.”

He laughed again. “You don’t have to apologize.” His gaze seemed to bore into hers, leaving her frozen to her spot. The way his blue gaze locked onto hers—it was like he was trying to say something. That or he was trying to read something in her.

Liz blinked and scooped up the rag to deposit it into the garbage can. She dusted her hands on her pants. “Thank you. Let me get you a new glass.”

Her hands shook as she reached for another one from the cupboard. There was no reason for her to be uneasy. Occasionally dishes broke. That was life. This time she didn’t fill the glass all the way. Holding onto it tightly, she walked it over to him where he now stood beside the table. “I’m going to wipe up the rest of that mess real quick and then I can give you a list of what is missing.”

He nodded and settled into his chair—Jack’s chair.

She tore her gaze away from him. It was odd that he’d picked that one. Then again, maybe not. It was the closest one to him. Usually Sean sat there when it was supper time. She gave her head a sharp shake and focused on finding a rag. She ran it under the warm water at the sink and got down on her hands and knees to wipe up the sugary residue that had been left behind.

Liz felt his gaze on her before she actually lifted her eyes to Michael.

Well, it seemed Finn had gotten into her head. Why did he have to bring up Michael and mention that he had a crush on her? What was she...in high school? Crushes were for women in their twenties. She didn’t have time for that sort of drama. She wasn’t interested in finding new love. All she wanted to do was get through today and love on her family.

He smiled at her and she looked away. It would be too easy to read his kindness as anything more than just that—especially when she was feeling so alone. Liz got to her feet and wrung out the rag.

A sharp pain sliced through her hand and she sucked in a gasp. The rag fell to the bottom of the sink and she stared at the drop of red blood that spread on her palm with the water. She muttered and shook her head as she grasped her wrist tightly with her other hand. She'd been hurt worse before. This was nothing, but it was like when papercuts could cut deeper than a knife—or at least feel like it.

She peered at the tiny piece of glass embedded in her palm and reached for it with her finger and thumb.

“Don’t!”

Liz jumped and stifled a shriek when Michael's voice came right behind her ear. She shot a dark look at him. “Don’t you know better than to sneak up on an injured woman?”

The corners of his lips quirked. “Isn’t that the rule with injured animals?”

“Same thing,” she muttered, but a small smile filled her face as well, only to be replaced by a grimace when Michael lifted her wrist closer to his face. “If you try to take that out with your fingers, you’re only going to push it deeper into your skin. Here.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a small red object.

“Is that a Swiss Army Knife?”

He flashed her another smile, and this time it caused a shift in her stomach—something small and fluttery. He released her hand and pried a pair of tweezers from the side of the knife. “Yes. And it’s gotten me out of several bad situations.”

“You’re a regular Boy Scout, huh?”

“Hey, don’t knock it. When you’re in the middle of those woods at the edge of your property and you need to stay warm, you’ll want a Boy Scout there to help you start a fire.”

She snorted. “Or my phone.”

He rolled his eyes in an almost exaggerated way. “*Sure, rely on technology. That will save you.*” Michael met her gaze again, and the humor seemed to dissipate from his eyes. “This is going to sting, but not as much as if you were to have pushed it into your skin a few minutes ago.” He flipped on the faucet and held his fingers under the water and then placed her hand there.

Liz flinched and bit down on her lower lip as she turned away. Another brief sharp pain and then relief. Michael released her wrist to put the knife away. She opened and closed her hand, her blood turning the water a light pink color as it dripped from her hand.

Michael didn’t waste any time getting a fresh rag and pressing it to her palm. “There. Put a little pressure on it and you shouldn’t need a bandage. Trying to keep one on your palm is incredibly difficult.” His voice was low and serious.

“You seem to speak from experience.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Yeah. I suppose I do.” He nodded toward the table. “How about we get those details written down before there are any more mishaps.”

There was that word again. She bit back a smile. Funny how he had the same word as she did to describe this whole experience.

### *Michael*

*M*ichael rapped his fingers along the top of the steering wheel. He couldn't keep the smile from his face. Despite the reason for showing up, and the broken glass, even the injury, he'd enjoyed spending time with Liz.

He always had. It wasn't hard to be with her. She had a way of making him feel at home. Perhaps it was the little thought that Adeline had put in his head about his old feelings, but the more that they'd talked, the more memories surfaced over just why he'd liked her so much all those years ago.

She hadn't changed at all—not based on his memories, anyway. Liz was kind and generous. And yes, she did seem to get lost a few times during their conversations, but that was to be expected. He couldn't count the number of times he'd found himself spiraling with grief. She'd handled it so well. In spite of all that had happened to her, she was still vivacious and quick with a smile.

Spending time with her only confirmed one thing. Whenever he had to leave, his body yearned to return to her side. But that was just residual from his younger days, right? Maybe it was a longing that had blended with his loneliness from no longer having Ellen to confide in.

Was Adeline right? Should he attempt to spend more time with her? She could probably use the support, too. They had a

common bond in a way. He drove through town and headed straight for the sheriff's department.

It was time to get his head out of the clouds for at least a few moments. Liz could wait. What he really needed to focus on was the increase in criminal activity. He needed to make a few calls. The Pratts and the Taylors might be able to fill in some blanks, too.

He entered his office and gave a smile to his newest secretary. The young woman's dark hair was pulled into a modest knot at the back of her head with wisps of hair framing her face. She had dark almond eyes, a thin nose, and full lips. The only thing he really knew about Lily was that she'd grown up in the city and had opted to move out to the country.

Michael touched the brim of his hat and nodded to her. "Lily, could you get someone from the Pratt household on the phone? I will also need to speak to the Taylors."

She nodded and reached for the telephone. "Right away, sir."

He moved into his office and settled into his chair. It swiveled with the motion and he found his thoughts drifting once more toward Liz. Adeline might be off track when it came to romance, but that didn't mean he couldn't spend time with Liz outside of finding who stole her tools. With all her sons off and married, she might even welcome the extra company.

"Sir?" the intercom buzzed. "I have Mr. Pratt on the line."

"Thanks, Lily." He pushed the button on the phone and lifted the receiver to his ear. "Mr. Pratt. I heard there was a problem with the fence that surrounds your property?"

"I'm sorry, you heard what, Sheriff?"

"Your fence. Zeke Callahan seems to think there was some vandalism that occurred at your property line. A fence line might have been cut and some cattle got loose?"

There was a long pause. "No. I don't believe so. I mean, our fences are in need of repair all the time, but none of them

looked like it was done on purpose.”

Michael pressed his lips together and his eyes narrowed as he turned around in his chair and glanced out the window behind his desk. “So there isn’t anything strange going on at your property?”

“No...” he drawled. “Everything is fine, but thanks for checking in.”

Michael hung up the phone and rubbed his chin. If the Pratts weren’t having problems, then what was Zeke talking about? Was he aware that the rumor wasn’t true? The whole interaction at Slate Rock Ranch seemed strange to say the least.

He reached for the phone to buzz Lily again when his door swung open and Anderson entered. His face was smudged with oil and so were his hands. He rubbed an old rag over them, then wiped his brow with his forearm. “I don’t get paid enough for that sort of thing.”

Michael chuckled. “It’s part of the job.” It was in this part of the state. He settled back in his seat once more, his eyes following Anderson as he settled into a chair across from his desk. “Have you heard anything about an uptick in vandalism lately?”

Anderson crossed his ankle over his knee and cocked his head thoughtfully. “Not that I’m aware of. But the folks around here don’t typically report anything unless it’s something big.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” he murmured. He was beginning to wonder if Adeline and Sean were staging the incidents. Though he couldn’t figure out why Adeline would actually damage the tractor tire. That’s time *and* money to fix something so integral to their daily operations.

Anderson’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. “Why do you ask?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but Lily’s voice came through the speaker again. “Sir, I have Mrs. Taylor on the line.”

Michael held up a finger and brought the phone to his ear. “Mrs. Taylor.” He smiled to keep his voice light. “I heard you might be dealing with some unsavory problems out at your property.”

“Oh good! I wasn’t sure if you had heard or not.” She murmured something to someone, her voice muffled probably from covering the receiver. Then her voice grew louder as she came back to the phone. “Someone has painted a large object on the side of my barn. I’m having the boys paint over it, but I thought you should know. People need to be keeping a lookout for this sort of thing. We don’t want our perfect little town to turn into something we aren’t proud of.”

“No. We don’t want that.” He grinned, his gaze landing on Anderson. “Before you paint over it, I’d like to have an officer come out and take a look. We’d like to know what we’re dealing with.”

“Oh.” Her voice sounded surprised. “Well, if I had known that, I wouldn’t have had them start today. You might be able to catch the last little bit if you hurry.”

He groaned, dragging his hand down his face. “Do you suppose your sons could hold off on finishing their project until I get someone out there?”

A sound of disappointment came through the speaker. “I’d prefer the paint to match. If I wait, won’t it look different?”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” He closed his eyes briefly and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We shouldn’t be more than twenty minutes out.” After a few more words from Mrs. Taylor, he hung up the phone.

“Could you head over to the Taylors and check out the graffiti?”

“Graffiti? Someone tagged them?”

“I’m not sure. It’s strange that they’re trying to cover it up without filing a report.”

Anderson scrunched up his face. “Is it though? It’s just paint. I’m sure it’s more of a nuisance than anything else.”

Telling his deputy about his concern regarding Adeline's matchmaking plans would only draw more attention to the idea that he and Liz would be good together—a concept he was beginning to rather enjoy. Michael pressed his lips together into a thin line. "You're right. But there's been a few other reports of mischief. I want to make sure I validate all of them before completing my investigation."

Anderson rose from his chair. "Sure. After I check it out, I'll let you know. Then I'm heading home. I have a date—" He swallowed as he met Michael's gaze. "—tonight."

The young man was probably in his late twenties. He deserved a night off. But the way he was shifting, squirming almost in that chair before him, gave Michael pause. Raising a brow, Michael steepled his fingers beneath his chin. He could interrogate his deputy and find out why he was suddenly so fidgety. But he'd rather Anderson head out and check the story at the Taylors. He waved his hand toward the door. "Go on. Let me know how it goes and then have a nice evening. I'll see you tomorrow."

His deputy nodded and shot out of his seat like his pants were on fire. Whatever that was about, Michael would figure it out later.



"SHERIFF, it looks like the Taylors were telling the truth about the graffiti."

Deputy Anderson's voice came through the radio loud and clear. He frowned as he drove the rest of the way home. That meant his theory of the Callahans and Bakers setting him up with Liz wasn't as likely.

But worse than that, he had to figure out who would be brazen enough to target each of the properties and why the MO was so different for each of them.

The sky was falling into dusk and he hadn't yet gotten anything to eat for dinner. His stomach grumbled at the notion that once again, he'd managed to forget to eat all day long. He

placed a hand over the rumble. Then in a split-second decision, he turned his car down a familiar main road toward Sal's Diner. It had been a few weeks since he'd eaten there, and Jess's pie would hit the spot.

He parked his truck in front of the building and took off his hat as he headed through the double glass doors.

There were only a handful of people eating. Two gentlemen sat at the counter drinking coffee. A couple sat in the corner sidled really close to one another, smiles on their faces. And a young mother with a little girl was seated more toward the middle of the restaurant.

The place smelled like french fries and roast beef sandwiches. There were hints of other scents like the apple pie he craved. Michael headed for the counter and settled down a few seats from the closest man. The stranger glanced up at him, his gaze sweeping over Michael's uniform. He nodded once and turned back to his coffee.

"Sheriff! Haven't seen you in here for a while, now." A short, curvy waitress with blonde hair stepped from the swinging door that led to the kitchen. Her lipstick was a shade too red for his taste, but it probably got her better tips with the younger crowd.

He placed his hat on the counter and offered the woman a smile. She was familiar enough, but it had been too long for him to remember much about her. His focus dipped to her name tag. "Evenin', Candy. Just wanted a slice of that famous apple pie."

She tilted her head and placed a hand on her hip. "Oh, I'm sorry. We're out of apple tonight. Jess was supposed to bring a few more today, but I think she got held up."

His stomach growled again. He could always go for cherry, though it wasn't his favorite. Michael glanced at the chalkboard menu that hung on the wall just as the bell above the door entrance jangled.

Out of habit, Michael twisted in his chair only to lay his gaze on none other than Liz Baker. She balanced a stack of

pink boxes in her arms as she backed into the restaurant and headed toward the counter. She puffed and blew a strand of hair from her face. “I’m so sorry, Candice. Jess asked me to bring these to you today because she had a few appointments she had to get to, and I plum forgot.”

Liz pushed the boxes onto the counter and that’s when her eyes locked with his. Her face broke into a wide smile. “Well, if it isn’t Sheriff Michael Donahue. Fancy meeting you here.” Her warm chuckle sent pleasant shivers through his body and he climbed down from his seat.

“I don’t suppose those are the apple pies that they’ve been expecting all day, are they?”

A pretty pink flush covered her cheeks. “I’m afraid they are. After everything that happened today...” She sighed. “Let’s just say that things got away from me.”

Candy grabbed the boxes and shot a smile in Michael’s direction. “I guess you can get that slice of apple pie after all.”

Liz’s focus bounced from Michael to Candy and back. “Well, at least one good thing happened today.”

“What’s that?” He searched her face, drinking in everything about her that he’d always admired. It was official. Adeline had incepted her ideas of romance and companionship into his head, and he couldn’t find enough reasons to argue with them. It would be nice to have someone to spend time with. And Liz could be that someone.

“Isn’t that so?” She was talking. Shoot, he should have been listening to what she’d said. He could risk either agreeing or disagreeing with her and look like an idiot when he officially picked wrong.

Or he could try something different.

“How about we discuss it further over a piece of pie?” He gestured toward the kitchen where Candy had disappeared. “Would you care to join me? My treat.”

*Liz*

*W*as this a date? Had she managed to find herself sitting across from Sheriff Donahue on an actual date?

No. That wasn't possible. They were friends, nothing more. Even if she'd been romantically interested in him, Finn could be wrong. Right now romance seemed like a virus. It was infecting and making the rounds in her household, and perhaps she was getting swept up in it. But within the next few months, that interest would probably die down and she'd realize she wasn't prepared for something new.

Liz twisted her cup of herbal tea between her hands. The ceramic warmed her, and the smell of peppermint and ginger mingled in the air above her mug and set her whole body at ease. She brought the cup to her lips and sipped the hot contents slowly. Her eyes studied Michael as he cut off a piece of pie, dipped it into some whipped cream and took a bite.

She'd opted to forego the sweets. It was getting late and she hadn't planned on staying. Why did she stay? She could have just as easily told him that she needed to get home. But instead, she sat across from him in a booth at Sal's Diner, wondering why he'd asked her to stay.

She placed her cup on the table and cleared her throat. "Do you have any leads on the theft today?"

Michael stilled, the corners of his lips quirking into a boyish grin. “No,” he drawled. “At this point the only leads I’d have would be from witnesses, and so far, I don’t have any of those either.”

Her face flushed. Of course he didn’t have any leads. This wasn’t some crime drama television show that could be wrapped up in an hour. She looked down at her drink, wishing she could slip right into the mug and disappear.

“Do you ever find it funny that we both ended up here?”

Her head snapped up. “What?”

Michael put his fork down on the table. “We both grew up in the city and we ended up in Copper Creek. Strange, right?”

She tilted her head. Vague memories of Michael going to her high school were hard to recall the older she got. They hadn’t exactly run in the same social circles, though she had thought he seemed nice.

The only reason she’d ended up here was because of Jack. “Why did you move out here?” Liz picked up her spoon and stirred her drink for lack of anything else to keep her hands busy. She peeked at him and smiled. “Most people we grew up with chose to stay in the city.”

He shrugged. “I suppose it’s because of my cousin. I was close enough with her that when she moved out here and got married to Zeke, I figured it would be a fun place and we could stay in touch.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “You’re related to the Callahans?”

He chuckled. “I forget that people don’t realize that, but yes, I am. I’m guessing people don’t pay much attention because our last names are different.”

“Yeah, that would do it.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “So does that mean you know why Zeke Callahan hated Jack? I mean, he’s always been nice to me, but for some reason the two of them never got along.”

Michael’s features seemed to flatten. They were void of any indication that he was even alive. He didn’t blink. There

wasn't a smile or a twitch. It was strange. Like his face was acting on its own volition... if that was even possible. He really needed to get it together.

Liz laughed and waved her hand in front of his face. "Earth to Michael."

He jumped and joined in on her soft laugh. "Sorry, what was the question?"

"Zeke. Why did he hate Jack so much?"

This time his face seemed to color. It was short-lived and faint, but the coloring was there. He rubbed the back of his neck and brought another bite of pie to his lips. "Zeke? I don't know for certain, but if I had to wager a guess, it might have something to do with me."

Her brows creased and she shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense. How could Zeke dislike Jack because of you?"

Michael seemed to dip his head, but then he lifted his smoldering gaze to hers. "It might have something to do with the crush I had on you in high school."

Her stomach knotted and her mouth fell open. Then she tossed her head back and let out a laugh that was hard enough her eyes watered. "You're not serious." The expression on his face said otherwise. "Wait a minute." She gasped. "You're telling me that you *liked* me in high school and never asked me out? Why not?"

Apparently, it was his turn to laugh. But instead of a warm, confident laugh from the other night, this one came out all strained and quiet. "Honestly? You had it all together all the time, and you were *beautiful*. You were so out of my league that I figured I would just let my crush fizzle out."

Her gaze remained locked on him. To deny the disappointment that churned in her gut would be lying to herself. His last statement was so loaded; she wished she could refute each point he had made. She pushed her cup aside and poked the table with her fingertip. "First of all, I wasn't *out of your league*."

He let out another laugh. “You don’t remember high school the way I do.”

She ignored him. “Second of all, you never know if you’ll get something unless you try going after it first.” Liz poked the table once more but didn’t know what she could say that would tie up everything in a nice little bow.

Michael’s eyes dipped to where she tapped the countertop and he smiled. “But you don’t have to worry. I don’t plan on acting on it. That was a long, long time ago.”

So, he didn’t like her anymore. Ha! Finn was wrong.

Wait a minute. Finn was wrong.

And now she felt even more foolish for accepting Michael’s offer for this whole little get-together. She forced a smile and nodded. “I wasn’t worried.” She placed her hand over his and something electric passed through them. She literally saw a little spark come from their hands. It wasn’t like anything she’d experienced before. She jerked her hand back from his and stared at it before lifting her confused eyes to meet his. “I guess my shoes caused a little too much friction.”

“Or maybe you were speeding when you came down here with those pies and I need to give you a ticket.”

Liz snickered. “You’ll never know.”

His laugh warmed her and it was like they were transported in time to when they were younger. The cloud of anxiety and pain that had hovered for the last few days had dissipated. Their conversation shifted from pie to her children to how things were going with the Callahan’s ranch, then landed on books.

“You read?” Her brows lifted and she let out an incredulous laugh. “I didn’t peg you for reading in your spare time.”

“What else might I spend my spare time on?”

“I don’t know. Practicing at the shooting range?”

His hand flew to his chest and he stumbled from his chair and across the room with an overly dramatic flair. “Elizabeth

Baker. That wounds me.”

Her cheeks flushed and she looked around. “Michael, sit down.” Her frantic laugh did nothing to convince him. He moved closer to her and shook his head. “I do love to read.”

Liz folded her arms. “Let me guess. You read mysteries.”

Michael tossed back his head and laughed. “You really need to stop assuming that my whole life is mystery and intrigue.” He wagged his brows up and down and lowered his voice. “Unless that’s something you’re into.”

She gasped. Her face flushed more, but whether because she was embarrassed over their flirting in public or because she was actually enjoying herself, she couldn’t be sure. “Seriously, Michael. What kinds of books do you enjoy reading?”

He slipped back into his chair and rested his elbows on the counter. “I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“Really,” she drawled. “Well, if I guessed, would you tell me?”

Michael chuckled, not meeting her gaze. “I don’t even think you’d be able to get that out of me. The only person who knows my reading habits was Ellen.”

And just like that the air cooled between them. What was she thinking? They’d both lost the love of their lives and here she was flirting with him. The heat in her face deepened and she clasped her hands in her lap. “Jack liked reading, too. Only he would never admit to it.”

Michael peeked at her.

“He made me a bookshelf that lined my room. My own private library.” She smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Though at the time I had no idea that he liked reading. He read all sorts of books. I’d find books missing from my room and they’d turn up in the living room where I’m assuming he’d read privately when no one was around.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “It’s funny how we notice these things after they’re gone, right?”

Michael nodded. “Yeah. Funny.”



SHE TOSSSED her keys on the console table and shut the front door. Even if Michael wasn’t interested in her, it was nice to visit with someone who wasn’t family. It was strange in a funny sort of way. The more time she’d spent with him, the more she realized just how much she had needed this kind of companionship.

Spending time with Michael seemed to lighten the weight that had settled on her shoulders since the weddings. It was like she wasn’t tied to her children or the loss she’d experienced before. She didn’t need a new romantic relationship despite the thoughts her son had put into her head. No, she needed to find her own way again—get back to her roots and what made her happy.

Liz wandered into the living room and flipped on a lamp near the fireplace, illuminating Sean as he lounged in a chair on the other side of the room. She sucked in a gasp and her hand flew to cover her heart.

He had a sly smile on his face, one that both embarrassed and irritated her. “What took you so long?”

She placed her hands on her hips. “Sean! Don’t you know better than to sneak up on your poor mother?”

His brow lifted and he chuckled as he got to his feet and strode toward her. “I did no such thing. I’ve been waiting here for you since Ian said you took Jess’s pies over to the diner.”

“I’m sure your wife would agree that you have better things to do than to wait up for your mother. You don’t even live here anymore.”

“You’re avoiding the question, Mom.”

Her hands flew into the air and she moved past him toward the bookshelf. Her eyes scanned the books without really seeing them. “What question was that?”

“What took you so long?” He rose from his seat and crossed the room toward her. The smile that played on his lips was so similar to Jack’s that she had to take a moment to clear her head.

Liz cleared her throat, plucked a book from the bookshelf and hugged it to her chest. “I decided to eat some pie while I was there.”

Sean’s head tilted and one brow arched as he studied her. It was clear he didn’t believe that was the whole story. But he didn’t have any evidence. His gaze dipped to her book. “Don’t you have enough books in your room?”

She looked down at her book and then her gaze bounced back to meet Sean’s. “Why are you being so nosy? Don’t you have somewhere to be? Like with your wife?”

Her son shrugged his shoulders. “I told Adeline I’d be late.” He plucked the book out of her arms and studied it. “Gone with the Wind? Isn’t that a little heavy this late at night?” He offered it back to her, looking more and more like Jack the longer they spoke. Her breath caught in her throat and she tightened her hold on the book. “I have a feeling your dad read this one.”

Sean’s features pinched and he shook his head. “No. Dad didn’t read.”

She looked down at the book and then back at him. “I’m pretty sure. This one came from my library. If he didn’t take it out of my room, then who did?”

He shrugged again. “I’m not saying he didn’t move it. But I know without a doubt that the only reason Dad would ever read a book was *if* his life depended on it.”

Her brows pulled together. “I could have sworn he liked to read. This wasn’t the only book that he’d taken from our room.” She lifted it and traced her fingers over the cover. “Do you think he was *pretending* to like reading?”

“No clue.” Sean poked the book she held in her hands. “But if he did, don’t you think he’d pretend to like books that

are a little more masculine? Like Michael Crichton or Stephen King?”

Sean made a good point. If he’d never seen his father read a page in a book, it was unlikely Jack was a reader. Between herself and Sean, one of them would have discovered the secret. “Strange.” She glanced up at Sean. “Well, it’s getting late and I’m going to head to bed.”

“But—”

“I’m not going to discuss who, *if anyone*, I visited with while at Sal’s.” She didn’t turn around as she tossed the words at him. A smile tugged at her lips. Let him try to figure out what she meant by it.

“I *knew* it,” he called after her.

## 6

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### *Michael*

*M*t had been a full week since he'd seen Liz, and the night at the diner hadn't been able to be scrubbed from his mind. Every night when he'd closed his eyes, he saw her face. He could hear her laugh and smell her perfume. It was getting ridiculous.

Michael pulled open his office desk drawer and stared at the copy of Wuthering Heights. He hadn't been completely honest with Liz regarding who knew about his reading habits. Jack had been aware, but only because he'd stumbled on the information. Michael had dropped a book he'd been reading only to have Jack retrieve it for him and bring up the library project he was building for his wife.

The memories of that conversation came flooding back. It had stung to discover that Liz had similar tastes and hobbies. But then Michael met Ellen and the rest was history. Michael picked up Wuthering Heights and turned it over in his hands. This had been the last book that Jack had let him borrow before the accident. He just couldn't bring himself to return it after the funeral. Then the more time that had passed, the harder it was to do anything but keep it stowed away in his drawer.

Michael flipped the book open and read the inscription for the hundredth time. *My love for you resembles the eternal*

*rocks beneath.* It was a quote from the book, and though the story was sordid and not much of a romance, the sentiment was likely something that resonated with Liz.

The fact that Jack was able to quote the story was impressive, at least. Michael would have liked to know more of the story regarding this book as a gift. The book was old, worn and had seen many years of use. Corners had been folded and the book had been pressed open.

All of these bits of evidence were enough to make him feel a small amount of guilt over not returning it. He'd have to remedy that; he just didn't know how he'd manage to explain why he'd held onto the book for over two years.

Michael tossed the book back in the drawer just as Deputy Anderson entered the room. He settled into a chair and slapped his notebook on the desk. "I've been looking into those problems you mentioned. The graffiti from last week was mostly painted over, but it did look like someone had tagged the building. The fence that was damaged didn't appear intentionally so. The most likely cause was an animal bumping into an old, worn section and something coming loose."

"You're certain?"

Anderson nodded. "That's what the head ranch hand said."

Michael rubbed his jaw. "Any new occurrences of vandalism since?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Have you gotten any reports?"

Michael shook his head. "No."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Anderson staring at him like he might have all the answers. But the only thing charging through his head was that Adeline might be in on this. However, Zeke wasn't the type to go along with such a crazy charade. He had enough on his plate with his daughters.

Michael frowned. Adeline might be mischievous, but she wouldn't intentionally ruin her father's property. It was like Zeke said, money and time. Adeline knew better than that. Then again, his opinion of her was based on the woman he

knew before she got married. The Adeline of today might be different.

Irritation like the reaction to nails on a chalkboard rippled through him. He grimaced. If he caught his eldest goddaughter in the midst of a lie—a false police report, for that matter—he'd be required to charge her.

Zeke wouldn't like that.

Michael huffed. At this point he'd rather not look into these particular cases, but he couldn't exactly send his deputies to check them out. He leaned back in his chair and studied his deputy. "That will be all, Anderson."

His deputy nodded and stood.

Alone in his office, Michael turned and faced the window. He'd need to have a talk with his goddaughter about her matchmaking escapades. Sean might be on that list as well. A smile tugged at his lips. It wouldn't hurt to visit with Liz and let her know what was going on. She shouldn't have to deal with the uncertainty revolving around her missing tools.

He pulled open the drawer again and glanced at the book. No, he wouldn't return it just yet. That was a conversation for another day.

The radio hooked on his shirt pocket crackled. "We have a disturbance at the convenience store. Shots fired."

Michael groaned and got to his feet. "Call in some backup." He'd have to deal with his job before he had a chance to stop by and visit Adeline or the Baker family.



THE CONVENIENCE STORE was surrounded by several vehicles. Customers hovered on the sidewalk just outside of the building, probably trying to get a look at what was going on through the window.

He jerked his cruiser to a stop and stepped out. His hand rested on the butt of his gun as he approached the front doors

of the store. For some reason this place and the bar on the opposite side of Copper Creek were more likely to be hit with distasteful folk from the city as they passed through town. It was probably because they were businesses on the outskirts of town. People coming from the city didn't venture farther in.

Michael crept inside, his eyes immediately darting to the cashier who pointed toward the back of the store. Loud voices argued in that direction. He nodded and edged down the aisle closest to him.

A quiet gasp tore through the air and he froze. Liz was crouched into a seated position halfway down the aisle. Michael ducked and shuffled toward her. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? What are you doing here?"

He gave her a dumfounded look. He was the sheriff. "Who else are they going to call?" Michael shook his head. "That doesn't matter. What's going on?"

She glanced warily toward the back of the store. "They were shouting, and the man threatened to hurt her. I think he fired at the ceiling."

Michael flicked the strap off his own weapon. It wasn't uncommon for folk out this way to openly carry. Most of the residents were ranchers and needed to protect their property from wild beasts. The fact that the guy discharged his weapon in public would get him a citation. He pulled his com next to his mouth. "Where's my backup?"

"Deputy Anderson is on his way. ETA is five minutes."

"Was anyone hurt?" he asked Liz.

She shook her head.

Michael jerked his head toward the door. "I need you to get out of here."

Her brows furrowed. "They might see me."

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "You'll be fine. I don't want you in here if anything goes wrong."

"I don't think you should be in here if anything goes wrong," she retorted.

A laugh would have come from his throat if he wasn't so concerned about her. "I'm the sheriff, Liz. I'm supposed to be here."

Her gaze darted toward the front of the store, then to his. "What about your backup?"

"It sounds like there's only one guy back there. I'll try to diffuse the situation. Anderson should be here before anything goes wrong."

Still, she hesitated. Her face was blotchy and red, and her hands shook. If he could, he would have taken her out the front door himself and made sure she was settled and okay. She didn't appear to be hurt. The most important thing right now was for her to get to safety before anything went wrong. Michael pointed toward the door. "Go."

Finally she nodded and scurried in the direction he'd sent her. He watched until she disappeared completely. Then he pulled his weapon from its holster and stealthily moved in the direction of the arguments. The woman's voice was growing more hysterical while the man yelled at her to shut up.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose and he tightened his hand on his gun, lifting it with straight arms. The arguing grew louder.

"I don't know what Matt told you, but it isn't true. I've never cheated on you."

"There's the problem. You're going to say anything to get out of this. It's called self-preservation."

"Can we please just go home and talk about this?"

The man snorted. "You'd like that, huh? Because the second we get outside, you'd take off running. You don't think I'll use this, do you?" The distinct sound of a click filled the air.

A gasp ripped through the room and made his stomach churn.

“Bud, don’t be like that,” she pleaded.

Michael peeked around the side of the aisle. “Bud, how about you put that gun away and we talk about this.”

The couple jumped and Bud whipped his gun in Michael’s direction. He was getting too old for this. Where in the world was Anderson?

He cleared his throat. “Son, I understand you aren’t happy right now. But whatever you’re upset about isn’t worth any of this. Put the gun down.”

Bud’s focus wavered.

“I’ve got backup. You can still put down the gun and we can all make it out of here alive.” Michael prayed the woman wouldn’t say anything that would set the man off.

It felt like hours, but in all reality, the moment probably only took seconds. Bud pressed a release on the gun and the magazine clip clattered to the floor. He emptied the chamber, then held up his left hand and slowly bent to put the firearm on the floor. He kicked the gun in Michael’s direction just as Anderson charged through the entrance of the store.

“Anderson,” Michael called. He picked up the weapon, his eyes not leaving the couple in front of him. There were tears on the woman’s face and her chin trembled. Bud worked his jaw back and forth.

Anderson charged into the scene, holding his gun ready. “On the ground. Put your hands on your head.”

In a flurry, Bud was taken into custody, and the woman was pulled aside to be interviewed. Peg admitted that they were on their way from the city to visit some friends. She’d been driving, and Bud was drunk. His friend had never liked her and had claimed she was cheating. It was a simple enough story, but still one of those instances that was slowly making him lose faith in humanity.

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his thinning hair as he stepped from the building into the parking lot. About thirty feet away, Liz sat on the tailgate of her truck, her

gaze fixed on him. Michael took a step in her direction but was stopped by a voice.

“Sheriff—”

Michael turned toward Anderson. “Yeah?”

“I just looked up this guy’s record. Seems he’s done this before. He’s violating parole.”

Michael sighed and replaced his hat.

“What do you want me to do with him?”

“Book him. Unlawful discharge of a weapon. Make sure he gets his phone call.” He glanced over to Liz, finding her still watching him. He hooked his thumbs into his belt loops and strode toward her. When he got about five feet from her, he stopped.

“Hi,” she murmured.

“Hi.”

“I would say we should stop meeting like this, but my sense of humor has dissipated somewhat.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “I don’t blame you.” Michael moved closer. “You okay?”

She nodded, her hands clutching the tailgate on either side of her legs. “I think so.”

Michael turned and boosted himself up to sit beside her. “That was probably really scary.”

Liz didn’t face him. She’d shifted her focus to the flashing lights on the squad cars in front of them. She swallowed and shrugged.

He held his hands together in his lap. She shouldn’t have been there. This deep sense of protection had erupted the second his eyes had landed on her. If anything had happened to her, he didn’t know what he would have done. He’d felt it; something in the back of his mind had gotten distracted. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. It was one of the reasons he chose this profession. He was good at compartmentalizing his job and his personal life.

Michael peeked at her. “Did you get what you needed?”

She shot a confused look at him.

He gestured toward the store. “Whatever you were here for. Did you get it?”

Her huff of a laugh was laced with a small amount of derision. “Of course not. You made me leave.”

“I made you—” He shook his head. “You needed to get out of there in case that man fired his gun and you caught a stray bullet. Are you seriously blaming me for kicking you out of the store? Because I’m sure you can go in there and buy what you need in the next thirty minutes.”

Liz let out a heavy sigh. “No. Of course I’m not blaming you. I’m just a little on edge.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

She swung her focus from the building to him. “Is it always like that?”

“Like what?”

Her hands came up and she hugged herself. “Do you often have to go into situations where someone could kill you? I mean, I remember the issue with Jess and Ian. But I thought *that* was a once-in-a-lifetime sort of situation. I guess I never realized that you put your life in danger so frequently.”

His brow lifted. “What happened with Jess was definitely something unique. I can’t think of a single time when I was involved in something so dangerous. But the other stuff? Like tonight?” Michael shrugged. “Yeah. I suppose I come across people who are more reckless. Tonight that guy was drunk. He wasn’t making the best decisions.”

Liz snorted. “That’s an understatement if I ever heard one.” A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “But from the look of it, you handled it very well.”

He twisted, tilting his head and appraising her. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how Ellen did it.”

Confusion replaced the slow spread of warmth from her compliment. “Huh?”

“How she was able to send you off to your job every single day not knowing if you’d come home to her.”

Michael chuckled. “It’s not as bad as you think. Around here the guys I run into are drunk or on drugs when they make bad choices. The usual traffic stop is nothing in comparison.”

She gave him a pointed look. “But it does happen.”

“I never said it didn’t.”

“So my statement stands. I don’t understand how she could let you go off to work and not know if you would come home.”

He stiffened. She didn’t know what she was talking about. If he’d been a sheriff in any other city, there would be more problems than here. The folks who lived here didn’t cause much trouble. It was the out-of-towners who thought they could make trouble. “My job is no more *dangerous* than what Jack did.”

She let out a laugh, her shoulders relaxing as she placed a hand on his knee for a split second. “That’s funny. I needed a good laugh.”

“I’m not kidding, Liz. If you compare my job to what Jack did, you’ll find that statistically speaking we’re both just as likely to get hurt or killed on the job. Take Jack’s accident for example—” The words died in his throat. The way her eyes darkened sent a chill through his body.

“Don’t talk about him.”

He’d crossed a line. That was clear. It didn’t matter if he was right in this instance. It didn’t matter if ranchers were just as likely to be killed on the job as a sheriff of a small town. He’d broken open the wound of Jack’s passing. He was a complete idiot.

Michael cleared his throat and leaned over to rest his forearms on his knees. “I didn’t tell Ellen much about work.” He didn’t look at her, though he felt her gaze drilling into him.

“I didn’t want to worry her. But you’re right, my job can get dangerous at times. I guess I’m just used to it.”

The cars in the parking lot drove away one by one over the next several minutes. They were left in the silence of the late afternoon as it turned into evening, and he couldn’t tell if she was furious with him or if everything had settled. He couldn’t leave their conversation like this. To do so would definitely mean that he wouldn’t be able to see her again without it getting awkward.

“What were you—”

“I was going to—”

He chuckled and glanced at her again. “You first.”

She offered him a smile. “I was going to get a few things I needed for dinner tonight. But I think I’ve run out of energy to make anything.” She dropped her gaze to her hands in her lap and picked at her fingernails. “I was thinking maybe I’d get a couple pizzas.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I don’t think anyone would blame you for wanting to skip meal preparation for one night.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh shoot. Sean is going to lose it.”

“Sean?” Michael’s brows furrowed and he straightened. “What does he have to do with any of this?” He couldn’t have possibly known that the guy from out of town would have a gun nor that Michael would have to come to the scene. This was all a coincidence.

She dug her hands into her hair. “He asked to make sure we had ice cream. Normally I would go to the grocery store, but this place was closer. If he found out that I was here when this happened—”

He held up both hands. “Say no more. I won’t say a word.”

That small smile returned to her face. “Thanks.

### Liz

Liz's heart still beat like crazy. It fluttered around, banging against the sides like a butterfly in a cage. She'd like to say that it had everything to do with the incident inside the convenience store, but she'd be lying to herself.

The truth was, she had been scared out of her mind for Michael. Knowing he was going to confront the guy who'd willingly shot a weapon in the store had made her anxiety shoot through the roof.

Her whole family knew how to shoot. It wasn't the sound of the weapon that had put her on edge. It was the *where*. There was something about being in that store when the echo of the shot rang out that had put her completely off balance.

Yes, that had triggered her reaction. But then Michael showed up and everything became even more real. Michael was willingly going toward the chaos. And all of a sudden that small amount of uncertainty and anxiety in her chest erupted into something even stronger.

Even as Liz's gaze flickered over to him, it was clearer to her that these concerns weren't just for her own life. The fear she experienced wasn't something she ever wanted to feel again. Even if she'd entertained a relationship with him before this point, it wouldn't be wise to do anything about it now. Maybe if she hadn't already lost someone.

Maybe.

She hopped off of her tailgate. “Yeah. I think I’ll get some pizza and ice cream. You’re welcome to join us if you’d like.” The words came out of her mouth before she had a chance to analyze them. Friends. She’d invited him over as a friend. There were no romantic feelings involved between them whatsoever.

Michael seemed to hesitate. It was obvious he hadn’t expected her to suggest such a thing. He was probably busy. It was short notice and they’d have to take a raincheck.

“Of course if you—”

“That sounds nice.”

“I—oh, what?”

He flashed her a smile and climbed down from the truck bed. “I haven’t had anything to eat all day. Pizza would be great.” He turned and closed the tailgate. Then he stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and rocked back on his heels. “I’ve got to go file a few reports at the office, and then I’ll be there. Shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

She nodded. “Sure. I’ll see you in an hour.” Liz watched Michael head toward his car, still feeling on edge. She shook out her hands in an attempt to get them to stop trembling, but it didn’t work. Still suffering from the event. That’s all it was. That was normal.

After Michael drove away, she purchased the ice cream and called in a pizza order. If this had been any other night, she wouldn’t have even bothered. But Sean and Adeline wanted to come by for dinner tonight to discuss something with the family. It was probably related to their growing businesses.

Even after waiting for the pizzas to be done and making the drive home, Liz felt uneasy. Time and distance didn’t do much to help matters. She sat in her truck, the pizza on the seat beside her making the whole cab smell like mozzarella cheese and pizza sauce. How was she going to explain why she’d invited Michael Donahue to dinner?

They weren't anything more than friends. So she'd have to say they ran into each other. Their stories weren't going to match up if she wanted to keep the kids from knowing where she was that afternoon. It would probably be better if she just told all of them.

Her hands rested on the steering wheel and she dropped her head between them. There was nothing they'd be able to do now. What was done was done. Besides, it wasn't like her sons hadn't had their own scares in the last few years.

Liz lifted her head and reached for the pizzas. She opened her door and ended up knocking it into none other than Michael. He grunted, and she gasped. "I'm so sorry! When did you get here?" She scrambled from the cab, the pizzas forgotten on her seat. She reached out and touched his cheek with her palm, examining him to be sure she hadn't harmed him.

Michael chuckled and stepped away from her. "I'm fine. It's nothing I can't handle."

Her face colored. "Well, I'm sorry all the same." She turned to reach for the pizzas, but he stepped in her way.

"Let me get that for you." He grabbed the stack, and she shut the door after him. Michael nodded toward the house. "Lead the way."

She jumped and started walking, her steps crunching on their gravel driveway. Michael wasn't in his uniform anymore. He must have been able to complete his report faster than expected if he'd managed to head home to change.

He wore a nice pair of jeans without any holes. His button-up plaid shirt was a blend of blue colors. The black shoes on his feet were probably the only thing he wore from his uniform. He hadn't even bothered to wear a cowboy hat which was so common at Cedar Hollow that her eyes seemed to be drawn to his freshly combed hair.

Liz dragged her gaze away. Staring was impolite at any age, and she wasn't about to make him feel uncomfortable. She headed up the porch stairs and opened the door for him.

He smiled at her as he passed through the doorway, then waited for her just inside the foyer.

She stopped, her gaze meeting his with an intensity she couldn't control. Her hand landed on his arm and she lowered her voice. "I'm not sure what my sons have heard about the problem at the convenience store. They might have seen something on the news or gotten info from town. But I'd rather them not get too riled up about it."

"Of course." He didn't argue or ask her to clarify. That meant he probably didn't know what she was hinting at.

"That means I don't want them knowing I was even there."

"Okay."

Liz let out a sigh. "Which also means that if they ask why I invited you, we need a different place we might have bumped into one another—"

"Liz, are you asking me to lie to your sons?" Michael chuckled. "That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

She worried her lower lip. She wasn't thrilled about the lie. And she'd about convinced herself to tell them the truth anyway. The only problem was that she didn't know how they'd react when they found out about what had happened. "What do you suggest?"

He eyed her for a moment, looked away, then brought his gaze back to meet hers and set the pizzas down on a nearby console table. "I'm going to tell you something, but I don't want it to get weird between us."

Her stomach tightened, knots formed, and she caught her breath. Was it possible that he'd lied about the feelings he no longer felt for her? No. That was preposterous. It was all probably due to the strange feelings she'd been experiencing lately. The sense of loss and loneliness from Jack being gone and her marrying off all of their sons.

She needed to get it together and fast.

Liz swallowed and nodded. "Go for it."

Michael smiled mischievously. “I have a feeling that Sean and Adeline are trying to set us up.”

Her mouth dropped open and her gaze shot toward the kitchen. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “It started at Finn’s wedding. Adeline seemed pretty insistent that I should get closer to you.”

Her brows furrowed. “She wanted you to get closer to me? Why would she want that?”

Michael shrugged. “Beats me. She claims it’s because I’ve been alone for so long and I deserve to be happy.”

Funny. Hadn’t one of her sons said the same thing? She blinked rapidly and shook her head. “Okay, so they want us to get closer. What does that mean exactly? Friendship? We’re already *pretty close.*” To suggest anything else would be utterly silly. But knowing Adeline, her reasons probably ran deeper.

His countenance seemed to dim, if only by a little bit. He reached for the stack of pizzas again. “Dunno. But I figured I’d let you know what they were planning in case anything got awkward.”

Too late. Things were already awkward between the two of them. She couldn’t shake that feeling of trepidation she’d had earlier. Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Well, unfortunately for them, they’re not going to get what they want.”

His eyes seemed to widen slightly and he coughed. “What?”

She sliced her hand through the air and started for the kitchen. “I don’t need anyone to play matchmaker for me—friends or relationships. I am perfectly happy with my life the way it is. Aren’t you?”

This time he chuckled, easing the tension that had grown between them. “I think I said that exact thing to Adeline.”

Liz glanced over her shoulder at him. “I didn’t realize you two were close.”

“I’m her godfather.”

“Wow. That’s neat. Are you the godfather for all of Zeke’s daughters?”

Michael nodded. “I’m their mother’s cousin. I’m also the closest family. It made sense.” They entered the kitchen and he followed her toward the island with the boxes. She grabbed the ice cream and deposited it in the freezer. Everyone but Brock, Piper, Sean and Adeline were present. They were all chatting around the kitchen table quietly until her entrance with Michael. The conversation stopped abruptly and all eyes landed on them.

Ian was the first to stand from his place at the table. He held out his hand and walked across the room with a smile on his face. “Sheriff. To what do we owe the pleasure?” They shook hands and Ian clasped his free hand over the ones they gripped together.

Michael exchanged looks with Liz. She let out a heavy sigh and stepped farther into the room. “There was a problem at the convenience store when I went to pick up a few things. The sheriff was called out to the scene, and I invited him for dinner. It’s no big deal.”

“Wait, what kind of problem?” Ian rose from his seat. “Any problem where the sheriff is involved has got to be pretty bad.” He shot a look in Michael’s direction. “Sheriff?”

She stepped into Ian’s line of sight, blocking him from being able to pester the sheriff for details. “Michael doesn’t have to tell you anything.”

“It’s *Michael* now?” Sean wandered into the kitchen, a wide smile crossing his features and his tone teasing. So Michael was right. Her son and daughter-in-law were trying to get them together.

Liz glanced over her shoulder toward Michael and shrugged. There was nothing to keep from them. She’d already made it perfectly clear to Michael that she wasn’t interested in a relationship. She faced him and reached for the boxes in his arms, then placed them on the table. “Regardless, I didn’t want

to cook tonight and since Sean and Adeline wanted everyone here for some kind of family meeting, I figured pizza would be the best route.”

A few moments later, Brock arrived with a squirming Brooklyn in his arms. She reached her chubby little arms out to Liz and Brock relinquished her. “What’s going on?” He deposited the diaper bag on the floor beside the table and took a seat. Piper sat beside him, giving Liz a smile.

It appeared Sean was going to say something, but Adeline touched his arm and shook her head, cutting him off. Instead, Ian was the one who spoke up. “Mom was at the convenience store in town and was probably in danger.”

Brock’s easy demeanor changed immediately. His whole body stiffened and he shot a concerned look in Liz’s direction. “What happened?”

“It’s fine. It was nothing.”

Ian snorted. “You have a tendency to downplay stuff. Sheriff Donahue ought to be the one who tells us. At least we can trust him to tell us the truth.” He gave Michael a pointed look. All eyes turned toward him.

Well, at least they were focused on him for reasons other than their time spent together. Liz glanced at him. There could be worse guys for her children to have picked for her. She had a good relationship with him. Maybe she shouldn’t completely discount Adeline and Sean’s matchmaking intentions.

*Michael*

*M*ichael squirmed—more on the inside than out. He'd been in the Baker's home at least a hundred times in his lifetime. He'd watched each of the Baker boys grow from young children to the fine young men they were.

But he'd never felt so put on the spot in all his life. Each one of them and their wives looked at him like they expected him to tell them some great secret.

Michael shot a look in Liz's direction, finding her gaze on him as well. She didn't seem as concerned as she had earlier. All he had to do was find a way to explain what had happened without it sounding terrible but also making sure it was accurate.

That wasn't possible.

He took a deep breath and let it out, his cheeks puffing with the effort. "There was a disgruntled young man at the store. He discharged a weapon but not directly at anyone. Anderson arrested him, and he's now sitting in county unless he was able to make bail."

Okay, so that description was more than he probably should have given. Not one person in the room smiled or even seemed to be breathing. Liz gaped at him. Definitely too much information. He gave her a sheepish grin and met each of her son's eyes steadily. "Don't worry. I got your mom out of there,

and no one was hurt. If I had thought there was any chance of that happening, she would have been my first priority.”

Great. He’d put his foot in his mouth once again. Now everyone stared at him with disbelief.

He dragged a hand down his face. “Not that your mom is my priority. What I meant to say was I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her.” He grimaced. “But I also wouldn’t let *anyone* get hurt, period. Because that’s my job.”

Maybe he should just cut his losses and get out of there. This was turning out to be a bigger mess than he’d anticipated. He didn’t want anyone to feel uncomfortable, least of all Liz. But at this point all he was doing was saying things better left unsaid. Heat crawled up his neck and he let out a chuckle. “You know what I mean.”

“No.” Sean grinned. “I don’t think we do.”

“*Sean.*” Both Liz and Adeline spoke in unison.

Michael glanced around the room once more, finding amused stares had replaced the shocked ones. At least that was something. He’d probably have to apologize to Liz after dinner. His words had gone rogue on the whole scenario.

A few quiet chuckles bounced around the room as everyone let the topic drop and headed toward the pizza on the counter. Michael moved toward Liz, admiring her granddaughter. He reached a finger out, letting Brooklyn wrap her hand around it.

“I’m sorry I made a mess of things. That was not my intention. I should have—”

“Michael.”

He lifted his focus to meet hers, surprised to find her soft, easy smile.

“It’s fine. I had half a mind to tell them all anyway when I got home. I just hadn’t figured out how to spell it out in a way that wouldn’t make them get all protective.”

“That wasn’t protective?”

She laughed, her focus shifting to the little girl. She pressed a kiss to Brooklyn's forehead and nuzzled the baby close. "That was nothing. Honestly, I was a little surprised that they didn't immediately demand to head down to the sheriff's department and raid the cells." She snickered. "I guess getting married has made them all a little soft."

Liz turned her head, pulling Brooklyn's cheek against her own as she met Michael's eyes. "I don't think I thanked you for helping me get out of there. In the moment, things were a little hectic. I don't know what would have happened if you weren't the one who showed up. For that, I am grateful."

"Don't mention it." He placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently. The warmth of her body gave his hand a strange kind of tingle—something he hadn't experienced before and yet somehow familiar. Michael pulled away quickly and gestured toward the pizza. "I'm going to fix myself a plate. Would you like one?"

She nodded. "Please."

He nearly rested his hand on her shoulder again but thought better of it. As much as he'd like to experience that sensation again and examine it, he knew better. He picked up a plate and stacked it with two slices of pizza. Then did the same with a second plate.

By the time they were all seated at the large dining room table, the noise in the room had grown exponentially. Everyone was competing, speaking over one another. Michael had taken a seat near one end of the table. His chair sat beside Sean who had taken over the head of the table. On the other side sat Liz. She continued to have Brooklyn on her lap. She'd pluck off a few pepperonis and give them to the baby one by one.

Michael's gaze met Liz's half a dozen times before Adeline leaned closer to him and murmured, "It's nice to see you're following my advice."

"And what advice is that?"

"With Liz."

He shot her a flat look. “First of all, the two of us don’t need to get any closer than we already are. Liz is still reeling from the death of her husband, and I—”

“Know exactly what she’s going through.”

His mouth remained frozen in an opened state and his gaze flitted toward Liz down at the other end of the table. She was otherwise engaged in a conversation with one of her other children.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Adeline rolled her eyes. “You know exactly what I’m talking about, and you know what else? I think you’re enjoying yourself.”

He shook his head. “First of all, you don’t have the credentials to play matchmaker. Secondly, I’m too old to be one of your pet projects. Just because I enjoy spending time with her doesn’t mean that anything will come of it.”

She shrugged. “You can deny all you want, but I see the way you stare at her. *And* the way she looks at you. If you ask me, there’s already something growing and all the two of you have to do is let nature take its course.” She wiped her mouth with her napkin and placed it on the table beside her plate. “Speaking of nature, I have something to announce.” She rose from her seat and picked up her glass of water.

Adeline clinked her glass a few times with a spoon she must have retrieved from a drawer in the kitchen, and eventually the whole group turned their attention to her. Michael’s gaze shifted back to Liz again as if against his will.

It was like he’d been transported back in time to when he’d thought he might have a shot with her. The bright smile she wore. The way her eyes sparkled when she looked around at her family with the purest kind of love—all of it made him want to entertain a possibility with her again.

Yes, they were both older. She had a full-grown family that was growing every single day. Heck, Liz probably didn’t need him or anyone. She had built her own support system with the man she’d married. What could he even offer her?

Gasps and congratulations ripped through the room.

Michael jumped and swung his focus to Adeline. Sean was holding her at his side, and both of them were beaming. A few people in the room were chuckling and cracking jokes about how this one better not be fake. His brows creased and he found Liz's eyes pinned on him. The warmth crawled up his neck once more.

Great. Adeline announced something and he'd been so lost in thought he hadn't heard a single word. A smile stretched across his face and he got up from his chair. Quickly he moved across the room and gave Adeline a hug, murmuring, "Congratulations."

She turned her head toward him and whispered, "You weren't even listening, were you?" Her eyes danced with accusatory amusement. Adeline had probably been paying attention to him when she'd made her announcement, and now she wasn't going to let him off easy.

He pulled back and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I was a little distracted. But you can tell me now."

Her head tilted slightly and a teasing smile played on her lips. Was she seriously considering not telling him, forcing him to stumble through the rest of the evening?

Michael's eyes narrowed and he pressed his lips into a thin line. "Is this any way to treat your godfather?"

She lifted a shoulder. "I'll tell you if you tell me something."

He rolled his eyes and stepped back, folding his arms. "And what is that?"

"Tell me you're not considering starting a relationship with my mother-in-law."

His brows shot up. "What?"

"You heard me. I did it, didn't I?"

Michael shook his head. "I honestly don't know what you're talking about."

She placed her hand on her hip and matched his disgruntled expression. “Come on, Michael. I was right. You still like her, and you can’t help but think it would be worth the risk to see where things could go.” Adeline gestured toward where Liz and Sean were speaking, and Michael’s focus shifted in that direction.

His chest tightened in that familiar way it had when he was younger. Then the nervous energy returned. He was too old for this. Butterflies and a stomach full of knots were for the young. He was more logical now. He’d experienced it all before.

“See? There. That right there—the way you’re looking at her. I can tell. It’s the same way that Sean looked at me.” Adeline’s chin lifted triumphantly. “So when are you going to ask her out on a date?”

Michael stiffened. “*Date*? Who said anything about a date? She’s my friend, Adeline. And you have more things to worry about right now than my love life. My chance with Liz was lost almost 35 years ago.”

“Who says you don’t have another shot?”

“*She did!*” he said in exasperation. Well, maybe not in so many words. But she’d made it clear she wasn’t interested in anything with anyone. And especially not with him. If her opinion of his job was any indication, he knew he didn’t have a shot with her even if they were younger. Liz was out of reach. He let out a sigh, and his voice evened out. He set his stern gaze on Adeline. “And I think you need to stop with the fake crimes, too. Your matchmaking isn’t going to go anywhere, and all you’re doing is hurting your business.”

Her brows creased. “What? I didn’t fake anything.”

“Come on, Adeline. The ruined tractor tire? The missing tools in the barn over here?”

She held up her hands. “I didn’t do anything with the tractor. That was real.” Her gaze shot to Sean. “Maybe Sean did something with the tools. But that’s only because we wanted you to come this way.”

His brows creased. If she didn't cause the problem with the tractor, then who did? He shook his head to clear it. He'd figure that out later. "Adeline, you realize you can be fined for filing a fake police report, right?"

"I didn't do it."

"Sean, then. And you'd be an accessory."

Adeline shook her head. "Was my name or Sean's on that report?"

His jaw tightened. "No."

"So the person who filed the report is..."

He blew out a frustrated breath. "*Adeline*. Liz didn't do anything wrong. You guys are manipulating the two of us. Regardless, those tools were still taken from the premises."

"But if they were misplaced and forgotten, how would you prove it?"

He let out a groan. "Adeline, this is serious. Under no circumstances are you to break the law."

She held up a finger, but he cut her off.

"Not even to set me up with Liz."

Adeline snapped her mouth shut. "Fine. But that doesn't mean I won't find other means—"

"*Adeline*." He dragged a hand down his face. "Do yourself and everyone else a favor and stop meddling in other's affairs."

"But—"

"I mean it. Tell me you'll stop meddling."

She pressed her lips into a tight line. "I can't do that or I'd be lying."

He shook his head. Fine. At least Liz knew what they were up to. Michael held out a hand and curled his fingers twice. "Okay. Fess up so I don't have to be the only one in this room unaware of what I'm congratulating you for."

Adeline laughed. "Okay. Fair's fair." Her eyes brightened and she lowered her voice. "Sean and I are going to have a baby."

His eyes widened and he beamed at her. "That's great, Adeline! Amazing! You must be so excited!"

She nodded. "We are."

Michael pulled her in for another hug. "You're going to make a wonderful mother, Adeline. I'm so happy for you both."

Her arms wrapped around him tightly. "Thank you, Michael."

The family settled back into their normal dinner routine and resumed eating. Michael glanced around the table, more in awe than anything else. Ellen hadn't been able to have children. And after the initial disappointment, they'd managed to fill their lives with other joys. The most family he ever had were nieces and nephews, and of course the Callahans.

Seeing all the family around the table only solidified the fact that Liz didn't have any need for someone new in her life. He'd have to be happy to just continue being her friend.

Dinner was spent with a great deal of small-talk and after everyone was done eating, they moved into the living room to visit. He settled on a couch and contentedly listened as the conversation drifted from family updates to the business of running the two ranches. From the sound of it, Cedar Hollow had been in trouble last year. No one said it outright, but it was alluded to.

Michael's focus again landed on Liz and he frowned. She'd been in trouble and hadn't reached out to him. He didn't know how he felt about that. Shouldn't he be someone she came to when she needed support? That's what friends were for.

"What's wrong?"

He jumped and glanced to his side at Jess. She smiled warmly and memories of when he'd first met her filled his

mind. She'd been much less confident and trusting. She'd flourished being here with the Baker family.

Jess continued to stare at him. "You just look a little off."

He chuckled. "Maybe this is the way I normally look."

She shook her head. "No, that's not it. When I met you, I distinctly remember you being more self-assured."

"Well, then in that case, perhaps it was the situation. I was what you needed me to be."

"*Maybe*. But honestly, you've seemed a little distant all evening. I figured you could use a friendly face."

Michael studied her. "I'm good. Thanks for the offer, though."

She settled back against the cushions and crossed one leg over the other. "Do you remember bringing me to your place when those guys were coming after me?"

"Who could forget?"

"I asked you about your wife and if you had children."

He stiffened. What was it with everyone in this family wanting to talk about his personal life?

"You mentioned that you didn't have children but that your life had been fulfilling anyway." Jess glanced over to where Piper and Brock were sitting with Brooklyn. "I wonder if you ever consider what it would be like if you had. You could be a grandfather now."

His stomach twisted and churned. It was times like this when he *did* feel alone. Michael cleared his throat and tugged at his collar. "There's no use thinking about what-ifs. Besides, I have the family I was always meant to have."

She twisted around and lifted her brow. "Is that so?"

"Yes. I have a few siblings with children, the people I oversee at the station, and I have my friends. And the Callahans," he added for good measure. "And now Adeline is having a child. Her baby will practically be like a grandchild

to me. Semantics aside, I've always believed I get to pick my family.”

Jess gazed at him thoughtfully. “That’s good. And if it helps, I consider you like family, too. With my mom farther away, it’s nice to know I have people here I can count on.” She offered him another smile and got to her feet.

Michael’s gaze followed her until she made it to Brock and Piper and held out her hands for the baby. This family was more close-knit than his own, as much as he didn’t want to admit that to anyone.

And just like that, the hole in his heart grew a little bigger.

*Liz*

*H*er family was growing. It was only a matter of time before each of her children would be announcing their own pregnancies. And she could hardly wait. Brooklyn was the sweetest little girl, and JD was the most adorable little boy. She had no doubt that she'd love this new grandchild just as much as the two of them.

Liz's gaze flitted over to Michael who appeared to be less than comfortable. His features were paler than usual and his whole body was tight. Something was bothering him. Had the problem at the convenience store been harder on him than she'd originally thought? She got to her feet and headed across the room to stand before him.

He looked up at her with surprise.

She jerked her head toward the door. "I feel like going for a walk. What do you think?"

Michael nodded and rose from his place. "Sounds good to me."

Liz led the way through the living room, foyer, and out the door. The sun had officially disappeared behind the trees in the woods, but there was still some light in the sky. A light breeze filtered through the trees in the distance, bringing with it the scent of pine and lavender. She breathed in deeply and hummed with pleasure. "You know, when Jack wanted to buy

this property, I thought he was crazy. I didn't know the first thing about ranching."

His smile was small. "I don't think anyone knew what to expect when you ran off with a cowboy and moved out here."

She snorted. "Well, you moved out here, too. So there must be something special about this place."

"I didn't move out here for any reason besides the job opportunity." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "You chasing a cowboy out into the middle of nowhere is far worse."

Liz bit back a disgruntled scoff and it came out more like a strangled choking sound. She covered her mouth and faced him. "Michael Donahue, I did not come chasing a cowboy." She turned her head and sniffed in an exaggerated show of feigned superiority. "Maybe he kidnapped me. And you haven't been doing your job well enough to figure that out."

He stopped, his features totally serious. "No one would have believed you didn't want to be here. We could all see how happy Jack made you. I truly believe that the two of you were soul mates."

A chill raced down her spine and goosebumps lifted on her arms. She rubbed at them vigorously. "That's sweet of you to say." She peered at him as the sky darkened. "Do you really believe in that sort of thing?" At his confused stare, she elaborated. "The soul mate thing."

Understanding filled his features. "Of course. But is there only *one* soul mate out there for people? No. I don't believe so. I believe your soul connects with someone when it needs to. It might be with a high school sweetheart or with your best friend." His voice softened toward the end and he looked away from her, continuing on their walk.

She worried her lower lip and fell into step beside him. "I like that."

He looked in her direction.

"The way you described being in love. It's not about what you think you want. It's about what your heart knows you

need.” She let out a small laugh. “You know, I have to say that after watching all of my sons fall in love, I’m glad I don’t have to go through all that again. The ‘will they or won’t they.’ It’s nice not to have to worry about that sort of stuff, right?”

“Right,” Michael murmured. “But don’t you ever miss having someone to confide in? I mean, there are just some things you can’t discuss with your children.”

“Well, most of the topics of discussion I have with my children are suitable for them. I don’t really have anything I need to keep from them. Now, if you ask them, they definitely have a lot they try to keep from me.” She gave him a pointed look. “I’m sure you didn’t miss the part where they said we had some financial trouble.”

The look on his face was enough to convince her that he knew exactly what she was talking about. Her face warmed and she avoided looking at him. “Turns out we weren’t meant to grow as fast as we did over the last couple of years, and I didn’t see any of it coming.” It was completely embarrassing. “You would have thought that I would know better. I’ve been running this place since I married Jack. And after he died—” Her voice caught in her throat. “Well, you get it.”

He didn’t say anything, and she couldn’t tell if that was better or worse than saying something trite in an attempt to comfort her.

Worse.

It was definitely worse.

Her blush deepened and she threw her hands down at her sides. Liz stormed off toward the barn, avoiding his gaze. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Michael’s steps followed her, crunching into the dirt.

“That the only thing I should have known better about was marrying a cowboy and leaving the city. I couldn’t possibly know what I’m doing even though I’ve been doing it for thirty years and it was only a matter of—”

His hand shot out and grasped her hand, pulling her to a stop. “That’s not what I’m thinking at all.” Warm blue eyes studied hers. “I think you were brave to go out on your own and try something different. You followed Jack because you were in love, and I think that showed. We all make mistakes. That’s called being human.”

Emotion bubbled up in her throat. Since the moment she’d found out about how bad their finances had been, she’d barely been able to hold it together. Just hearing him say those words seemed to lift a weight from her shoulders she didn’t know she’d been carrying.

Of course they were back on track now, but there was still that lingering doubt that she should have done better. Liz squeezed his hand and nodded. “Thanks, Michael. I appreciate that.”

“Well, it’s the truth.”

His hand was still holding hers as they continued to gaze at each other. She didn’t feel the need to withdraw right away, which was strange. The level of peace she felt when she was around him was completely different than she was expecting. Electricity hummed in the air surrounding them and she leaned slightly closer to him.

The front door of the house burst open and the screen door banged against the house. They both jumped and she released his hand, bringing it up to her hair. She tucked a strand behind her ear and nodded toward the barn. “Shall we continue?” Without waiting for a response, she hurried onward. Their brief moment was strange. More than strange, it felt foreign and almost taboo. She’d chosen Jack. Michael had Ellen.

She was a firm believer that people who passed from this life lingered and supported their loved ones. What would Jack think if he saw what was happening? More than that, she still wasn’t ready for a relationship. And definitely not with someone who worked in such dangerous situations on a daily basis.

And yet...

She couldn't deny that something had awakened inside her. The beating of her heart thudded a little faster and not because she had practically started running.

Liz stopped, breathless in the doorway of the barn. Her hand came up and rested against the doorjamb. She was an adult. And as such, if she wanted to begin a new relationship with someone, she shouldn't feel guilty or awkward about it.

So why couldn't she shake this sense of shame?

Michael materialized beside her, his breathing heavy but not as bad as hers. He bent over and placed his hands on his knees. "I didn't know you could move so fast," he said and chuckled. "You're in pretty good shape."

"Speak for yourself." She motioned vaguely at him from his head to his feet. "You don't look like you're struggling at all to keep up."

"Oh, inside I'm dying just a little bit. First, it's my appendix, because who needs that. Then it will be a kidney—I only need one of those..."

Liz snickered. "I didn't realize you had a dry sense of humor."

"There's a lot about me that you might not realize." He'd said it with a teasing tone, but there was an edge to his words that caught her off guard. She met his gaze once before moving past him down the aisle of horse stalls.

They currently housed about a dozen horses in this stable, but there was room for more—space they'd be utilizing as their boarding picked up. Out of habit, she made her way to a stall all the way at the end on the left-hand side.

The dapple grey mare had been Jack's. Two things she valued highly that he'd left behind—her library that Jack had built, and this horse. Though, in a few years she might only have the library.

Liz lifted her hand and rubbed the animal's nose just as Michael came up beside her. "He's a beautiful horse."

“She.” Liz offered him a half-smile. “Jack got her shortly after Brock was born. He had this crazy idea that the boys would help him raise her, train her, and then breed her.”

“Did that happen?”

Liz shook her head. “Well, they helped with the training, and we did breed her a few times, but we only kept one. But now she’s getting old and I have a feeling she won’t be around much longer.”

He reached out with curled fingers. “What’s her name?”

“Meredith.”

Michael scrunched up his face into an unexpected, confused smile. “That’s a strange name for a horse.”

“That’s what *I* said.” Liz laughed. “But after we had three boys, Jack insisted we were destined to have all boys and the girl’s name he loved wasn’t going to be put to use. So he named the horse.”

“I could see Jack doing something like that.”

She gave a soft look in Michael’s direction, and her voice seemed to echo in her head. “Yeah. He had this way of surprising me. It’s what I loved about him.” Her face flooded with warmth and her stomach twisted. She opened the stall and came to stand beside Meredith.

Great. Why did she have to keep bringing him up? Michael probably wasn’t the least bit interested in talking about someone who’d passed away two years ago. She rubbed her face into Meredith’s neck. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

She peeked at him. “I’m sure you’re getting awfully tired of me talking about Jack all the time.”

Michael shrugged and moved closer to them. “I’d rather you talk about what makes you happy. If that’s Jack, then go for it.”

As much as she wanted to find the words to describe him, she couldn’t. Michael was a different breed. He had been

friends with Jack but not so much that he'd want to reminisce about him to this extent. She turned, leaning her body into Meredith's and cocked her head slightly. He stilled and met her gaze with an unsure one of his own.

“What?”

“Your turn. What makes you happy?”

Michael’s countenance changed and shifted into something brighter. “Didn’t we already discuss that?”

“What? Your reading habits? Okay, but what else?”

“I like going to the range.”

Liz chortled. “You mean shooting? Don’t you *have* to do that?”

Michael joined in with a laugh of his own. “Okay, Miss ‘My hobbies can’t relate to my job.’ What about you? Tell me that one of your favorite pastimes *isn’t* going on horse rides.”

She sucked in a mock gasp. “*That’s* different.”

“Prove it.”

Liz placed a hand on her hip. “Because when I go for a ride, I don’t have to worry about anything on the ranch. I’m just going to enjoy the scenery.”

“And when I go to the range, I get to just enjoy the scenery.”

She tossed her head back and laughed.

“What? It’s true.” A boyish grin played at his lips.

“When you go to the range, you’re also practicing the skill that you are basically required to have. When I ride, I don’t have to have any skills related to it.”

“Liar.”

“What?”

He folded his arms and shook his head. “I am calling you out. You can’t do your job if you can’t sit in a saddle and stay there.”

Her mouth dropped open, then closed and opened again. She probably looked like a codfish more than anything else. How could she argue with him on that front? She couldn't. "Fine. You win this round. But I still want to know about something that you enjoy that has nothing to do with your job."

"Same," he said and laughed. "You come up with something and I'll do the same."

"I think that's hardly fair. I asked you first."

He laughed again, the sound reverberating through her and somehow making her feel lighter. "Ah, but if I go first, then I'm breaking a cardinal rule."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Ladies first."

Liz rolled her eyes. "I don't think that applies in this situation."

Michael shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not."

"Oh, alright." She tapped her chin. "A hobby that doesn't have to do with my life..." As much as she wanted to come up with an answer, the only things that came to mind were her reading and spending time working the ranch. Her brows knit together. How had she become so two-dimensional?

"Didn't you used to love painting?"

She stilled, her gaze sweeping to find his. "Yes. I did."

"Do you still do that?"

"Oh, I haven't picked up a paintbrush since before I had Sean."

"Why not?"

They both moved farther down the body of the horse and spoke over her back. Liz folded her arms on the animal and rested her head on top of them. "I suppose I had better things to occupy my time with."

“But finding joy in something—something that’s your own thing—isn’t that just as important?”

A smile tugged at her lips. “Yes, it is.”

**10**

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## *Michael*

*M*ichael gazed at this woman who had been through trials time and time again, and she was no less beautiful or capable. With each passing moment they spent together, the memories and reasons for why he'd liked her so much came rushing to the surface.

Doggoned Adeline and her nosy matchmaking ways.

Neither he nor Liz had any need for a romantic relationship, and yet here he was contemplating how nice it would be if they did.

*Why not?* his heart seemed to say.

“Your turn.”

“Hmm?” He stiffened, successfully being pulled right back to reality.

“I went. Now you get to tell me one of your hobbies that has nothing to do with your day-to-day life.”

He wagged a finger at her. “But didn’t I bring that one up? Does it really count?”

She scoffed. “Of course it counts.”

Michael bit back a smile, but it refused to stay hidden. He enjoyed her company far too much. “Okay.” He took in a deep breath and blew it out. “Every so often I take community courses for really strange things.”

It was like a light went on behind her eyes. Her whole face brightened with excitement as she lifted her head and gazed at him unwaveringly. “Really? Like what?”

He could already feel the heat crawling up the back of his neck. It wasn’t that they were all embarrassing. Some of the courses had actually been fun and were great for everyday situations. But then there were others that were better suited for other people.

People who weren’t on the older side of things.

People who weren't supposed to be tough representatives of the town.

People who weren't him.

Michael looked away. "Well, the other day I took a two-hour course on making sourdough bread."

Her eyes widened. "You can bake?"

He grimaced. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that. My bread was more sour than it should have reasonably been. I don't know what I did, but it was definitely wrong."

Liz laughed. "What else have you learned?"

"Colored pencil art." At her stare, he continued. "Ballroom dance. First Aid and CPR. You know, community classes."

"That's amazing. I didn't even know they had classes you could attend."

He didn't know what he was expecting her to say, but it wasn't that. Then again, Liz didn't seem like the type to make fun of people. He shouldn't have been worried, and now he felt silly keeping it a secret. "Yeah. There's this painting class tomorrow night. You could be my date." He bit down on his tongue the second the words left his mouth and looked away. That dreaded four-letter word. How could he be so dumb to ask her out on a date? Without meeting her gaze, he muttered. "I mean, you could—"

"I'd love to."

His head snapped up and he gave her a wide-eyed stare. "You would?"

Liz nodded. "Sure, why not? It's been far too long since I've put a brush to canvas. I think it would be nice. And what's better than a date between friends?"

*Friends.* Right.

That word was like a slap in the face. He just needed to remember that she hadn't given him any indication that she wanted anything more. How had he gotten so far off track so quickly?

“Great. I’ll pick you up around six.”

Her lips curled into a beautiful smile, one that could make his legs go weak with just one glimpse. The longer he gazed at her full lips, the tighter the knots in his stomach became. Once upon a time he’d wanted to kiss that mouth more than anything else in the world.

He shook his head and swallowed hard. He’d keep it together. Adeline wouldn’t break into his reverie that easy. “It’ll be fun.” Michael moved out of the stall and waited for Liz to shut it. Then he stepped around a large bucket as he made his way toward the entrance with her close behind.

“Wait, I forgot something.” Liz hurried back toward the horse and stuck her hand into what looked like a leather satchel that hung on a nearby post. She held out her hand and Meredith’s large soft nose stuck out from the stall and seemed to inhale whatever treat she offered to her.

Liz murmured something sweet to the animal and backed away from her. The bucket was right in her path.

He lurched forward. “Watch out for the—”

Her boot got stuck in the bucket and she lost her balance. Arms flailing, she let out a little squeal and tumbled toward him.

Michael’s arms shot out just as she collided with him. Her face was so close to his, her eyes wide and unsure. Both of them were breathing heavily, and his heart pounded loudly in his ears. Liz’s hands grasped tightly to his forearms, squeezing just enough to draw his attention to them.

“Are you okay?” he murmured.

She nodded. “Are you?”

A wry smile filled his face. “I’m not the one who about face-planted on the ground moments ago.”

A sparkling smile that rivaled the stars in the night sky filled her face. “You make a good point.”

They stood like that for a few more moments. It was like there was some unspoken agreement that neither of them

wanted to release the other. Her perfume was mild and sweet, giving off floral notes. The way wisps of her hair framed her face gave her the appearance of being almost angelic.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't going to keep it together. Adeline had already meddled and he was a goner. There was no way he'd be able to spend any more amount of time with her and not fall madly, deeply in love.

His gaze dipped to her lips, the temptation was strong to brush his own against them and experience their sweet taste. Michael squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head again. He released her arms and took a stumbled step back. His hands immediately flew to his pockets and he rocked back on his heels. "I'll see you tomorrow, Liz." He spun around and charged from the barn.

Yep. He was in trouble.

The one woman he'd pined after.

The one woman who'd been off-limits.

His heart yearned for her, and his head wasn't strong enough to stay away.



MICHAEL FUMBLED with his paintbrush and snuck a quick look in Liz's direction. This course was far beneath her abilities as an artist. He knew it. Heck, she probably knew it, too. And yet she continued to smile like she was having the best night of her life.

The instructor was some twenty-something kid. She'd probably just graduated from college with an art degree. She appeared to be enjoying herself as the one in charge. The few times she'd wandered through the room, she'd stopped and watched Liz work. The snippets of conversation he'd overheard revolved around Liz's artistic background. And Liz was soaking it all in. She practically glowed.

Liz's eyes found his, and he froze. Shoot. He was staring again, and she'd caught him. Could he be more obvious? She

gave him a small smile before turning back to her picture.

He stared forlornly at his version of a moon over a lake, surrounded by trees. These painting classes were supposed to be easy, and yet his attempt looked more like a giant egg suspended above a shattered mirror. At least the trees looked right. Then again, maybe trees were harder to mess up.

“That’s not half-bad.” Liz’s voice came beside his ear and he jumped. His heart rate quickened and he glanced at her. She was examining his poor excuse for a picture and all he could think was how much he wanted to turn it away and avoid the embarrassment of her critique.

“You’re just being kind,” he said with a chuckle.

Liz shook her head. “We all have to start somewhere. I can tell what it is. And besides, art is more about expressing yourself than drawing something that is exact. If we were supposed to make it perfect, they would have given us cameras instead of paintbrushes.”

“Oh yeah? And if I walked over to your easel, what would I find?”

She laughed. “Art isn’t about comparisons either. You do it because it brings you joy. Have you been having fun?”

“Sure, but—”

“Then that’s all that matters.” Liz moved over to her painting and flicked her wrist a few times to add more paint to her picture. He leaned back and sure enough, her picture couldn’t have been more perfect. What was more, she had decided to add the silhouettes of a mare with her foal near the water’s edge.

He snorted, causing her to look up. Her cheeks colored and she laughed. “Everything I said still applies. You have to do things that make you happy. Life is too short to worry about doing anything wrong.”

Her words sent chills down his spine. The meaning behind her statement couldn’t have hit him harder if she’d hit him over the head with a frying pan. He wouldn’t have said that his life had been a waste. On the contrary, he’d found love. He’d

discovered joy in his career. To ask for more would have been selfish.

Except now as he kept catching her gaze, he wanted more. That much was clear. He wasn't about to let this opportunity pass him by. He'd have to find a way to be seen as more than just a friend.

When the painting class was officially over, several of the students took pictures with their works of art. He couldn't bear to stand beside Liz and the painting that could have hung over some rich guy's fireplace, so he took her picture and insisted he'd send her a copy.

They headed outside toward his squad car and he opened the door for her. She gave him a funny look, prompting him to pause. "What?"

Liz shook her head and let out a soft laugh. "Nothing. I just haven't had the door opened for me in a very long time." She tipped her head, glancing at him from beneath her lashes. "It's nice."

"Well, you are my date and everything is still new and exciting. Wait until we've been doing this for ten years. Then the novelty will wear off and everything will go back to normal."

Her eyes widened.

Michael went over everything he'd just said in his head and almost smacked his forehead. What in the world had he just gone and said? He'd meant for his statement to be sarcastic and funny, but it probably came off as him stating he had plans for their future already. Back when he was a little younger, that would have been a death wish for a budding relationship. His eyes locked with hers and an explanation was on the tip of his tongue when she tossed back her head and laughed. "You might be right about that."

Wait. What was she saying? Was she interested in something more? Had he been so inside his own head on all of this that he'd missed signs that she had changed her mind?

No. That wasn't possible. She would have said as much.

Right?

Argh. Dating was still just as complicated as it had been when he was younger, and he was so out of touch. What was the protocol right now? Should he give her a kiss goodnight when he dropped her off?

Liz ducked farther into the car, signaling he should shut the door. He did so, but his feet wouldn't move to carry him to the driver's side. All of these thoughts were exhausting. If he didn't figure out the right course to take, he'd wear himself out beyond fixing.

Michael hurried around the car and climbed in. He faced her and flashed her a smile. "Do you have anything planned in the morning?"

Her lower lip protruded as she glanced up and away, probably thinking about her schedule. When her eyes found his, she shook her head. "No, I don't believe so. Why? Do you have another class that you want to invite me to?"

He shook his head. "I was actually thinking of something else we could do tonight. But we're going to be out late."

A grin slid across her face. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll see."



## Liz

Liz gaped at Michael as he loaded two bundles of wood onto the back of an ATV. They'd picked the wood up from the convenience store, then stopped by his place and grabbed something in a large black canvas bag. Now they were loading up her ATV, all the while he was insisting that she didn't have to lift a finger—well, except to go find a picnic blanket.

"You're not going to take me out into the middle of nowhere and do something sinister, are you?"

He stopped and gave her a dark look. "What? Of course not."

She laughed. "I'm *kidding*."

Michael moved toward her, closing the distance between them. "And I'm the sheriff, and I take things like this very seriously."

Her amused expression faltered. "Right. Of course." She swallowed hard. Who knew that Michael was so serious about his job?

They stared each other down like that for a few moments. Then his face broke into a wide grin and he laughed. "See? I can be funny, too."

Relief washed over her, easing all the tension in her shoulders. She swung out and nudged him in the arm. He laughed again and rubbed the spot. "You've got an arm on you."

"I own a ranch." Liz rolled her eyes. "Okay. So what are we doing? What's the plan?"

He folded his arms, his eyes dancing with excitement. "I told you that you'd just have to see. I'm not going to spoil it for you."

"This isn't even your property. You can't just go driving all over it willy-nilly."

His brow arched. “Did you just say willy-nilly?”

She couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of her throat. “Geez, Michael. I haven’t laughed this much since...” Her voice died off. “Since before Jack passed.” Her heart squeezed and her lungs lost the ability to breathe. She gasped in a sharp breath and emotion sprang to her eyes. What a random time to start tearing up! He’d been gone for two years. She should have a better handle on this. What was it about this specific situation that had her losing her control?

In two quick steps, he’d gathered her into his arms and held her tight against his chest. She buried her face into his neck, smelling his woodsy cologne. His arms were strong and sure, making her feel like nothing could get at her. If only she could remain in his arms like this, shielded from the pain and the world around her for the next several years.

Liz stiffened. Where had that thought come from? Hadn’t she told herself over and over that she couldn’t start another relationship right now? She’d been logical, and she’d been honest with herself. Dating Michael came with so many risks, only one of them being her heart. She pulled away from him and brushed at her face, offering him an embarrassed and watery smile. “Let’s get going. I’m not going to dampen how wonderful this night has been.”

“You’re not dampening—”

She held up a hand and brushed past him, immediately feeling colder without his arms around her. On top of the embarrassment was the distinct feeling of guilt—like she shouldn’t be laughing or enjoying herself. How long was appropriate to mourn the loss of her husband? Definitely more than two years. Right?

“Right.” She climbed onto the back seat of the ATV and got settled.

“What?” Michael came up behind her and she jumped.

“Huh?”

“You said something.” He studied her for a moment. “You okay?”

A lump formed in her throat and she waved him off. “Of course. It’s just one of those days.” He needed to stop being so attentive. That was probably the thing that was messing with her the most. She leaned forward and patted his seat. “I would drive, but I don’t know where we’re going.”

He hesitated, then thankfully dropped it. His leg swung over the seat and he settled in front of her. She scooted closer and wrapped her arms around his waist. Michael started the engine and they lunged forward. The engine roared in her ears as they darted down the trail that led toward the woods.

“How do you know where we’re going?” she yelled near his ear.

He turned his head slightly, calling back, “I don’t. I’ll know when I see it.”

“Michael!” she admonished. “There are wild creatures out in these woods. You can’t possibly be taking us there.”

At that moment, he turned the ATV down a trail that ran parallel to the woods. She could feel more than hear his laughter as it rippled through his chest. She eased against him, resting her head against his back and letting him take charge. The path they were on would lead them around the pastures where they fed the horses and cattle. There were several trails that weren’t in use at the moment, so she wasn’t concerned at all about where they were headed. For once in her life, she’d let someone other than Jack take charge and she had to say, as scary as it was, it felt good too.

Michael slowed the ATV as they pulled into a pasture that had recently been cleared of all animals. The grass that had been growing had been gnawed down to only a few inches in height. Patches of dirt were visible in the more worn areas. Michael heaved the wood from the back of the vehicle and tossed it on the ground, then he built it into a teepee shape and lit a fire beneath it that spread through the whole structure. Once the fire was roaring, he grabbed the blanket and set it out a few feet away and upwind from the smoke.

She watched with fascination as he then grabbed the mysterious cylinder canvas bag and pulled out metal pieces

that he set up as a tripod. When he stood back to admire his work, her mouth dropped open. “Is that what I think it is?”

He glanced at her over his shoulder and grinned in a way that made her heart skip a beat. “Have you ever brought a telescope out here?”

Liz shook her head.

“Really? I mean, in the city there’s too much light pollution to see much of anything. But out here it’s amazing. I can’t believe you haven’t taken advantage of it.”

“I wouldn’t have the faintest clue how to use something like that.” She moved closer and touched the top of the large black tube reverently with her fingertips. It was sleek and cold to the touch. She shot him an accusatory look. “You could have led with this, you know.”

His brow pulled together, confusion swirling in his expression.

“The other night, when we were talking about our hobbies. I didn’t know that you liked star gazing.”

Understanding replaced the confusion and he nodded. “Oh. That’s because this wasn’t my hobby. It was Ellen’s.”

Her smile faltered. “Oh. I’m so—”

“Don’t apologize, Liz. People come into our lives for reasons we will never fully understand. They make impressions on us and then sometimes they have to leave. All we can do is honor their memory.”

She shook her head, staring at him in complete awe. “That has to be the most eloquent thing I have ever heard.”

“Given enough time, I’m sure you would have come up with something similar.”

Liz shook her head. “I’m not so sure.” She shifted under Michael’s scrutiny. His eyes bore into her like they could see past all the layers of pain she experienced on a daily basis. It seemed like he could feel all the love she had for Jack and every last ounce she refused to relinquish. She could make excuses and say that her love clung to *her* as if it were a

parasite feeding off her. But that would be wrong. She clung to that love like it was a lifeforce and she wouldn't be able to survive without it.

"Don't ever discount yourself like that." His stare was unnerving, and yet at the same time, she felt seen and understood. Michael had gone through the exact same thing she'd been through. He'd lost Ellen. If she were to connect with *anyone*, why couldn't it be with him?

Was she being too severe in her stance on such things? Liz looked away, breaking the spell he had on her. She moved toward the blanket and settled down on it, letting him finish getting everything set up.

The fire roared, sending off little crackling sparks into the dark sky above. Michael lowered himself down beside her and leaned back to stare at the sky. "I never really appreciated my place in the universe until Ellen insisted that I go stargazing with her." He smiled, his sights on nothing in particular. "I don't do it as much as I used to with her."

"Why not?"

His gaze cut to hers. "I dunno. I suppose I just miss doing it *with* someone." Michael rubbed the back of his neck and gave her a sheepish smile. "I'm sure there are a few things you have stopped doing because you enjoyed doing them with—someone else."

"With Jack," she supplied.

"Yeah." He blew out a long breath. "This is strange, talking like this, isn't it?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Maybe a little. But only because it still feels so new... and *familiar*... at the same time." Liz sighed. "I think you're the first person that has been able to help me feel the most *normal* in the last two years."

Michael grinned. "I'm happy to oblige."

A cool breeze drifted between them and she shivered. The fire had died down enough that it was giving off less heat. She sidled up next to Michael and folded her arms tightly across

her chest. “So... is there something specific we’re waiting for?”

He leaned back and pointed at the sky. “Tonight and tomorrow there’s supposed to be a meteor shower.”

She turned wide eyes on him. “Really?”

Michael nodded. “They happen more often than you think. But you have to be in the right place to get the best view. Luckily the ranches out here offer the perfect location for such things.” He reclined on the blanket and placed his hands behind his head. Then he pulled one out and pointed at the sky. “In just a little while we should start seeing the beginning of the shower.”

Liz craned her neck and stared in the direction he pointed. She leaned back and laid down beside him. The heat from his body was almost too inviting. As if against her will, she inched closer to him so her side touched his. Michael’s arm slipped beneath her head and around her shoulders, securing her against him.

Chills raced through her body, starting up goosebumps that lifted on every inch of her skin. Michael’s fingers trailed up and down her arm. Tingles turned to fire from his touch. She twisted her face around to look at him.

What should have felt so foreign and off-limits—didn’t. She peered at him, noting the strong jawline hidden beneath his facial hair. The arm she rested her head on flexed as he got comfortable. Something jittery filled every inch of her body. Liz shuddered at the pleasant sensation, which only made Michael tighten his hold on her.

How could this feel so right, being here with him? She took in a deep breath, then froze. Tiny speckles of light glittered through the sky in straight lines. Her mouth opened in amazement and she couldn’t tear her gaze away from it. The scene was beautiful beyond anything she’d ever seen before.

If she’d lived her whole life without experiencing a meteor shower, what else was she missing?

“What do you think?” His deep, husky voice resonated through his body. He resumed trailing his fingertips along her arm, but his focus remained on the sky overhead. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she rasped before she cleared her throat. “It’s ethereal.”

He twisted until he locked eyes with her. Their faces were so close that it would take next to nothing for him to move the few inches more to claim her kiss. Her throat went dry and her hands clammy. So much for logic. Everything inside her seemed to be lunging for him, begging for him to touch her like Jack had. She wanted to be in his arms, to feel safe again.

No.

The resounding word was deafening in her head.

Michael was a friend that she didn’t want to lose. One wrong turn and they would both suffer. Crossing the lines from friendship to relationship was far too risky.

Her will to fight that argument was getting weaker every second. Liz turned her face toward the sky and cleared her throat once more, but it did little good. She still squeaked when she spoke. “When are we going to use that telescope you set up?” She moved to stand up. Being as close as she was to him was getting dangerous. She needed distance.

And clarity.

He was too sweet, smelled too nice, and everything was just too perfect.

She couldn’t fall into a trap where this happened—where she abandoned the years she’d spent with Jack.

Slowly he got to his feet, his brows creased as he moved toward the telescope. His demeanor had shifted to something visibly closed off. His jaw was tight as he ticked it back and forth. But rather than speak to her about how close they’d been, he set to work adjusting the telescope to the right angle.

Liz stood off to the side, rubbing at her arms again. If she didn’t warm herself, she’d be tempted to curl back into

Michael's arms again—and that temptation was far too strong for her to resist.

She took a step away from him for good measure and then turned around so she wouldn't fixate on the way the muscles in his arms flexed. Liz lifted her chin and stared at the sky. The darting lights were growing in number and resembled glitter being poured straight from a container onto another surface.

"You ready?" His voice came directly behind her ear, so close she could feel the heat of his breath against the back of her neck.

Liz shivered voluntarily. "One more minute."

"You might not have another minute."

She spun to face him, finding him closer than she expected. Sucking in a breath, she moved to step back, but he reached out and grasped her hand. She glanced up at the sky, avoiding his gaze even though he held her firmly. "But you said this shower would last for two nights."

"It's not the same shower. There are clusters of meteors that are moving along the same path."

"Oh." It was all she could say. Anything more and she'd squeak again. She offered him a smile and allowed him to lead her toward the telescope, their fingers interlocked.



## *Michael*

The frustration within him was brewing at a rate he wasn't prepared for. Michael wasn't frustrated with her. No, he could never be frustrated with Liz. She was perfect.

He was angry with himself for every single thing he'd done wrong since the wedding. It was like he ping-ponged from one concept to the next without any regard for how it would affect Liz. At least he'd made up his mind. He was going to get closer to her. He just hadn't figured out the safest way to do so. The skittish way she'd darted from his side was a clear indication that she wasn't ready for anything serious.

But the way she'd snuggled into him like they'd been together for years was enough to give him a false sense of security. He thought he'd figured everything out—like he'd gotten a cheat code for a hard video game.

Michael released her hand as soon as she was positioned in front of the telescope. But he moved into position behind her, close enough to feel the heat emanating from her body. She leaned down to look through the lens and he reached around her, his arm brushing against hers as he adjusted the view. "Does this improve anything?" he whispered.

"No," she muttered under her breath.

He tried another adjustment. "How about this?"

She jumped slightly and exhaled a deep breath. "Wow, Michael. Have you seen this?"

A smile tugged at his lips.

Liz glanced over her shoulder, turning her chin so it nearly rested there. She sucked in a gasp, finding him so close. Their gazes were pinned on each other, but neither one of them seemed brave enough to take the next step. This little dance they were in wasn't getting any easier.

His gaze dipped down to her lips and he moistened his. It would be so easy to steal a kiss.

*Then do it*, his heart seemed to scream at him. *Just take it.*

Liz deserved better. She deserved to feel safe.

*If it was up to her, nothing would happen.*

A sound that blended a growl and a groan rumbled through his chest. Michael straightened and took a few steps back, causing her to turn around completely and stare at him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked quietly.

He dug both hands into his hair and tugged at the ends until the pain brought him clarity. “I lied.”

“What?”

Michael shook his head and paced in front of her.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

How could he tell her everything that was going through his head? None of it made sense. He didn’t remember it being this bad when he fell in love with Ellen. The way his body was reacting to Liz—the way his heart yearned for her—it was growing unbearable and they’d only recently been spending more time together.

“Michael?” she whispered. “Just tell me.”

He froze and fought against the instinct to glower at her. “You don’t want to hear what I have to say.”

“Why not?”

It was the way her bright eyes were fixed on him and the way her raspy voice could slice through his chest and leave a mark on his heart. Everything about her was impossible to ignore. He dropped his hands to his sides and strode toward her. “I lied when I told you about the crush I had on you in high school.”

Her features pinched and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “You *didn’t* have a crush on me?”

“No, that part was true. It couldn’t be *more* true.” He threw his hands into the air. “Why doesn’t this sort of thing never get easier?”

“What sort of thing?”

He held up a single finger. “Shh. I need to think.”

Liz’s head reared back. “What?”

Michael groaned again. “I lied when I said that I wasn’t going to act on it.”

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers. “What?”

“Will you stop asking me that?” Michael resumed his pacing. The burning sensation in his stomach grew and started to travel into his chest. It was so severe it bordered on physically painful. He stopped suddenly and leveled a serious gaze at her. “*I loved* my wife. I want to make that perfectly clear.”

“Of course you did.” She looked absolutely terrified of him now.

Great. Well, now there was no smoothing things between them. He’d gone from zero to sixty in a matter of milliseconds.

He closed the distance between them and grasped both of her hands within his. “I know you don’t think you’re ready for something yet. I get it. *Boy*, do I get it. But there’s something I have to say today, or I will regret it for the rest of my life until the day I die.” He peered at her, trying to make his mouth form the words that his heart wanted her to hear. His hands trembled and his heart thundered like a thousand horses’ hooves. His gut churned. This was it. The moment—the chance he wished he’d taken over thirty years ago.

“Liz, I have feelings for you that I don’t think will ever go away.”

She blinked. He should probably just be grateful that she didn’t laugh in his face. But the shocked look on her face was enough to give him pause. Was she shaken because he admitted to liking her? Or was it due to not feeling the same?

Heck, it could be both and he'd never know. Not unless she chose to tell him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing the pounding in his chest to abate. A migraine was slowly taking over his head and he wouldn't be worth anything to anyone tomorrow when he had to go to work. "Please say something," he whispered.

"Michael..." Her tone said it all. She wasn't ready and he'd jumped the gun far too soon, all because he couldn't take the incessant arguing between his logic and the side of him that believed love could cure all.

He was an idiot.

Michael nodded, his eyes flying open. He forced a smile that was more painful than the ache in his chest or his head. "It's fine. Forget I said anything."

She moved toward him. "Michael." This time her voice was softer, gentler somehow. "Just because I don't know if I'm ready now, doesn't mean I might not be ready later."

He flicked his gaze up to meet hers as she drew closer still. Her hand rested against his cheek, and he flinched as a spark of electricity flowed from her touch.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel *something*. There *is* a definite pull between us."

She felt it too. His heart lifted. All was not lost. He didn't dare breathe for fear that she'd take back her most recent statements.

"Can we just, I don't know, take things slow? I enjoy spending time with you. I don't want to lose that."

"Of course, Liz. Anything you need."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Really?"

His brows pulled together and he moved closer to her, closing the distance between them so fully that their bodies touched. "Hey," he murmured, "it's okay. I don't want you to ever feel like you don't have control. You need to want this as much as I do." That was a near impossibility. As far as he was concerned, his heart had jumped off the cliff without any

harness to speak of. He was diving down, down, down into a cavern. He wasn't sure he'd survive the landing without her being able to deploy a parachute of some kind.

Only, she didn't have to know that. It would probably only scare her off anyway.

Michael tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then let his fingers trace her jawline. She leaned into his touch, and at the same time, her whole body shuddered. "You're cold," he accused.

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

He pulled her hard against his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her. Together their bodies warmed. Michael rested his chin on top of her head and smiled. He might not have gotten her to agree to put a label on whatever this was, but he'd let his intentions be known. That was a step in the right direction.

Her arms came around his back, her touch gentle and stirring all kinds of carnal reactions that had laid dormant for so long. Michael swallowed hard and shut his eyes again.

*Easy. You won the battle today. But that just means there's a bigger war out there and you have to be on top of your game.*

Once the meteor shower was over, they cleaned up their picnic and he drove the ATV back to the house. They got to the front porch and she glanced at her watch. A sharp gasp tore from her throat and she whipped up her head to gaze at him, her mouth covered by her hand. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Liz, I could spend the rest of eternity with you and happily lose track of time."

She snorted. "Why didn't I realize you were so good with your words?"

Michael shrugged. "I suppose you see what you want to see."

Liz sobered. "I suppose you're right." She placed her hands behind her back and leaned her shoulder against the column of the deck. "But I see you now."

A smile spread across his face. "Yes, you do." He nodded to where her watch was on her wrist. "What time is it?"

Liz snickered. "It's past two in the morning. I didn't realize we'd been out there so long."

"Whoa! That's a bit later than I thought. I suppose time has a tendency of slipping away when you're admiring beauty." He was referring to her, of course. But she could assume he meant the shower. One day she might accept how lucky he knew he was just to be given a chance to be around her. Guaranteed, he'd be floating on air for the next twenty-four hours.

They gazed at one another, each lost in their own thoughts. At least he was. The porch light flickered on and the front door burst open. Liz yelped and jumped away from the door as she spun to face it.

They both gazed at Ian with surprised expressions.

Ian's focus bounced from Michael to his mother and back again. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" he muttered.

She snickered and glanced at Michael, who returned it with a wide smile of his own. "We lost track of time."

"You lost track of—" Ian dragged his hand down his face. "Mom, since when do the rules *not* apply to you?"

Liz stepped toward him, her hands on her hips. "Since when did enforcing the rules become your job? I'm an adult, and I will make my decisions based on what is best for me."

Her son arched a brow. "And staying up until all hours of the night is *best* for you?"

"Oh, hush, you!" She flicked her fingers at him. "You head back to bed. I'm sure your wife is wondering where you wandered off to. I'll be inside in a minute."

Ian glanced at Michael again, his eyes remaining on him as he spoke to his mother. "My wife will be just as concerned as I

am over your whereabouts—though I would assume the moment she discovers *who* you’re spending your evenings with these days, she’ll be thrilled.” He shook his head. “Be inside in ten minutes or I’m locking you out.”

The second the door slammed shut, Liz doubled over and laughed. “I can’t believe I’m the one on the other side of things.”

Michael chuckled. “It is a little strange to have your son giving me the side-eyed stare when it comes to that sort of stuff.”

Liz waved her hand through the air, dismissing his comment. “Ian is the least of your problems. It’s Sean who wouldn’t allow such an arrangement.”

He opened his mouth, ready to spew everything he’d found out about Adeline and the missing tools, but then thought better of it. She didn’t need to know all that information right now. Eventually, sure. But for now, she could be happy believing that there was little to no stock in those ideas. Michael snapped his mouth shut and smiled at her when she met his gaze. “You have great kids.”

One brow lifted and a half-smile tugged at her lips. “They’re not kids anymore, Michael. They’re adults who are concerned for their mother.”

“As they should be.” He chuckled as he moved up one step.

Liz’s gaze turned serious. She worried her lower lip, rolling it between her teeth. What would she do if he kissed her at that moment?

No. He’d be stupid to think that she’d approve of such things right now. So instead of pulling her in for a toe-curling kiss, he reached up and placed his hands on either side of her face. Michael planted a kiss on her forehead, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and murmured, “I’ll see you when I see you.”

When he released her, she took a quick step back. Even in the darkness and the washed-out coloring she got from the

porch light, he could see her cheeks flush a lovely rosy hue. She placed her palm against her cheek and smiled at him. “I’ll be counting the minutes until we can spend more time together,” she murmured.



## Liz

Liz couldn't sleep well. Her whole body seemed to buzz with nervous energy. It wasn't unpleasant. On the contrary, it was a sensation she'd found she missed after being with Jack for so long. She had laid in bed all night, staring at the ceiling, allowing Michael to fill her thoughts and completely take over.

His smile, the way he touched her with a gentle hand, even his flexibility when it came to starting something more. She couldn't fight the smile that hadn't left her face since the taillights from his car disappeared out of sight. Liz rolled over on her side and nibbled on her thumb. Her lips parted into another grin.

It hadn't taken long at all for her to change her tune about starting a new relationship. It probably had something to do with *who* rather than the relationship in general. She had been familiar with Michael for so long, and over the last couple of years, they'd only grown closer as friends.

Who would be better to open her heart to than someone she trusted implicitly? Someone who understood what she had gone through.

The morning sun filtered through her bedroom window. It was dim but just enough that she could slip out and go for an early morning ride. Funny, she didn't feel the least bit tired. The exhaustion would probably knock her out a little later in the day.

Liz pulled on an old pair of boots and grabbed Jack's leather jacket she usually took with her on her morning rides. His scent had long since disappeared, but for some reason she felt closer to him whenever she wore it.

The house was quiet. No one seemed to be up yet. As she slipped through the house and toward the kitchen, she took care not to let her boots clunk against the floor. She'd grab a hardboiled egg for a quick breakfast and then be on her way.

She turned the corner into the kitchen and stopped short, a gasp tearing from her throat. Liz chuckled, her hand on her heart. “Piper, what are you doing here and up for that matter?” Her gaze dipped to Brooklyn, who rested snuggled into Piper’s chest. “Of course. That little one always seems to be on her own schedule, doesn’t she? Did you spend the night here?”

Piper nodded, her body swaying back and forth. She pressed a soft kiss into Brooklyn’s feathery hair. “We had a game night with everyone last night and didn’t feel like heading back to our house.” Piper adjusted her hold on Brooklyn. “She’s just gone back to sleep. I’ll be putting her back to bed here in a minute.” Her focus dipped to Liz’s old, muddy boots and then landed on the leather jacket. “Are you going somewhere?”

Liz smiled. “Guilty. I thought I’d take a ride around the perimeter of the property. Then maybe I’d head to town and see a few friends.” She moved toward the fridge, yanked it open, and retrieved an egg.

“*Friends?* Like the sheriff?”

She nearly dropped the egg in her hand. Then she let the fridge door close. “Really? Does everyone know?”

Piper attempted to hide her smile behind the baby’s head, but she didn’t do a very good job of it. “Ian might have told us.”

“*Ian?* He came out at two in the morning.”

“Like I said, game night ran long.” Piper chuckled. “Don’t worry. The general consensus is that you need it.”

“I *need* it? Need what exactly?” She shook her head and commenced cracking the egg open, if only to keep her attention focused on something besides her meddling children and their spouses.

“Someone to complete you.” Piper said it with a matter-of-fact tone like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Liz sighed. “For the record, I don’t *need* anyone to approve of what I decide to do in my free time. As a matter of

fact, I don't need anyone to chime in on my relationships at all.”

“So you admit that there's a relationship?”

Her face flushed and she spun toward Piper. “I admitted to no such thing. I was merely making a statement regarding how I deserve privacy. I will let you and everyone else interested know if anything changes.”

Piper snorted.

“What?”

Her eyes widened and she gave Liz an innocent look. “I didn't say anything.”

“No, but you made that sound.”

“What sound?”

The egg was peeled and Liz was out of patience. Her children could gossip amongst themselves all they wanted, but she wasn't going to play their game. She didn't have to report anything to them whatsoever. Her love life had been private before she'd birthed them, and it was going to remain that way until she was good and ready. “I'll be back in a few hours, Piper.” She moved toward the kitchen door that had a straighter shot to the stables and snuck outside.

For the second time that morning, her heart nearly exploded from her chest. She gaped at Michael standing a few feet from the stairs, then her head whipped around and she glanced over her shoulder to see if Piper had caught sight of him.

It wasn't likely, but she couldn't be too careful. She launched herself down the stairs and grabbed his upper arm, twisting him around to walk with her. “What on earth are you doing here?” she hissed.

Michael chuckled, and as much as she wanted to ignore the way his laugh could affect her, she couldn't. They made it a few steps before he finally answered her question.

“You said you were looking forward to us spending time together.”

“Don’t you work today?”

He tilted his head. “I’m the boss. I can go in whenever I want—or whenever they really need me. Right now, I want to be here with you. Where are we going?”

She was practically dragging him toward the stables until they made it inside and she could release him. “*We* aren’t going anywhere. I’m going for a ride and you’re heading into work.”

He pouted. “Now, that’s no fun, is it?”

Liz laughed in spite of herself. “On the contrary, I have to go for a ride to clear my head from everything that you said and did last night.”

“Like I said. *No fun.*”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like you’d want to sit in a saddle this early in the morning.”

“Why not?”

Liz stared at him. Her gaze raked over him from head to toe. “You’re serious?”

Michael shrugged. “I’ve ridden horses before.”

“You have?”

He laughed again. “Come on, Liz, you’re not giving me any credit. I live in Copper Creek—have done so for the last thirty years. Do you honestly think I could have gotten away with not going on at least one ride?”

“And you’re saying you want to go with me? Right now?”

Michael stepped toward her, closing the distance between them. He was dressed in his official uniform with all the bells, whistles, and walkies he could ever need. And he still said, “Absolutely I do.”

Liz folded her arms across her chest. “Well, if you’re going to come with me, you’re going to have to put on your own saddle.”

The corners of his mouth twitched, but he didn't say anything.

"What is *that* look for?"

He shook his head, shrugging. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm trying really hard to impress you."

Her heart melted ever so slightly. "You don't have to impress me, Michael, because I already think you're one of the best men I know."

"In that case... I was just thinking you sounded like you were scolding one of your kids."

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "You're right. You can't even imagine what it's like being the only adult leading my posse of children."

Her eyes widened and she reached out to touch his shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking when I said that." He didn't have children. She couldn't tell if it was an issue with him or if it had been something Ellen had struggled with. If it was him, he was handling it very well.

Michael shrugged. "It's fine. Really, Liz. If I got offended by every statement regarding my fatherless status over the last thirty years, I wouldn't be the man I am today. I'm fine. And hey, don't forget my goddaughters and those guys of yours that I already feel like are part of the family."

Once again, he knew the exact right thing to say to her to help get through the awkward moments between them. He just had a way with words—something Jack had but not to the extent that Michael could whip them out.

She nodded down the aisle. "Well, let's get a couple horses saddled before the sun comes up and blows our cover."

"Right." He reached for her hand before she could escape down the aisle to gather their supplies.

Liz stared down at where their fingers were laced together, then brought her gaze up to meet his. Michael's focus drilled

into her, so serious, causing her to squirm. “What?” she whispered. Thoughts of their moments together the night before came flooding back and fresh chills raced down her spine.

She hadn’t told him in so many words that she was open to dating him, but after getting some distance from that conversation, she’d felt a shift. Spending time with Michael had been the one thing that pulled her away from the loneliness she’d been experiencing lately.

The hard part was accepting that he wanted her like he was alluding to. They weren’t young anymore. That was both a good thing and a bad thing. Neither one of them would play games. They’d be able to communicate with one another better than the younger versions of themselves.

What was she so afraid of? If she let go and accepted that this relationship was going to take place, what was the worst that could happen?

Michael’s face broke into a smile and he shook his head. “I’m just glad that you’re letting me tag along with you.”

She squeezed his hand. “Of course. I like spending time with you too.” She jerked her head in the direction of the saddles. “Let’s get out of here before we get caught. What do you say?”

They moved together, Michael not releasing her hand as they walked. It was strange, having someone holding her hand again after Jack had been gone for so long. Strange, but thrilling at the same time. It was almost like Michael was awaking something that had been asleep for too long.

The morning was quiet. Only the sounds of the horses pawing at the ground and the occasional songbird in the distance broke the stillness. The sun would come up soon, but they’d be long gone by then.

Michael hefted the saddles onto the horses and she secured the straps. Then she fixed the reins so they fit just right. Every so often she’d find Michael staring at her. She’d smile, look away and attempt to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear—but

there was nothing to tuck. Just another nervous habit from when she was younger.

She climbed into her saddle and watched as Michael did the same thing with a finesse she hadn't expected. Her brows pulled together and she let out a small laugh. "You've been holding out on me."

He joined in her laughter. "I might have grown up in the city like you, but my cousin married a cowboy and I have to be ready to head out into unknown properties. There are only so many trails that my squad car can fit. Sometimes I have to use a horse to get around places."

"Well, then maybe I won't go so easy on you. See if you can keep up." She dug her heels into her horse's flanks and the animal burst forward, ready to expend some pent-up energy. They flew from the confines of the barn and she turned her horse toward one of her favorite trails. The sky was now bright enough that they didn't have to worry about visibility.

The crescent moon still hung in the air, but the stars had long since disappeared. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day. There weren't any clouds on the horizon and though it was chilly now, the cold would burn off the second the sun lifted high enough in the sky.

Trees, plants, and her property flew past her in a blur. She could only hear the beating of her own heart as it danced with the same tempo of the horse's hooves hitting the earth beneath them. She breathed in the cool, crisp air. Pine and lavender flooded her senses.

She couldn't hear Michael's horse behind her, but somehow she could sense that he was nearby. It was something about this day—the last twenty-four hours that had helped even out her emotions. Perhaps it was time to let go of the pain and loss she'd held onto so privately for so long.

The trail widened up enough that Michael pulled up beside her. He leaned forward, a wide smile on his face. Their horses matched one another's tempo. This moment seemed to be from a fairy tale.

Liz chanced a look in his direction. If it weren't for the uniform, he would have looked like he belonged right there beside her. The thought both shocked and pleased her. There was no doing better than Michael.

He caught her eye and held it for what was likely only a second, but as time slowed down for them, it felt like much longer. Her heart jumped around erratically. Her stomach flipped, and not because of the small leap her horse did over the babbling brook they'd passed.

Liz held a hand to the hat on her head and laughed. All the weight from her shoulders had slipped and disappeared. Life was too short to let it pass her by when she had a second opportunity for happiness.

Their ride continued until the horses slowed to a trot, jostling her in the saddle. Liz pulled up on her reins and leaned over to pat the animal's neck. They were now out in the middle of the fields she owned. They'd passed by the forests that hugged a part of her property.

She met Michael's gaze once more before dragging her attention to the sky where it had been painted in red, pink, and purple. Liz let loose a happy sigh, then brought her eyes back to meet Michael's, not surprised to find him smiling at her. His face was flushed, much like hers probably was.

"I was wrong," she said.

His contented and happy expression faltered. "Wrong about what?"

"About needing to go at a snail's pace." Her blush deepened but not from the chill or the exertion of their ride. "I can't remember the last time I was as happy as I am right now with you."

Michael shook his head. "I don't want you to feel like you have to—"

"I don't feel like I 'have to' anything, Michael. I'm telling you the truth. I have been holding onto something I lost a long time ago. And for what? It's not making me happy. It's not helping me heal." She looked away. "That is, what I'm trying

to say is..." As hard as it was, she forced her eyes to meet his.  
"Whatever you're ready for, I think I am too."



## *Michael*

*H*eat and churning exploded in his stomach and moved throughout Michael's whole body. He hadn't expected this. Granted, he didn't know what to expect. He would have been happy with a stronger friendship—one where he was allowed to hold her hand or pull her into his arms when she was upset.

But this? She was offering up so much. It couldn't be real. Could it?

He almost didn't dare move or speak for fear that whatever lucid dream he was currently participating in would disappear. Michael studied her face—that beautiful, worn face that had experienced so much and still managed to make his heart stammer.

"Are you sure?" Inwardly he grimaced. *Never ask a woman if they're sure, especially if there's a sliver of a chance they are acting solely on a moment.* "Because if you need more time, I'm fine with—"

"Michael. I've been through this before. I married the love of my life. I raised a family with him. I know what I'm talking about when I say that I'm ready for something more in my life." Her voice trembled. Or maybe he was imagining that.

He pulled on his reins, forcing his steed and Liz to stop so she could stay in the conversation. "I believe you. But I also know that when emotions run high, people admit things they might not be ready to say. I want to do this right, Liz. I *have* to make sure that we don't jump too far, too fast and end up getting hurt." He tilted his head, setting unwavering eyes on her. "Does that make sense?"

She nodded. "And I don't think that will happen. Not at this point."

He chuckled. "I should have known this would be the route you would take. You've always been sorta impatient."

Liz scoffed. "Impatient? I have not!"

“Okay, maybe not always—”

She placed a hand on her hip. “Not *ever*. ”

He laughed again. “Okay, maybe impatient is the wrong word. Impulsive, maybe?”

Her mouth opened and then she snapped it shut. “All right, perhaps that one is a little more accurate.”

Michael pulled his horse up beside her and reached out to take her hand. He brushed his lips over her knuckles, his eyes never leaving her face. “But it’s one of the things I love about you. I love that once you know you want something, you jump in with both feet and eyes shut tight. I admire that.”

Her face flushed but only slightly this time. “I can’t believe I never knew you were such a romantic.”

He didn’t release her hand, nor did he look away. “There’s something I never told you.”

Liz’s eyes narrowed and she pulled her pursed lips to the side. “Never told me about what?”

This time he did drag his eyes from her, staring at their hands instead. “Do you remember when we were seniors in high school? It was before you met Jack at that country dancing thing.” He rubbed his thumb across the top of her knuckles. “You got a poem in your locker.”

She shifted in her saddle. He still didn’t look at her. This was the one secret he’d kept from everyone, even Ellen. The poem had been his silly attempt at expressing how much he’d liked her. The funny thing was that he hadn’t heard anything about it after she’d received it. Not a whisper in the hall, not a rumor as to who gave it to her. It was likely she’d kept it a secret as well. But whether she’d been concerned or embarrassed, he never could tell.

“Michael,” her soft voice dragged him from his quiet thoughts, and he lifted his gaze to meet hers. She had a funny kind of expression on her face. “I never told anyone about that poem. Not even my family.”

He fought back the embarrassment. It had been over thirty years since he'd written it. He didn't even know what had prompted him to bring it up now. Michael swallowed down the humiliation. "Well, I *did* admit to having a pretty big crush on you. You can't be *that* surprised about it." He blew out a breath. "You probably don't even remember a word that poem said."

Liz's smile didn't bring him any comfort. She shook her head. "I couldn't repeat it word for word, but I did keep it."

His eyes rounded. "You didn't."

She nodded. "That was the most romantic thing anyone had ever given me up until that point. I waited, hoping the author would come forward, but they never did." She glanced away. "Then I met Jack."

He couldn't be disappointed. Rather, he *shouldn't* be disappointed. He'd been a chicken and hadn't told her about the poem. After slipping it into her locker, he'd immediately regretted it. The only solace he could gather from that impulsive decision was that he hadn't penned his name to the poem.

Besides, he'd been happy—more than happy with Ellen. Their life together was not something he would ever regret. And if he were a betting man, he would say that Liz felt the same about Jack. He gave Liz a crooked smile. "Well, I suppose everything worked out the way it was supposed to."

She didn't say anything right away. Instead, she seemed to be considering his words before she nodded. "You're right. I think we both ended up with the people we were meant to be with." The smile in her eyes deepened. "But that isn't to say that at some point the universe seemed to want to push us together."

He snorted. "The universe? Or Adeline and Sean."

Liz laughed. "You're right. I completely forgot about their little matchmaking attempt. You never did tell me how they planned on setting us up." She turned her horse to continue on their ride and he followed, making sure to stay beside her.

His eyes widened. “That’s right! It started with a few instances of vandalism. Right around the time when Zeke reported the damage to his tractor tire and the graffiti that was found at a few properties, you had your tools stolen.”

Her brows creased. “What does any of that have to do with setting us up?”

“Well, it came to light that the stolen tools were actually—*not*.”

She yanked on the reins and faced him. “What are you saying, Michael? That Sean stole the tools that are still missing just so you would come out to the ranch? Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, chagrined. “I honestly thought that once I told Adeline that I was on to her, she’d make sure they were returned.” He chuckled, but it was strained.

Liz didn’t look too pleased about this new information. “Well, I guess it’s good I didn’t file an insurance claim yet.” She shook her head. “I guess I’ll be having a discussion with my eldest son when we get back.”

Michael coughed, followed by a quiet laugh. “Don’t tell him that I’m the one who snitched.”

Her gaze flew to his and she bit back a smile. “Why not?”

Without missing a beat, his grin disappeared. “Because if your sons don’t like me, I don’t have a chance in this life to make you mine.”

Liz blinked. It was clear she hadn’t expected him to say that, even with their previous conversation regarding her willingness to go along with whatever he wanted from this relationship. It wasn’t quite shock that was written on her face. It was something else—as if she were envisioning what a future like that might look like. A hint of a smile crossed her face, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she nodded.

Michael turned away, not certain what would happen if she found how pleased her smile made him. They rode in silence

for a few more minutes until the static from his radio broke through the quiet. “Sheriff?”

Liz’s attention dipped to the radio on his shoulder and then bounced to his face. Her brows were lined with concern.

“It’s probably nothing.” He turned his chin toward the walkie and pushed the button. “This is Sheriff Donahue.”

“You’ve been requested at a domestic disturbance.”

He shot a quick look in Liz’s direction. “I’m not going to be available for at least thirty minutes.”

More crackling. “Deputy Anderson is on-site and requesting backup.”

“Is there someone else who can arrive sooner? What about Deputy Hall?”

There was some hesitation. “Sir, it’s at Deputy Hall’s residence.”

Michael glanced up at Liz who was already turning her horse around. “It’s fine,” she murmured. “Our ride was about over anyway.” The smile and the humor had left her face. Concern and maybe some anxiety had replaced any amount of happiness she’d worn.

He nodded, then pressed the button on his radio again. “I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Liz had already pushed her horse into a run—it was an easy gait but faster than he wanted to ride. Something about her reaction had him worried, but he couldn’t put a finger on why. She almost seemed closed off. Was she offended their early morning ride had been cut short? They probably needed to discuss it.

But there was no chatting when they were in a hurry. He’d have to discuss it with her later. They made good time, arriving at the barn in about twenty minutes. Liz was already out of her saddle and leading her horse inside when he was able to climb down. He strode quickly after her. “Is everything okay?”

She jumped and glanced at him as he led his horse into its stall. He wouldn't be able to help brush the animal down, but he'd make it up to her. Liz's eyes darted away and she offered him a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. You seem a little—off."

Liz snorted. "Don't worry about me. Sounds like there is someone else out there who needs your help."

He closed the stall door and stood in front of her. She stilled, finally meeting his gaze. "I thought I made it clear that I *do* worry about you, Liz."

She attempted to brush past him, but he blocked her way. "You've been requested. You can't stay here when they need you."

His brows creased. Of course she was right. He had a job to do. And now it was like he was being torn in two. "We'll discuss this later."

"There's nothing to discuss." She threw her hands into the air and let out a laugh that was probably supposed to convince him, but it only put him more on edge. "I'm fine. You have work to do. I'll see you later." This time she was able to brush past him. She went right to a shelf that had various brushes on it, then she turned and faced him. "Really, Michael. I'm fine." She flicked her fingers at him. "Go do your job."

Still, he hesitated. Then without thinking about the repercussions, he strode to her in two steps. He placed both hands on either side of her face, waited for her to nod, then pressed a firm kiss against her lips. Liz gasped when he pulled back. "We'll talk about it when I return," he said definitively. There was no room for argument.

Liz blinked a few times, just staring at him. He bestowed one more swift kiss on her and turned, half-running, half-jogging out of the barn.

Whatever was going on at the Hall residence had better be worth whatever had just occurred between himself and Liz.

Because for some reason, he felt like he'd just taken one step forward only to take two steps back.

He turned on his lights and drove the familiar roads to his deputy's home. Anderson's car was parked beside Hall's. There were a few people out on their lawns watching with curiosity. Why couldn't people mind their own business?

Michael slammed his car into park and hurried up the driveway toward those who were standing on the front porch. Anderson had his arms crossed and was speaking with Hall, who looked slightly sick to his stomach.

Jacob Hall raked a hand through his hair and met Michael's gaze with almost a sense of relief. He was a kid, only about twenty-five and lived with his mother. He hurried off the steps and came toward Michael. "I'm sorry we had to bother you this early."

Michael shook his head. "It's fine," he grunted, his gaze sweeping over the neighbors. "What's going on?"

"It's Mom. She's having another episode, but this time it's worse."

He looked to the house. "Is she inside?"

Jacob nodded. "She was screaming at me—started throwing things. I think someone called it in because she was really loud." He swallowed hard. "She thinks I'm my dad."

Michael's brows raised. "That's new."

He nodded again. "He's been dead for five years. I get that they had me when they were getting on in age, but I didn't think we'd be dealing with this level of dementia so soon." Jacob almost looked like he was going to break down.

Michael placed his hand on the young man's shoulder. "It's not easy to see your parents go through something like this. Doesn't matter how old you are."

"Do you think you could—you know—go talk to her? She really likes you."

He glanced at the house where Anderson stood by the door. "Why was she so upset?"

Jacob grimaced. “She was accusing me of cheating on her. I think she saw me leave for a date last night.”

Michael squeezed the young man’s shoulder. “I’ll have a word with her.” He pressed his lips together and let out a deep breath. “Maybe it’s time you look into finding her an assisted living place. There are some nice ones in the city.”

Jacob frowned and shook his head vehemently. “I’m not going to abandon her.”

“No one said you had to do that,” Michael offered. “The fact of the matter is that these disturbances are getting worse. She needs help. More than you can give to her. Think about it.”

It was clear by the look on Jacob’s face that he wasn’t even willing to consider such an idea. Michael sighed. “I’ll go speak with her. Hopefully we’ll be able to give her some clarity.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.”



## *Liz*

*A*fter Michael had taken off, Liz stood in the barn, not knowing what to do with everything that had just happened. Their relationship hadn't shifted from friends to more all that fast. She wasn't even uncomfortable about the speed. In fact, she wasn't sure just what had upset her.

They were having a good time—an excellent time. And she hadn't admitted to wanting more because the moment felt right. It had been something she'd thought about as she had lain in bed the night before.

So what exactly had occurred to put her in such a foul mood?

The call. That had triggered something, reminded her that he had a job that wasn't the safest in the world. But to be fair, most jobs all had some degree of risk to them, didn't they? Jack had been killed on the job.

Most of the calls Michael was sent on were probably petty. Traffic stops, complaints between neighbors, that sort of stuff. There just wasn't a lot of crime that occurred in Copper Creek. She sighed as she brushed her horse down. The animal pawed at the ground and bobbed her head.

Liz pushed aside the fears and anxieties that threatened to overcome her. Michael was still a good man who made her feel happy. That hadn't changed, and it probably never would. He also knew how to listen and...

That poem!

Her hand froze mid-air and a smile crossed her face. She had nearly forgotten about that poem. She'd mentioned it once to Jack when they were dating and he'd brushed it off. He hadn't even gotten jealous over it. Granted, she hadn't told him what it had said word for word. She'd just said it was romantic.

But in pure Jack fashion, he made his own romantic gesture. He worked with his hands and built her that library.

He was a different kind of romantic. And that suited her just fine—especially when strength and being a provider was exactly what she needed.

Those needs had shifted. She didn't need anyone to provide for her. Her future was set. They had done well to prepare for her retirement. She didn't need someone to give her children, wealth, or a shelter.

She needed a friend, someone to make her laugh, and someone who could listen. The irony of how Michael seemed to fit that bill perfectly wasn't lost on her. If she could open her heart to him, get past the feeling that she would be leaving a part of Jack behind... then maybe she could find that part of her that had been missing for the last two years.

Liz finished taking care of the horses, forcing herself to forget about the radio call and wondering if Michael was okay. A domestic disturbance sounded frightening, but that could mean any number of things.

Besides, she needed to have a discussion with her son before any more time passed. She strode from the barn and headed toward the house on surer feet. Sean wouldn't know what hit him after she was done with him.

When she entered the kitchen, she was met with knowing smiles by everyone except the son she needed to speak with. Her eyes landed on each of her five sons, ignoring their grins. "Where's Sean?"

Brock was leaning in his chair, his boots propped on the table. "Aren't you going to tell us what happened with you and the sheriff this morning?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You may be a grown man and married with a child, but I assure you I can still whoop you. Get those boots off my table."

He dropped them, but the humor still danced in his eyes. "Piper said she saw the sheriff here really early. Considering that he was here late last night and early this morning, is it safe to assume—"

Liz gasped. "Absolutely not."

“So, what? Each of you got a little over three hours of sleep then decided to go for a ride?”

Her gaze bounced from each of her sons and daughters-in-law—all of whom had similar expressions of pleasure radiating from their faces. She let out a groan. “It doesn’t matter what is occurring between myself and the sheriff. But if it *was* something, I wouldn’t go telling any of you. Mind your own business, will the lot of you?”

Brock chuckled. “All right, guys, let’s leave her alone. If she ends up with Donahue, then we’ll find out at the wedding.”

Apparently, none of her sons had any issue with her moving on. She would have assumed they would want to preserve the memory of their father as much as she did.

What was she thinking? It wasn’t like she had agreed to marry the guy. He may be around more. He might even have alluded to the idea of the two of them getting together, but she didn’t have a ring on her finger.

She twirled the wedding ring she still wore from her marriage. Okay, so she did, but it was for a different man. Liz glanced at it. Maybe it was time to put it aside—turn it into a necklace so he could remain by her heart.

Brock got to his feet. “Come on, guys. Sean said he needed some help where the properties meet.”

Her head shot up. “Where is Sean? I need to speak with him.”

Brock glanced at her. “He didn’t stay for game night. He’s over at Slate Rock. Why?”

“Will you give him a message from me?”

“Sure, okay.” The lilt of his voice was more confused than curious. “You could call him, you know.”

“Then he wouldn’t get the full effect of my irritation I know you can convey.”

A grin played on his face. Good. He was willing to be part of the game. “What do you want me to tell him?”

“Something similar to what I just told all of you. And tell him I know about the tools, and if he doesn’t return them to the tool wall by the end of the day, then he’ll get the full brunt of my wrath.”

Brock’s brows raised in question. “The tools...” he drawled. “You mean the ones that went missing a few weeks back?”

“Yes, those.” She turned on her heel and headed out of the kitchen, pausing only once to glance at him over her shoulder. “Do yourselves a favor and mind your own business when it comes to what I do throughout the day.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he called after her.

It was sweet that they cared about her well-being, but a child shouldn’t be the one to care for his mother. It was the other way around. She was more than capable of taking care of her own needs. Just the knowledge that her children were more focused on her love life than their own had been enough to set her off-balance once more. If she had it her way, everyone would stay in their own lanes.

She made it into her room and headed directly for the little alcove of her library. Her eyes traced each and every book on those shelves until they landed on the one she searched for. With the tip of her finger, she tilted the book from the shelf and into her hands. Liz traced over the plain cover with the gold-leaf lettering that read *Journal*.

The book flipped open in her hands until she stopped the flying pages at just the right spot. A single sheet of yellowed paper fluttered to the ground and she bent down to pick it up. The words were scrawled in a messy kind of cursive—handwriting that could have belonged to a man or a woman.

Each line stood out as if raised from the paper itself. She traced over each word with care, unable to hold back the smile on her face. Fresh chills, similar to the day when she’d first read the poem, covered her whole body, lifting goosebumps on her arms and legs.

*BROWN EYES, warm like honey and endless as the night*

*A laugh that brings sunshine and joy to everyone in sight*

*She doesn't know her beauty or the harmony she brings*

*But Elizabeth is the only word the songbird sings*

*She is my peace, she is my love, she is my light.*

WHAT COULD HAVE PROMPTED the teenage version of Michael to write such words—about her no less? It was strange to compare the version of Michael she knew now—the sheriff who took care of their small town—with a love-sick romantic from high school. What other secrets did he hide from her?

She stuck the poem back into the pages of her journal and snapped the book closed. Then she replaced the book on the shelf. That's when she noticed a book missing right beside the edge of the bookshelf. It had been easy to miss as it was blocked by a taller book.

Liz placed her finger on the shelf and peered at the hole. If she had been more diligent in organizing her shelves, she might have known which one was supposed to go there. Maybe one of her new daughters had borrowed one. Noelle had borrowed several since moving here. Maybe she had it.

Whatever book it was, she would likely find it either on a shelf in the living room or in one of the spare bedrooms her kids used occasionally. She moved to her closet and changed. She hadn't been lying to Piper when she said she'd like to head to town and visit some friends.

The friends she'd mentioned had included Michael. But now that they'd left things a little off-balance, she didn't think visiting him at lunch was a very good idea. Perhaps she'd visit Sal's Diner and take a book with her—anything to get her out of the house.



SHE PICKED a booth near the back corner and pulled out her copy of *Jane Eyre*. She didn't know what had prompted her to grab the book from the shelf. Perhaps it was because it was beside the empty space and she hadn't read it in what felt like ages.

It was ironic as the story's theme started to feel almost parallel to her own. Not in the story itself, but of Jane's path to independence. The reasons for staying with Mr. Rochester, whether because she needed him at first, to not needing him but choosing him—she could relate to.

When Jack had first passed, Liz didn't know if she could handle being on her own. Of course she had her children, but it was different not having a partner. That was the big trigger for falling down the hole of loneliness. Was she allowing herself to fall for Michael because she was lonely?

She snapped the book closed and placed it on the table. That notion left a sour taste in her mouth. She didn't like to think she was on the rebound. Except Jack had been gone long enough that it couldn't be considered a rebound, right?

Suddenly she felt sick to her stomach. Liz stared at the book with disappointment. In the end, Jane's character had stayed with Mr. Rochester—choosing that end for her own happiness, whereas initially it had been for survival.

Maybe drawing parallels to that story had been a bad idea. She needed to stop thinking about this too hard. She was an independent woman who didn't need anyone to take care of her—something Jane *had* needed. What she sought was companionship. That was different.

The door to the busy diner opened and she looked up, her eyes locking with Michael's. Liz's mouth dropped open and she snatched her book from the table, fumbling with it until it fell to the floor. This was stupid. It wasn't like she was reading something risqué. It was a classic novel, for heaven's sake. She hadn't needed to hide such literature from him.

And yet as he made his way over, she felt the need to grab it before he could.

Too late.

Michael bent, retrieving the novel. He stared at it, a crooked smile on his face as he held it out to her. “That’s a good one.”

Wait, he read *classic* novels? The vague memory of him admitting to enjoying reading in his spare time flitted through her mind. He hadn’t told her the genre he preferred. Was he hinting at it now? She accepted the book and traced her fingers over the worn cover. “I didn’t realize when you said you loved to read that you preferred the old-school stuff.”

“Who said I preferred it?” He settled into the bench across from her and waved the waitress over. “I said I liked to read.”

She gave him a pointed look. “And told me that you couldn’t admit to what you liked unless you killed me after the fact.”

He chuckled, and all her nerves disappeared just like that. It was strange the way he could put her at ease. Michael accepted a cup of coffee from the waitress when she arrived. “I’d like your grilled cheese and tomato soup.” He glanced at Liz. “Have you eaten anything?”

Liz shook her head. “I only got here about ten minutes ago.”

“Care to join me?”

She looked up at the waitress, who didn’t seem to notice. She chewed on her gum as she finished scribbling his order on her pad, then turned her attention to Liz. “What can I get for ya?”

“I guess I’ll have what he’s having.”

Michael offered her a warm smile, then waited for the waitress to leave before he leaned over the table. “We left things a little off this morning.”

Liz’s gaze darted to where she held her book in her hands. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

She peeked at him. “Really, it was nothing. I don’t know why I felt so strange when you left.”

“Was it because our ride had been cut short?” he pressed. “Because I wouldn’t blame you for feeling slighted. I hadn’t planned on going in until around nine. But that’s what I get for being on call.”

“What happened? Was it bad?”

He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. There was something sad in his gaze though, and it tore at her to see him not cheerful.

“What happened?” she repeated with more force.

Michael blew out a slow breath, then took a sip of his coffee. After he’d swallowed, he turned his sad eyes on her. “The Hall boy. Jacob. He’s living with his mother—she’s about sixty-five now, but she’s showing severe signs of dementia.”

Liz sucked in a sharp breath. “That’s terrible.”

He lifted a shoulder. “There’s not much you can do once they get to a certain point. And today she thought he was her deceased husband. They had an argument and someone called it in. Nothing dangerous. She was fine. But I told the boy that he ought to look into some care for her.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what I would have done if I had to make that kind of decision for one of my parents.”

“It’s tough, that’s for sure.” He tapped his fingers on his mug, his discerning gaze drilling through her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Of course he would be able to see she was upset about something. He was great at reading people, and they’d known each other since they were teens. She plastered a smile on her face. If she were to tell him that she wasn’t sure anymore about starting a relationship, that would only hurt him.

Besides, she wasn’t sure she didn’t want to start something either. All the thoughts that bounced around in her head were

battling with one another, and the only thing she could do was accept the path she'd set out on. She nodded and reached across the table for his hand. Wrapping her fingers around his, she squeezed. "I was just having an off day. I'm glad we happened to bump into each other—again." She looked around the diner and then back to him. "I'd say we have to stop meeting like this, but—"

"But I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Exactly."



## ***Michael***

**O**ver the next several weeks, Michael's relationship with Liz blossomed into something he never could have dreamed of. Every so often, he'd have to pinch himself—well, not literally. She would call him on his lunch breaks, or they'd meet after a shift to get dinner. Often, he'd swing by before his shift and they'd go for a ride.

There wasn't a single day where he didn't have a smile on his face just because he'd got to speak with her before work, hear her laugh, or make plans for later.

Elizabeth Baker was now his in *almost* every sense of the word. Her family knew it, his family knew it... even the whole town knew it. And now no one was trying to set the two of them up on dates.

It must be true what people say. His timeline might not be the same as God's timeline; he just had to have patience.

On a completely separate note, he still hadn't figured out who was running around town vandalizing various properties. The trail was growing cold as the weather warmed completely and people spent more time doing recreational activities.

Teens spent more time swimming at the creek with their friends or going to drive-in movies. Their lack of presence in and around town seemed to disprove his theories. They were otherwise preoccupied so they didn't have the need to break the law for the thrill of it.

All of this was taking more time he could spend with Liz and her family.

This evening was one of those nights. There was a rodeo in town and the whole crew planned to attend. It was the perfect opportunity for him to be part of the family.

Michael stared in the mirror at the tie he'd wrapped around his throat. He didn't know what was going through his head when he decided to put it on. The rodeo was an outdoor event, and he didn't know of anyone except for the announcer who

might be wearing one. And even then, it would likely be a bolo tie.

He groaned as he tore it from his neck and charged into his bedroom. He was trying too hard. Just because this was the first time the family had invited him on a big get-together didn't mean he needed to act any differently. Liz would be there, and that was all that mattered. She'd want to hold his hand and maybe they'd dance a little. He'd heard there would be some performances later in the evening.

The button-up shirt he wore was a light blue. According to Ellen, the color emphasized his eyes. She'd been the one who bought it for him—but seeing as it was the only really nice shirt he had, he'd gone with it. Pairing the shirt with a crisp pair of jeans and the only pair of cowboy boots he owned, he almost looked like he belonged on the ranch with the Bakers.

He tilted his foot, studying the boot. There wasn't even a scratch on these. He'd bought them on a whim once but hadn't really had a need for them besides the occasional outing. Okay, he was overthinking all of this. The kids weren't really kids anymore. They actually liked him. Heck, they'd tried setting him up with their mom. He had no reason to be worried about what clothes he was going to wear.

The clock on the wall chimed the time, alerting him that he needed to leave now or he'd be late picking up Liz. He grabbed his keys and headed for the door, then paused. Normally he wouldn't bring his sidearm with him when he was in plainclothes. But for some reason, his gut was telling him otherwise.

Michael shook off the unease he felt. But then it nudged him again. There would probably be several people carrying at an event like this. Perhaps that knowledge was what forced him to walk across the room and retrieve his private piece. He shrugged his arms into the holster that he wore at his side and slipped the nine-millimeter into the holder. The unease in his chest immediately lessened, allowing him to lock up and head out to the car.

Liz was ready for him when he pulled up to her house. There were other vehicles waiting as well, getting ready to head out to the rodeo. This year it was being held at the country club, as the owner hadn't yet completed the construction for the equine therapy business he was working on.

She hurried down the steps and hopped into his car without giving him a chance to open the door for her. When she glanced at him, she stilled. "What?"

He frowned at her. "Don't you know that your date should open the door for you?"

Liz rolled her eyes and reached for her seatbelt. "I wouldn't say this is a date, Michael. It's a family outing. You know that."

"It's a date if I want it to be one."

She shook her head but smiled and laughed all the same. Then she leaned over the armrest and placed a soft hand to his cheek. "You are too sweet."

He leaned in close and gave her a quick, chaste kiss. It was the furthest either of them had dared go in the intimacy department. As much as he yearned to be able to pull her hard against his chest and show her exactly how he felt, something stopped him.

Liz was still getting over her husband. Based on how easily she was triggered when their ride had ended early, he just felt like he needed to be cautious. She had to be the one to set the boundaries.

It might not be her love for Jack that held her back, but it was *something*. Whatever it was, he would give her time.

She pulled back and he reached for her hand, lacing her fingers within his before bringing them to his lips. "So what is this rodeo going to be like?" He pulled onto the main road, only glancing at her as they drove.

Liz stilled, her gaze swinging around to meet his. "Don't tell me that you have never been to a rodeo before."

He lifted a shoulder, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“Michael Donahue! Please tell me this isn’t your first rodeo experience. You’ve lived in Copper Creek almost as long as I have.”

Michael chuckled. “Well, to be fair, Ellen wasn’t really into all of that. She had other interests. I only went to a rodeo if I was called there for a disturbance. And normally, I never made it far past the front gate.”

She gasped. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true,” he said and laughed. “I never really had a need to go to these things.”

“*These things*. How dare you.” There was laughter in her voice. “You make it sound like I’m some country bumpkin.”

“Well, aren’t you?”

A gasp escaped her throat again. “We were both raised in the city, Michael.”

He shrugged again. “But you married a cowboy.”

“Well, if you marry me, then you’re marrying a cowgirl.”

The smile fell from his face. Had she just said that? No. He had to have imagined it. Liz didn’t joke about things like that. She’d never brought up anything more than friendship besides that one time she mentioned that she wanted to be on the same page as he was regarding their relationship.

Suddenly, he realized she’d grown just as quiet as him. She regretted saying it. He could practically feel it in the way her hand seemed to have tightened. She was stiff and uncomfortable. He should have joked with her about it. Instead, he let the statement get to him. He needed to reassure her.

“Liz, I—”

“I was kidding.”

And just like that, his heart sank. They’d been dating for almost two months. They’d gotten closer to each other, for heaven’s sake. Nothing would make him happier than knowing

she wanted to be with him for however long they could have together.

That statement alone was proof that she wasn't thinking that far ahead. Not yet anyway. As much as he wanted to convince her that it was a natural next step, he needed to accept that her timeline mattered even more than his.

He could be patient. He had to be.

Michael nodded and brought her hand up to kiss it once more. "Of course."

The rest of the drive went by in an almost unbearable silence. Why did this have to happen every single time anything important came up in a conversation? He was getting so tired of that. They were supposed to be past that sort of awkwardness.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her sneaking glances at him. "It's okay, Liz."

She sighed. "No, it isn't."

He bit back a laugh. "Why do you say that?"

"Why are you being so nice?" she demanded.

This time he turned his head fully but was only able to lock his eyes on her for a moment before returning his focus to the road. There was a single tear on her cheek—and it was enough to have him pull off to the side of the road.

Liz gasped, her eyes growing wide as he put the car into park.

He turned in his seat and stared at her. "Talk to me, Liz. I need to know what's going on if I'm supposed to help."

"That's just it, though, isn't it? I shouldn't expect you to help."

He gaped at her. That had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever heard her say. "Why in *heaven's name* not?"

She looked away, a soft, sad laugh whispered from her lips. "Because you aren't *responsible* for me. You don't have

to be there holding my hand through the hard stuff. This is just  
\_\_\_”

“This is just *what?* Liz. Do tell, because all day I’ve been believing something, and I’m getting the feeling that I’ve been fooling myself.”

Her large brown eyes stared at him unblinking. Had his words been too harsh? He hadn’t thought his tone was sharp, but then he was dealing with a pain in his chest he wasn’t prepared for. She worried her lower lip and dropped her gaze to their interlocked hands. “What do you think this is?”

The bark of laughter that ripped from his throat caused her to jump. He shook his head, withdrawing his hand from hers and running it through his hair. “Oh no, you don’t. I’m sorry, Liz. But you can’t say what you’ve been saying and then expect me to open my heart and put it on a platter for you to slice into.”

“Michael,” she whispered.

He set sharp eyes on her. “No. I’ve been very clear regarding my feelings for you. Very clear. I’ve told you things about our past that I probably should have held onto a little longer. Liz, I’ve spent so much time with you letting you call the shots and frankly, I don’t know if I can do it anymore.” There it was. He’d laid it out despite knowing it would freak her out. She looked like a scared little bunny rabbit. Michael sighed, his voice softening. “Liz, I would wait until the end of time if I knew that eventually you would choose me. I would. But I don’t know how long I can wait when I have no idea how you even feel about me.”

“You know how I feel,” she murmured.

Tempted to throw an argument in her path, he had to clamp down his jaw to prevent himself from raising his voice. Instead, he took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. “No. I don’t. You haven’t told me you loved me. You don’t initiate any intimate moments. *I’m* the one who’s told you my feelings are strong and I couldn’t just let them disappear. *I’m* the one who kissed you first and kisses you goodnight. Honestly, it feels like you’ve been holding back.”

Her eyes remained locked on her clasped hands. “I suppose you’re right.”

He sucked in a breath. This was it. She *had* been keeping her distance to a degree. He prayed it was for some other reason than simple disinterest. Had he read her wrong? Waiting for her to elaborate was becoming unbearable.

Finally, she met his gaze. “I—” She gnawed on her lower lip. “*I do* care for you.”

There it was. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“This is really hard for me—” she said.

“Just spit it out. Put me out of my misery.”

Something soft and warm touched his cheek and his eyes flew open. She drew her hand back. She blinked a few times and another tear slipped down her cheek. “Why would I do that?”

“You’re going to tell me you don’t feel the same.” His voice was hoarse.

Liz shook her head. “No, I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

She repeated the movement. “Of course not. Michael, I’ve been with exactly one man. I married him right out of high school, followed him out to this small town, and lived my life with him, raising my sons. When I agreed to be his wife, I never considered myself as anything more. My identity is with that man; it still is.”

His brows creased. None of this sounded any better than what they were just discussing.

“The fact of the matter is...” She took a shaky breath. “I want to be with you, but I don’t know how. Not yet, at least.” She offered him a small smile. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m nervous, and maybe I’m holding back because this is new territory.” She pressed her lips between her teeth and looked away. “One day, I could see us getting married, and that terrifies me.”

“I don’t think caring about someone should scare you so much.”

She let out a laugh. “I thought you were supposed to be a romantic, Michael.” She reached out and touched the hair at his temple, brushing a few strands back away from his face. “Haven’t you ever been so in love that you were scared of losing them?”

The pounding in his chest intensified. Was that what this was? Had Liz realized she was in *love* with him? His throat went dry. He didn’t dare ask her to clarify that. Already it felt like they were teetering on the edge of something dangerous.

“Okay,” he rasped.

“Okay?” Her eyes studied his. “We’re good?”

He nodded. “We’re good.” The only thing that could make this conversation better was if she’d outright told him that she loved him. But there was nothing stopping him from doing just that.



## *Liz*

“*I* love you.”

Those were the last words Michael had said to her when they were in the car. And as much as she wanted to reciprocate them, she couldn’t. That four-letter-word was something she’d only ever said to one man. And even then, it had taken months for her to get up the courage.

Verbally expressing herself had always been hard. In theory, she was a romantic, too. And when she got past that hurdle of saying ‘I love you,’ she could be flowery with her words as well. It was just that first time.

She couldn’t say it if there were any doubts left in her mind.

And now as they were holding hands and wandering through the throngs of people, she agonized over not saying it back.

Maybe she was comparing the love she had for Jack with the feelings she’d developed for Michael. To compare them wasn’t fair. Yes, she had known each of them for about the same amount of time, but the intimacy she’d shared with Jack ran so much deeper than anything she’d experienced with Michael.

She’d have to make it up to him somehow; she just didn’t know how she’d be able to.

The sick feeling in her stomach only got worse the more they wandered through the fairgrounds. Michael had made several good points during their conversation. And everything had settled in a good place.

*Until he’d said those three little words.*

Michael pointed at a food truck about ten yards away. “Do they seriously deep fry twinkies?” The disappointment in his blue eyes had seemed to settle into something content. But her thoughts didn’t want to let go of one single fact.

He was too good for her.

Maybe that was what had held her back. What if this didn't work out and he ended up getting hurt? She couldn't live with herself if she was the reason he got his heart broken. While in his car, her whole body had seemed to be freezing cold and on fire at the same time. There was this pain in her arm that made it almost go numb when he'd let down his walls and told her how he felt.

"What if I do something wrong?" she murmured.

"What?"

She looked up at him and the blood drained from her face. Had she just said that out loud? She shook her head no, trying to dismiss the fact that she'd just blurted that out.

"No, you said something. Say it again." Michael faced her, then without warning, he pulled her through the crowd and onto a patch of grass where they could speak without being overheard. "I thought we'd come to an understanding in the car. But I guess you're still working through some things."

She swallowed hard. "It's more of the same, Michael. I told you that I was scared."

"Being scared of losing someone and being scared that you are the one to cause it are two different fears, Liz."

"Not true."

He shook his head, taking both of her hands into his. "No. Right now, I can tell you I'm terrified that I will lose you. I'm not scared of much. My job wouldn't allow that. But losing you is something I don't ever want to experience." He ducked his head to peer at her with those steady blue eyes. "On the other hand, I'm not worried at all about doing something to mess this up. Not really. Because I know I won't intentionally hurt you. I know that I have zero plans of breaking things off with you. If that's going to happen, it will all be you. So tell me, Liz. Are you scared of losing me? Or are you scared of being the cause of losing me?"

"I'm scared I'll do something that will hurt you."

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“But it could happen.”

He dragged a hand down his face. “Life is far too short to worry about doing something wrong.”

She stilled and her heart rate slowed. Was he actually throwing her own words back at her?

A ghost of a smile filled his face. “This is a new experience for both of us. As for me? I’m not going to hold anything back. I love you, Liz. Nothing would make me happier than to be the next man you choose to marry. Now, that might happen. Or it might not. But I’m not going to stand in the way of my own happiness. I guess you have to decide if that’s something you plan on doing.” Michael pulled her against him, and his chin rested on her head. His strong arms wrapped around her tight enough she couldn’t really move if she had wanted to.

At that moment a sense of clarity filled her from her head to her toes. She rested her cheek against his chest and tightened her hold on him. “I love you, Michael.”

His whole body seemed to relax against hers, except for the pounding in his chest. She felt the reverberations of his heart against her cheek. It seemed to pound to the same tempo as her own heart, racing side by side like a pair of wild horses.

Michael pulled back, his eyes shimmering. “You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear you say that.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. “I think I might have a small idea.”

He shook his head. “Nope, not even a small one. I have loved you since I was seventeen, Liz.”

“But Ellen—”

“I loved Ellen with all my heart. But didn’t you know your heart only expands to encompass the love you have for others? You have six sons. And now six daughters. Would you say you don’t have the capacity to love even one of them?”

“Well, of course not.” Her words came out slow as understanding filled her mind.

“Now I do want to make one thing clear. I loved Ellen with all my heart. She was my everything and I know we were meant to be. But Ellen is gone. And I know she’d want me to be happy, even if that means finding someone else to grow old with. The love I had for you might have gone dormant, but it was always there, ready to be reawakened when the time came.”

She stared at him, at a complete loss for the words she needed to express herself. He was a far bigger romantic than she was. The gruff sheriff of their town had a heart bigger than she could have ever imagined. And she was lucky enough to have stolen it.

Michael’s eyes dipped lower for just a moment before lifting to her eyes. The question in his gaze was apparent. He wanted to kiss her more deeply, but he wasn’t going to do anything she wasn’t ready for. A burning in her stomach flickered to life, reminding her of a yearning she’d had months ago. She tilted her face toward him and closed her eyes.

The invitation was clear.

Michael’s lips closed on hers, caressing and exploring. His kiss was warm, sweet, and quickly grew to show just how much he longed to make her his.

She slipped her arms around his neck and stood on her toes to deepen their kiss.

Several emotions washed over her. In his arms she felt treasured, as if he’d been searching for her for his entire life. The patience it must have required to wait for her must have been extraordinary. Michael valued her, so much so that he refused to play games. He’d told her from the very beginning that she was something special. Not only that, but he proved just how special she was to *him*.

Chills caused her legs to go weak, making her lightheaded. She swayed slightly as waves of goosebumps flowed over her like the rolling tide of the ocean. Theirs wasn’t a kiss fueled by

lust. This passion was something unique. It was almost sacred, like a gift they would never want to take for granted.

When she pulled back, she gave him a tentative smile. “I’m glad we got that all figured out.”

He didn’t release her fully. His arms were still around her waist and the look of utter adoration hadn’t left his face. “I’m glad we got it all figured out, too.” The smile on his face widened and out of nowhere, he threw his head back and hollered.

She gasped, then laughed. “What was that?”

“You have made me so happy, Liz. I just can’t believe I kissed the girl I’d dreamed about all through high school.”

Liz blushed and looked away. “That’s ridiculous.”

“But it isn’t. Not really.” His voice was softer now, more tender. The way he spoke made her drag her focus back to him.

“How do you do it, Michael?”

“Do what?”

“You’re so positive about relationships. It’s been so hard to pull myself out of the ditch I’d put myself in when Jack passed. I mean, I had my good days, but lately it’s been one bad day after another.”

A shadow seemed to cross his expression. It was brief, but she’d caught it. Michael was so sweet to care about her. No one but Jack had ever worried about her like that. She drew circles on his chest with her fingers and looked away again. “I always thought I was lucky to find Jack. But now I can see that not only was that lucky, but in finding you, I experienced the impossible.” Liz let out an embarrassed laugh. “I’m sorry, that sounds so juvenile, doesn’t it?”

Michael gave his head a sharp shake, his lips pressed into a thin line. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t?”

“Liz, we were able to find love twice in our lifetime. I’d say that’s pretty incredible.” He took in a deep breath and let it out. “And honestly, I can’t even be upset that it took us so long to find one another. I’m just forever grateful that it happened at all.” He glanced over his shoulder, drawing her attention to all of the people who were wandering around them.

Suddenly all the noise from the fair came into focus. Michael gave her a sheepish grin and jerked his chin toward the rows of games. “How about I win you a giant stuffed teddy bear?”

She laughed. “What would I do with something like that?”

“I suppose you could give it to your granddaughter.”

“I like the way you think.” Liz reached for his hand and together they headed for the grouping of small white tents. The games had been designed with cowboys in mind. There were shooting games and a horseshoe toss. But the one that they ended up gravitating toward was to test out lassoing skills.

Michael offered her a cheesy smile, and she shook her head. “*What?*” he scoffed with a laugh. “You don’t think I can do it?”

It felt wonderful—almost magical to be able to laugh with him. “No, I *know* you won’t be able to do it.”

His hand flew to his chest and he took a mock stumble backward. “You wound me, Liz.”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “Oh *please*. When was the last time you had to lasso an animal?”

Michael straightened. “Well, a few years ago, one of Margaret’s goats got out and was wandering around town.”

Liz arched a brow. “From what I heard, there was no lassoing involved in that scenario.”

“*What?*”

She laughed again. “Michael, we live in the same gossipy town. Do you truly believe that people wouldn’t talk about a goat that ended up in the grocery store and ate through a shelf of potato chips?”

He chuckled. "I suppose you're right."

"Not to mention how many people were incredibly entertained by the fact that you had to drag the animal out of that store and got butted a few times."

His mouth dropped open. "Is nothing sacred?"

"Who knew that your job as sheriff would require retrieving a goat?"

"Okay, okay. I get it. We're not here to talk about goats. We're here to win you the giant teddy bear that's hanging on that rack." He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Hmm," she crooned. "I don't think I want anything more than the opportunity to spend more time with you."

He rested his cheek on her head. "I like that sentiment."

She craned her neck around and peered up at him. The dark scruff that lined his jaw, the lines around his eyes, all of it made him so distinguished. He was so entirely different than Jack, and yet she'd managed to develop feelings for him far more quickly than she thought possible.

A tiny twinge of apprehension was still in the back of her mind. There was something that wanted to hold her back. Perhaps it was that fear that she'd be hurt again.

Jack hadn't hurt her on purpose. Of course she couldn't blame him for the accident. But he'd left her all the same. He'd left her alone to care for six sons and a ranch. They had been meant to spend the rest of their lives growing old together. And now he was gone.

Was Michael the person who could make her feel whole again? To help her find joy in life once more?

Of course she had her family—and it was growing at lightning speed. But her sons all had their own lives, worries, and ways they wanted to spend their time. She had needed to find something that was all her own.

Michael gazed down at her with those eyes that she could melt into. He twisted, cupping her cheek with his hand before

placing a swift kiss on her lips.

When he pulled back, she couldn't fight the smile that hadn't left her face since their proclamation of love. "So what do you want to do?"

"As long as it's with you, I don't care."



## *Michael*

*M*ichael couldn't express the joy he felt in that moment no matter how hard he tried. How could he explain to anyone the way his chest seemed to expand with excitement and hope for the future? Everything was absolutely perfect. There was not one thing he could think of that would make this moment better.

Heck, if he could freeze the moment, he would. He wasn't the type of guy who continued to demand more and more when he could be happy with what he had. That was a gamble. Right here, right now, he'd be grateful for each small moment he got with Liz.

Even as he touched her, held her near, he almost couldn't believe he'd done it—like he was in some kind of alternate universe or vivid dream. But here she was.

Doggone it, he'd have to tell Adeline she was right and eventually thank her for pushing him toward Liz. He'd probably have to make his goddaughter some kind of honorary something if they got married.

## *Married.*

Michael's eyes darted to Liz as they wandered through the crowds once more. That was the first time he'd really thought about such a possibility. Would Liz even be interested in such an idea? They were both over halfway through with living their lives. It seemed somewhat strange to consider settling down once more.

His hand tightened around hers, prompting her to look up at him. How could her smile affect him so much? His heart hammered, his stomach knotted, and all he wanted to do was pull her into the shadows and kiss her until she couldn't catch her breath.

He offered her a smile in return. It was too soon to discuss marriage with her. But one day he'd make his intentions known.

Cheers erupted at an arena nearby and Liz gravitated toward it. Together they moved through the crowds of people and onto the bleachers that had been erected. They climbed the stairs until they managed to find a bench that had enough space for the two of them to sit.

There were several barrels set up in the arena and a woman rode a horse, weaving in and out of the barrels so fast she kicked up dirt as she went. Michael leaned over toward Liz. “I never understood the appeal of this one.”

She glanced at him momentarily, then returned her focus to the arena. “What’s not to get? She has to make her way through all the barrels faster than anyone else, without knocking into them.”

“But what is the thrill in that? She’s just riding a horse.”

Liz stared at him like he’d grown another head. “You can’t be serious.”

He chuckled, lifting a shoulder. “I mean, even I can ride a well-trained horse.”

Her brows furrowed. “Do you know the skill it requires to get a horse to dart around like that? Bronc riding, on the other hand, is nothing by comparison.” Her face appeared to be reddening. He’d hit a nerve without meaning to and she was absolutely adorable.

“Not to be contradictory, but when I think of rodeos, that’s exactly what I think of. Those guys have to stay on a beast who doesn’t want them there.”

She gaped at him. “Okay, yes, those guys have to hold on for long periods of time. But there is less skill in that. They only have to hang on.” Liz gestured toward the ring. “Those women have to practice and practice, train, and know exactly how to ride their horses to get around every single barrel. There’s a finesse involved and—”

Michael laughed. “Okay, you win.” He squeezed her hand and then brought it up to his lips. “I guess I need to pay more attention.” Rodeos seemed to open a whole new world to him,

a world with Liz at the center. “What other kinds of events are there?”

Liz studied him, as if doubtful that he had any interest in this subject.

He nodded to the arena. “I’m in my fifties, and I haven’t been to a real rodeo for anything more than work or the food. Humor me.”

One side of her mouth quirked into a half-grin. “More than you can probably count.”

His brows lifted. “That many, huh? How about you give me the highlights.”

She snickered. “The highlights? What does that even *mean*? ”

This back and forth—it was exactly what he loved about her. There was an ease with which they spent time in one another’s company. He shrugged. “I suppose you can just tell me what your favorites are.”

“Well—”

“No, wait! Tell me which ones you’ve competed in.”

This time her laughter was so loud he could hear it over the roar of the crowd. “Michael, I’ve never competed.”

“Really? Why not?”

She laughed again. “You have to train for stuff like that. I’m as much a city girl as I ever was. Just because I wear a cowboy hat and know how to work a ranch doesn’t mean I’m gonna be able to get into that arena and compete.”

“But you said you were a cowgirl.”

Liz smiled. “That I did.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked out at the arena once more. “I love it here. And in my heart, I believe I belong.”

“I think you belong.”

Her eyes cut to his. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “You fit here, Liz. I don’t think I could imagine you anywhere else. This is where you belong.”

“What about you?”

His gaze swept over the crowd of people, the arena, then back to her. “I love it here, too. But sometimes I don’t feel like I quite fit. Not like you.”

“How can you say that?”

Michael chuckled. “To some degree, I think a lot of the transplants who live in town feel the same way. We like this way of life—living in the country where there’s less crime and more space. But we don’t have the same kind of comradeship that you have with the other ranchers. It’s sort of like us townsfolk are on the outside looking in.” His eyes widened and he drew closer. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s just something I’ve noticed. You all have your own little community within the community.” He chuckled, but it was more out of embarrassment than humor. Boy, he was making a mess of things. The last thing he wanted to do was to put any distance between them.

Her features scrunched up and she tilted her head slightly. “I suppose I can see that. It’s not intentional—”

“Oh, I know.” He rubbed the back of his neck. Dang it, he should change the subject. “Anyway—”

“So—” Liz laughed. “You first.”

He had nothing—absolutely nothing to ask. Michael shook his head and gestured toward her. “Nah. You go ahead.” He grasped her hand and stared down at it, tracing her knuckles with his thumb.

“What you’ve said... it reminds me of something. Or maybe it just made me realize something.”

“Yeah?”

She wasn’t looking at him now. Instead, she’d shifted her focus to where their hands were clasped. Her cheeks filled with color, giving her an almost pink glow. “It’s been so long since I’ve been in a serious relationship—longer since I’ve

started one.” Her eyes flicked up to meet his. “And honestly, I don’t have time for the games.” Her hand tightened on his. “I wasn’t even thinking that I’d ever mean that much to another person.”

It didn’t matter how old he got, conversations like this always set his teeth on edge. He couldn’t tell where she was going with this. Was she wanting to break up with him already? Or was there something deeper at play? She *had* just admitted to loving him. Maybe she regretted it. “You mean that much to me,” he murmured. She probably couldn’t hear him with the roar of the crowd around them; he should say it louder.

Liz offered him a genuine smile. “I guess what I’m getting at is that I don’t want to dance around the subject. I’d rather know what your plans for the future might entail. How serious are you?” She let out a nervous laugh. “I’m sorry, maybe it’s too soon to talk about.”

He shook his head vehemently. “I get it, Liz. We aren’t getting any younger. It’s not like we’re going to start a new family, but there is the issue of our current families.”

“Exactly.” She beamed at him. “I’m so glad you understand. If this relationship of ours is going to be more casual, then I want to know so I don’t become too invested in it.”

“No.”

She stilled, her happy features growing uncertain and her skin pale. “Pardon?”

“I don’t intend for this relationship to be casual at all.” He shifted in his seat, turning to face her more fully. “I don’t mind that we’re each in the second half of our lives. I would love to spend every last moment of it with someone I care about.”

Her small smile returned.

“You want to know my intentions, Liz? I fully intend on wooing you until you finally accept that I am here to stay. I want to be in your life. I want to be part of your family.”

The color returned to her cheeks. “I think I’d like that, too.”

*Think.* She still seemed hesitant. Now, why would she ask him what he wanted if she wasn’t ready herself? The thought perplexed him. He shoved aside the doubt. Liz wasn’t someone to play games. She was straightforward. He’d seen the way she tackled things head-on when they bothered her. She’d do the same in her relationship.

Right?

His gaze narrowed and he dipped his head closer to hers. “Are you sure?”

Liz pulled back slightly, looked away, and pressed her lips together. “You know what? Sometimes I feel like I shouldn’t be willing to move on so soon after Jack—” She swallowed hard and met his gaze again. “But I know I want to be happy, and you make that happen. I think Jack would want me to be happy, too.”

“I know he would.” The words sounded trite.

“I guess I never really thought about it, but now that the boys have started their own families, I need to find myself again. I need to do what makes me happy.”

Michael nodded. All of what she was saying sounded great. She was thinking of herself, which would lead to her deciding what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. “That sounds really healthy.”

She breathed in deeply and smiled at him once more. “This is strange, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

Her strangled laugh matched the fidgety way she touched her hair and face. “That we’re talking like this. It’s surreal. I feel like we’re going at lightning speed.”

“We can go as slow as you want. I’m not in a rush.”

“I’m the one who brought it up. Maybe I’m too much of a planner. That’s it. It’s just strange that we can be so open about this. I was feeling so anxious at the beginning, but the more

time we spend together, talking this out, the more right this feels.”

Relief exploded within him, sprinkled with elation. Liz was right. It was like he was living within a dream. “I know exactly how you feel.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’m right there with you.”

Liz scooted closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

If she could hear the thoughts bouncing around in his head, he wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up changing her mind. He could see them settling down together. They could attend several more rodeos, and she could tease him about not knowing much regarding the sport. It was like they’d gotten past all the strange, awkward stages. They didn’t have to argue about whether they wanted children or where they were going to live.

He turned his attention to the arena. There was nothing more he could ask for in this life.

Loud shouts erupted but were drowned out by the cheering crowd as the barrel racer came to a stop at the end of her turn. Michael straightened and craned his neck around but couldn’t see anything from his vantage point.

Liz glanced at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure. Just a weird feeling.”

The concern etched in her face was enough to force him to brush off that instinct. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” He turned back to the arena as the announcer’s voice came over the loudspeaker.

But then there were more shouts followed by a gunshot and screams.

Liz stiffened and everyone on the bleachers moved as one, turning and attempting to look in the direction where the shot had been fired. Liz gazed at him, a frown on her face. “Was that—”

Instinctively, Michael reached for the gun in his holster. “I don’t know. But I’m going to check it out.” He rose to his feet, but her hand shot out and grabbed his hand. He looked down at her, surprised to find her face paler than usual. “What’s the matter?”

She chewed on her lower lip, her features pinched. “Maybe you should call someone.”

He fought the urge to chuckle. “*I am* the one they’d call.”

“*I know* that, Michael. But maybe you call backup first. I don’t know, but I don’t want you going over there alone.”

Michael lowered himself onto the bench as the air around them grew more tense by the second. “This is my job, Liz. It would be dishonorable of me if I sat back and did nothing. I’ll be fine. It’s what I do. I promise to be careful.” He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

She nodded, releasing his hand.

He hurried down the stairs, following the sounds of more angry shouts. With the uptick in crime going on, he *shouldn’t* be surprised. But he was. Most of the people in Copper Creek owned at least one firearm. Whether for hunting or personal security, it wasn’t unheard of to bump into someone carrying one on their person.

The strange thing was he couldn’t remember the last time someone had discharged a weapon at one of these events. What if someone felt threatened and returned fire? That thought alone pushed him to charge forward with more speed. He wasn’t about to let there be any casualties over someone being stupid.

Crowds of people scattered around him. He must be getting closer. One more explosion occurred, causing a ripple effect of screams. He sprinted onward until he neared the entrance of the rodeo. There was one angry man waving a gun around, surrounded by several equally angry cowboys.

Michael slowed as he neared the group. Everyone in the group seemed to relax somewhat when they saw him. Everyone except the man in the middle. He was the only one

who probably didn't recognize him. Based on his wild, bloodshot eyes, it was clear the man wasn't thinking clearly.

"Sir? I'm going to have to ask you to put the gun down."

"Why don't you make me?" the man sneered. "Who do you think you are anyway?"

Michael flashed his badge. "I'm the sheriff."

The man's features faltered. Good. At least he had some sense left in him.



## Liz

Liz sat on her bench, surrounded by other anxious people. They all seemed to know better than to go stampeding from the bleachers. Most of the people who were scattering were on the ground, running for safety.

However, she felt like there was a target on her back. She itched to lower herself beneath the bench and get out of sight of the person who'd fired the weapon.

Her thoughts turned to Michael, and her stomach twisted so bad that bile rose up her throat. He was heading straight toward the danger, and the only thing she could think of was that she'd lose another person who meant the world to her.

They'd only recently discovered their feelings for one another. Okay, so Michael knew long before she did. The problem was that she'd only just realized it and wasn't ready for that feeling of love to be ripped from her grasp so soon.

Her heart wouldn't be able to handle it if Michael got hurt. What if he caught a stray bullet? All her previous anxieties returned one by one. His job wasn't a safe one. Funny how it hadn't bothered her as much before now.

Things had definitely changed. She loved him. And he loved her. Liz wrung her hands. Michael said he'd be okay. He'd done this sort of thing before. She could trust him. She had to.

The blood in her veins ran cold and she shot out of her seat. Her children were here. She had no idea where they were. It was possible that they were near where the altercation had taken place. Her whole chest tightened and her heart stuttered. Now she was *really* going to be sick. None of them had called her to check in.

She reached for the phone in her back pocket with a trembling hand. The phone fumbled and fell from her grasp onto the metal bleachers. She lunged for it just as the screen lit up.

Sean's name came up with his number and the brief feeling of relief was squashed by a terror-filled moment of clarity. Sean could be calling because something happened. She swiped her thumb across the now cracked screen and held the phone to her ear. "Sean? Are you okay? Is Adeline—"

"Are you okay, Mom?"

"Of course. I'm at the arena. Where are you?"

His breathing was heavy. There was relief in his muffled voice as he spoke to someone else. "She's at the arena."

"Do you know what's going on? Where are you?" she repeated.

"Everyone is over by the food trucks. We were getting some snacks. Where's Sheriff Donahue? Is he still with you?"

Her hand tightened on the phone. "No. Michael left to find out what's going on." A lump formed in her throat. There was silence on the other end and she fidgeted in her seat. "Do you think he's okay?"

"He'll be fine, Mom. I'm worried about you." He murmured something she couldn't understand to someone else. "I'm coming to get you. I don't like that you're alone."

"I'll be fine. I'd rather stay in one place." She glanced around her. "Besides, it seems like things are starting to settle down over here. The announcer is heading back to the center of the arena." There was no sign of Michael, but she probably wouldn't hear from him for a while. "As much as I appreciate your concern—"

"Out of the question."

"Sean—"

"We're not discussing this. If Michael isn't with you, you're coming with us."

She could hear it in his voice; there would be no arguing with him. It was just as well. She wouldn't be able to enjoy herself sitting here watching the rodeo. Her mind was too busy worrying about Michael. Liz sighed. "I'll meet you near the north entrance of the arena."

By the time the phone conversation was over, the air around them seemed to have grown calmer. That had to be a good sign. She wandered down the bleachers toward the north exit and waited for Sean to arrive. While she didn't think it was necessary by the time he got there, she couldn't deny the peaceful feeling that draped around her just by having him walk her toward the rest of the family.

Her five other sons sat around a picnic table near the food trucks with their wives. Brooklyn played in the grass nearby, chewing on a teething toy. When she came into their view, it was like a bomb had exploded. Each and every one of them rose from their seats and hurried over to her.

Several voices erupted all at once.

“Did you see what happened?”

“Was the shooting by the arena?”

“Do you know if anyone got hurt?”

Liz held up her hands, silencing all of them. “I know as much as you do. There were two gunshots and a lot of people scattering. Michael went to check it out.” Just saying his name made that tightness in her chest return.

He'd be fine. He promised.

She swallowed hard. “I’m sure he’ll fill us all in when he gets back.”

They seemed to accept her explanation, and together their group returned to the table. Ian offered her a tray of fries after he grabbed one from the top. The conversation at the table picked up again with different theories of what had happened.

As long as she'd lived in Copper Creek, they hadn't had to deal with this many scares like they had recently. It couldn't be a local. They all loved their community.

“I bet you it’s someone from out of town.” Cal took a sip of his soda and nodded to Ian. “There’s a lot of folks who come through here for events like this.”

Ian scrunched up his face. “I’m not so sure. When that whole fiasco with Jess happened, there were people from the

city, but they came out this way because there are people out here who use drugs too. Maybe we just need to get used to the fact that this place is growing and there's not much we can do.”

Noelle frowned, leaning into Tate. “I like this place the way it is. I don’t want it to get bigger.”

Liz could relate to that sentiment. However if she hadn’t moved from the city, none of them would be here. Neither would Michael. She wouldn’t have married Jack—but she might have ended up with Michael in the city.

“You okay, Mom?”

She jumped, her gaze landing on Finn. His brows were furrowed. “You sure nothing happened over where you were at?”

Liz sliced her hand through the air. “I’m perfectly fine. Just have a lot on my mind.”

Finn still looked just as worried. He wasn’t easy to convince when things weren’t going his way. She let out a sigh and settled onto an empty part of the bench. “This place is going to continue to get bigger. It’s our responsibility to accept the newcomers with love and charity.”

She met each of their forlorn expressions with a laugh. “Oh, come now. You know that if people weren’t allowed to move here, I wouldn’t have been able to marry your father and none of you would have the lives you now lead. Yes, there will be some questionable newcomers, but they’ll soon get to know what Copper Creek is all about.”

They needed a change of subject—something to get their minds, and hers, off these problems and onto something brighter. Liz glanced around at each of the members sitting at the table. “Come on. Let’s talk about something else. How is everyone enjoying the rodeo?” Her gaze landed on Adeline, who looked almost gray. “Adeline! Are you okay, sweetie?”

Her daughter-in-law’s head shot up and she stared at Liz almost as if she’d been caught doing something wrong.

“You look absolutely ill. Do you need to go home?” Liz gave a sharp look at Sean. “You shouldn’t have brought her if she’s feeling sick.”

Adeline shook her head. “I’m fine, Liz. Promise.”

“You don’t look fine, sweetie. I think you might need to head home.”

She shook her head again. “It’ll pass. It comes and goes. Probably just the morning sickness that happens to last all day and well after the first trimester.”

Piper gave her an empathetic smile. “Madison had really bad morning sickness too. We should pick you up some ginger on the way home to make some tea.”

Brock clapped Sean on the back with a chuckle. “Have you figured out if it’s a boy or a girl?”

Sean shook his head. “We’ve got an ultrasound next week.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s a boy so we can carry on the Baker name.”

Liz beamed, reaching across the table to take Adeline’s hand in her own. “I, for one, can’t wait to snuggle with the little one—boy *or* girl.” She gave Brock a pointed look.

Jack was gone and the family was moving on. Deep in her heart she knew they weren’t going to forget him—no one would. But it was almost a sign—something in the universe was giving her permission to move forward with her budding relationship.

She wasn’t so superstitious to believe that Jack had a hand in setting this relationship of hers up with Michael. But she also wouldn’t brush off the sense that he was happy for her. As Liz glanced around her family, she let out another happy sigh. Everything was changing so quickly, but it was only getting better.

Everything except for that underlying worry for Michael.

He was still gone. He hadn’t called to update her on what was happening. For all she knew, he’d gotten caught in the

crosshairs of that second gunshot. The blood drained from her face and she grew lightheaded. Her breaths came out shorter and a faint feeling of *déjà vu* overcame her. This was the way she'd felt when she found out Jack had passed. This moment was only a fraction of what she'd felt that fateful day at the hospital.

In the hospital, she'd had a full-blown panic attack.

This time was more manageable.

Liz closed her eyes and counted down from ten. The waves of dizziness dissipated. As much as she wanted to call Michael and check in, she didn't know if he'd even be able to answer. It would be best if she just waited.

ONE HOUR PASSED before Michael's number finally showed up on her phone screen. Liz answered and scurried away from the group where they were cheering for each other while playing at the dart game.

She plugged one ear and ducked around the side of another tent. "Michael? Are you okay? Did you get hurt? There was a second gunshot—"

His soft, warm, welcoming voice came through the phone as clear as if he were standing right beside her. "I'm fine, Liz. I promised you I would be."

"You can't guarantee that and you know it." She winced, her words coming out a little sharper than she'd intended. This time she spoke more calmly. "I was worried about you."

He was quiet for a few moments. "I was worried about you."

She let out a strangled laugh. "You didn't have to be worried. I wasn't the one running toward the chaos. You were."

"True. But I didn't like leaving you on your own. Where did you end up?" His voice held a note of concern. The way he spoke made her want to see him in person that much more.

She wanted to wrap her arms around him and pull him close. She needed to know for herself that he was fine. “Sean came to get me. I’ve been with the family this whole time.”

He sighed. “Good. Look, Liz, I’m sorry I left—”

“I get it.” She understood. It was his job. And as much as she wanted to tell him his job was a terrifying reality she didn’t want to deal with, she didn’t exactly have any right to. Instead, she bit her tongue and leaned against a large pole. “Are you done then?”

“Almost. Deputy Anderson showed up in a car with back doors that don’t lock, so we’re waiting for another to be brought.” The tense silence returned. “I’m sorry today didn’t turn out like it was supposed to.”

His apology was almost laughable. “You’re not seriously saying sorry for leaving to help everyone, are you?”

“Well—”

“You’re a law enforcement officer, Michael. I figured you’d be required to drop whatever you’re doing when something big comes up. Everyone here is just lucky you were already on-site.” Eventually, she’d like to have a discussion with him regarding his career, but now wasn’t the time. He was probably already dealing with the stress of the situation. She needed to build him up even though she was emotionally spent. “I love you, Michael.”

“I love you too, Liz. I’ll finish this up and then call you back.”

She nodded, then realized he couldn’t see her. “Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.” She smiled as she hung up the phone, staring at the dark screen for longer than was necessary.

“Was that Michael?” Adeline’s voice came from behind her and Liz glanced over her shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Is he okay? Did he tell you anything about what happened?”

Liz shook her head. “I’m sure he’ll tell everyone later.”

Adeline offered her a smile. “I’m sure he will, too.” They stood in silence, each with their own thoughts. Then Adeline glanced up at her. “I’ve been thinking. If it’s a boy, I want to name him Jack.”

Liz whirled around and stared wide-eyed at Adeline. “Oh, sweetheart.”

“Sean and I discussed it, and we agreed it would be a nice way to remember him.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.” She took a step toward Adeline and wrapped her in a warm hug. “I’m so happy for the both of you.”

**20**

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## *Michael*

*M*ichael dragged his hand down his face. Days like today were hard. Would he have preferred to ignore the situation and let others handle it? Sure. He would have loved to spend the afternoon with Liz and not deal with idiots who had no respect for others.

The lights on top of the squad cars continued to flash. The disgruntled man sat in the back of one of them, banging his hand on the window.

He wasn't even sure the guy was coherent enough to know what was going on. Once they'd gotten the gun away from him, it was easy enough to tackle him to the ground and get him restrained.

Deputy Anderson headed toward him just as he hung up the phone. "The officer in the city says this guy is in violation of his parole."

"It's a lot worse than that. He's going to be charged with unlawful discharge of a firearm. He's lucky he didn't hurt anyone with his stupidity." Michael glanced at the guy once more. "How much do you want to bet this is more than just being drunk? He's got to be on something."

His deputy followed his gaze. "Yeah. Everyone here is pretty lucky you were on-site. I'd hate to see what could have happened if you weren't."

Michael grimaced. If only there was a way to prevent stuff like this from happening again. Unfortunately, they could only do so much. He patted Anderson on the back. "All we can do is our best."

Anderson nodded. "I'll take care of this guy. Are you heading to the office to finish up the paperwork?"

Michael looked over his shoulder toward the crowds of people. "I'll make sure to get it finished by tonight. I have a previous engagement."

His deputy smiled widely. “Does this have something to do with Ms. Baker?”

Holding back his smile wouldn’t have been possible even if he’d tried. “You just worry about your work, Anderson. I’ll check in with you later.”

“Yes, sir.” Anderson strode away, sporting a knowing smile on his face.

Michael headed farther into the fairgrounds. Adeline had messaged him where they were so it shouldn’t be too hard to find them. He’d have to figure out a way to make this date up to Liz—not that it wouldn’t be enjoyable on his side of things. It would just be another excuse to spend more time with her.

He wandered through the throngs of cowboys and cowgirls. A muffled speaker burst through a large building where it sounded like an auction was taking place. Probably horses or steers. The closer he got to the location Adeline had mentioned, the hungrier he got. The smell of those deep-fried foods called to him. He ended up at the deep-fried twinkie stand and ordered two before he finished his trek to the games.

Their large group was located in the middle of everything. And it was almost like Liz’s soul could sense his own. She turned before he was even within twenty feet of her. Those warm honey-chocolate eyes locked onto his, filling him with a sense of belonging he hadn’t felt since Ellen. He grinned like a schoolboy and held out one of the treats he’d ordered.

Liz snickered. “I can’t believe you actually got one of those.”

He shrugged. “We’ll probably be feeling it tonight, but for now I figured I’d indulge a little.”

She glanced around their group and then nodded toward the large temporary building they could only see the top of. “These guys are doing just fine. What do you say we take a look at the animals for auction?” Without waiting for his response, she slipped her hand within his and they headed in that direction.

Liz didn't speak right away. She seemed to be deeper in thought than before. Was she thinking about the path their relationship was on? Where they would live? How they'd spend their holidays? He didn't care what happened as long as they were together.

Michael took a bite of his dessert. It was funny how they could walk in silence for so long and not feel like they needed to fill the void with something else. He could walk with her like this for the rest of his life and be nothing but happy. That was a true sign of finding one's soul mate.

"What happened?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "What happened about what?"

"With the gunfire. What was going on?"

Oh. *That's* what she was thinking about. He rolled his shoulders and offered her a smile. "Just some drunk hooligan who wasn't happy about one thing or another."

"I'd say they were more than simply not happy. Was anyone hurt?"

He shook his head. "Don't you worry about that. Witnesses said he fired up and out of the fairgrounds, but not directly overhead."

Her brows were furrowed and she took a bite of her treat. She gave him a short nod. "I guess it's good he didn't come here with the intent to do people harm."

"Exactly."

"But it was still dangerous. There are thousands of people here."

A twinge of uncertainty pricked at his insides. This conversation sounded familiar.

Liz met his gaze. "I don't like that you have to deal with this stuff on a regular basis."

"What? I don't have to deal with it on a regular basis. Not usually anyways."

She let out a sigh. “Okay, you don’t have to deal with it *every single day*, but you do have to deal with it more frequently than if you were an accountant.”

He laughed. “Well, yeah. That’s what being in law enforcement is like.”

“I know. And I don’t like it.”

Michael pulled her to a stop. “I know there’s not much I can say that will help convince you that my job is just as secure as any job out there. I’ve been trained. There are protocols and procedures in place to help keep me safe.”

She didn’t look convinced. He’d had a similar conversation with Ellen when he first became sheriff. Ellen hadn’t wanted him to be the one in charge. However, she’d been okay with being deputized. Ultimately, it came down to supporting the one she loved.

Liz was capable of that. She would be able to see this was his career and it was something he was good at. At least he hoped so. But studying her now, he wasn’t so sure. Michael reached out and gave her upper arm a gentle squeeze. “Nothing’s changed since I’ve become sheriff. There have been and always will be the odd occurrence when I’m asked to a scene to help people. But if I didn’t, then who would?”

She pressed her lips together in a firm line. “Yeah. I suppose you’re right.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m being silly. You’re completely right.”

The words coming out of her mouth didn’t match what her eyes were trying to tell him. She didn’t trust anything she said, nor what he said, for that matter. He tilted his head slightly and moved closer to her. His voice softened. “Hey.”

Her gaze cut to meet his.

“It’s going to be okay. I swear it. The only time I’ve been in danger to the extent I thought I might get hurt was that time Jess needed my help. And I’ve been in law enforcement for so much longer. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

She nodded again, but he still could see her apprehension. The only thing that would solve this issue would be time.

There had been so many other dangerous moments where he'd never lost control of the situation, but she hadn't been privy to any of them. Given time, she'd see what he was talking about.

Michael pulled her in for a tight hug and rested his chin on her head. He'd long since stopped worrying about how his job might affect other people. Essentially, he was alone. He had no children. His extended family was far enough away that it almost felt like they didn't have an opinion on such matters.

Hopefully, Liz wouldn't stress too much about any of this. It would just take a little getting used to. She pulled away and smiled at him, but it was so brief he couldn't tell whether she'd given it to him to make him feel better or if she was actually feeling okay. Then just as quickly, she headed for the large steel building.

Michael blinked, his eyes straining against the change in lighting. The place smelled of hay and manure. He wrinkled his nose and shot Liz a look that procured him a more genuine smile. Yes, she'd get past this small bump in the road. They'd make it out together just fine.

He followed Liz as she wandered from stall to stall. Each animal she visited, she petted and spoke softly to. It wasn't any wonder that she'd chosen a life with animals. Her heart was right there in those stalls with each one, and he could almost see proof that she left a bit of her heart with each and every one of them.

While she was visiting with a rather large pig, his gaze swept through the immediate vicinity and landed on a large black beast of a horse. It was as if his feet weren't his own. They shuffled along the aisle and toward the horse that stood taller than any he'd ever seen. It was magnificent—like a horse from a fairy tale. This animal could have been photographed with a knight in full armor in the saddle and no one would think to question if the picture was taken in the past.

The horse peered down at him as if he were some peasant. He might as well have been. The horse's coat shined—glistened even. His hair had been cared for, brushed enough

that it wasn't matted or tangled. This horse wasn't a workhorse. He was a work of art.

"Amazing, isn't he?"

Michael jumped, then looked over his shoulder at Liz who smiled widely at him. "He isn't for sale. They're entering him in a competition."

"They do that?" Michael stared up at the horse in awe. "What is the competition? Mythical creatures?"

Her quiet laugh sent ripples of pleasure through his body. She grasped his hand and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. "He's won several times. It's like a dog show. You know, where they go around the arena showing off their skills and training. Jack wanted to enter one of those competitions before. But we were always too busy with the ranch to train and prepare a horse. Not to mention, when you're coming up against this guy, you don't really stand a chance."

Michael chuckled. "And I think this guy knows it."

Liz tugged him down the aisle. "Come with me. There's something I want to show you."

He sent one more look toward the beast and hurried after her. She pulled him to a stop in front of an area that was encased by what looked like baby gates. About a dozen puppies romped and crawled all over each other. Their small yips had to be the best part of watching them.

Liz's bright gaze landed on him. "Aren't they just the sweetest?"

His focus swiveled from the puppies to her face and then back to the animals. There was no sign indicating if they were for sale or part of some other kind of event. As far as he could remember, she didn't own any dogs. Or maybe she did and he just wasn't aware. Cedar Hollow Ranch was filled to the brim with horses, cattle, and the occasional stray cat or duck. It was strange they didn't utilize a dog. Weren't dogs supposed to be really helpful when moving herds around? He gestured toward the dogs. "Are you going to get one?"

She laughed again. "What would *I* do with a puppy?"

He lifted a shoulder, his previous thoughts returning.  
“Train it to help at the ranch?”

Liz stared down at the puppies. “I wouldn’t know the first part of doing something like that. Jack would have, though.” Her tone had grown soft, almost sad and his heart ached to do something to take it away from her.

Michael reached into the pen and picked up one that had been standing on its own, wagging its tail as it stared at him. He gazed at the animal’s soulful brown eyes that were almost as irresistible as Liz’s. “Are you a good puppy?”

The small creature yipped and lolled its tongue. Michael smiled and pushed it toward Liz. “You should get this little guy.”

She gaped at him. “What? You’re kidding, right?”

“Train him or don’t. You should have a companion that you can snuggle with when the day is done.”

Her lashes fluttered demurely as she lifted her gaze to him. “Isn’t that what I have *you* for?” The way her mouth moved around those words was nothing short of sensual. What she insinuated was even more so.

Heat swirled and churned within him. “I look forward to being just that for you when you’re ready. But until we get to that point, I’d suggest this as an alternative.” He lowered his voice so only she could hear him. “Just so you know, I don’t foresee you needing to wait very long.”

Gingerly he pushed the puppy into her arms, forcing her to take it. The second she brought the pup to her chest, he knew he’d won. It hadn’t taken much to convince her that she needed him as much as he needed her.

“I don’t have any idea what I’m going to name him.” She hadn’t torn her gaze from the animal for even a second.

There was only one name he could think of and there wasn’t even a contest. Michael rubbed the puppy’s head. “You should name him Jack.”

Liz stilled, then turned her wide, surprised gaze on him. It appeared he'd made her speechless.

Michael chuckled under her chin. "Not that you ever would, but I don't want you to forget him."

Her eyes brimmed with emotion. "That's so sweet, Michael." Still holding the animal against her chest, she reached her other arm around his neck and pulled him close for a brief kiss. "How did I get so lucky to find a guy like you?"

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## *Liz*

*L*iz nuzzled her face into the puppy's fur and exhaled softly. She peeked at Michael as he drove them toward her ranch. He had a serene sort of smile on his face, making him all the more handsome.

What kind of guy would suggest that she name the dog after her late husband?

Michael Donahue.

The small animal in her arms squirmed, attempting to lick her face. She couldn't believe she'd accepted the creature. But it was just what she needed. And Michael had seen that. She couldn't name it Jack, not after what Adeline had told her about possibly naming their first child Jack.

So she'd decided on Lucky.

They crept up the winding road toward her house, just listening to the music that played on the radio. When Michael pulled the car to a stop, he turned toward her. "I had a good time today."

"Me too."

His gaze dipped toward Lucky. "He suits you."

She smiled into the animal's fur. "Thank you, Michael. For insisting I get him. For being a rock when I needed one. For everything." As much as she wished she could find the words to tell him how much she appreciated him, she knew there weren't any that could accurately do so. Liz leaned over the armrest and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you, too. I always have." He whispered the last bit, but those simple words only added to the light feeling she was experiencing. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course." And the day after that and the day after that.

He climbed out of the car and walked around to open her door. Michael held out his hand and helped her to her feet.

There really was no one more perfect for her than he was. If she had to pick one person to be in her life after Jack, it would be him. She couldn't think of one reason why she should hold him at arm's length.

"I want to marry you." She blurted the words before she had a chance to analyze them. A gasp tore from her throat and a flush filled her face. Shoot. Just because she'd fantasized about being with him that way didn't mean he wanted it.

His eyes widened. She couldn't read his expression. For all she knew, he'd only toyed with the idea much like she had.

Okay, he'd alluded to wanting something serious. But back when she was dating, guys would say stuff like that and never mean it. Michael might not be ready despite mentioning his desires. Liz covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head. "I'm sorry. What I meant to say is..."

Words failed her. What could she say to both backtrack her statement but let him know that the door was open? This was so embarrassing. She was a full-grown woman who had already been married before. Couldn't she come up with *something* to say that would make sense?

"What did you mean to say, Liz?" Michael's husky voice broke through her reverie, tearing her from the sturdy tree she was clinging to. He moved closer to her, his brows creased and his mouth pinched in a way that made him appear worried.

She cleared her throat and attempted to hide her face behind Lucky. "For heaven's sake. All I meant was that the feelings I have for you aren't going away any time soon, and if you decide that you'd like this relationship to move in that direction, then I'm open to it," she rasped, her throat dry. What she wouldn't give for a tall glass of ice water.

Not daring to meet his gaze, though becoming acutely aware that he only moved closer and closer to her, she shifted. Her heart pounded harder than she could ever remember. As much as she enjoyed reminiscing about new love and all the sensations involved, this constant thundering behind her ribcage was getting exhausting. It was like she ran a marathon every time she was with him.

Between the heartbeats and the heavy breathing, her body probably thought she needed to get into shape or she wouldn't last.

Michael hooked his finger under her chin, lifting it gently for her to stare into his eyes. "Are you telling me the truth?"

She blinked. "What kind of question is that? Of course I'm telling you the truth. Why would I lie about something like this?" She fought the instinct to be offended. Besides, he should know better than to call her a liar.

He peered at her more deeply, as if he could stare right into her soul to find out for himself if she wasn't being completely up front. She frowned and attempted to pull away from him, but he didn't allow that. "I only ask because you seem to have this assumption that I don't want this just as much as you say you do."

Liz opened her mouth, but no words came out. He was right. She'd gotten inside her own head and made excuses for the things he'd said while she expected him to accept her confession at face value. "Okay, so what does that mean—for us?"

Michael's serious expression broke into a wide smile. He tossed his head back and let out a boisterous laugh. "Did you really just ask me that?"

"I just want to be sure we're on the same page."

"After what we just discussed, I think it's pretty clear."

The blush on her face intensified. "Well, humor me."

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Liz Baker, I'm going to make you my wife."

She blinked. Even though she expected him to say something along those lines, it was still a surprise to hear those words come out of his mouth. It was even more surprising to find that she wasn't anxious one bit about the prospect. It felt like the most natural step for the two of them. They'd been friends for so long that there was no other feasible outcome. "Good." It was the only word she could muster.

Michael laughed again. “Good.”



NEARLY A MONTH WENT past without another conversation regarding their tentative engagement. She wasn’t really engaged.

Or was she?

Regardless, until he was ready to propose officially, she wasn’t about to share their plans with anyone. It was like a sweet little secret that the two of them shared. Michael spent nearly every evening he wasn’t working at her place for family dinner. They went out on the weekends. Really, it was almost like they were already married.

It was Friday and they had plans to go dancing at the country club. Liz glanced at her phone. He was running late—only ten minutes—but she couldn’t remember a single time when he showed up even two minutes late. She stared out the window toward the road, willing his car to come into view and put her heart at ease.

Maybe she should call him. It wasn’t like him to forget. What reason could he have for not calling if he knew he was going to be late? Immediately her head went to a worst-case scenario. What if he’d gotten in a car accident? He could be lying in a ditch somewhere without a phone—so even calling him might not help matters.

She took in several deep breaths, but it didn’t alleviate the way her heart pattered inside. When Jack had died, she hadn’t even considered the possibility that anything was wrong. He had a tendency to be late every so often, too. Jack hadn’t come in from the field for lunch, but he could get caught up and forget to eat.

Liz moved outside and paced her front porch. Michael wouldn’t be able to call if something *had* gone wrong, which was why she was now contemplating calling the sheriff’s office. One of them would know how to reach him.

She gnawed on her lower lip so hard that she drew blood as her pacing grew even more erratic. Fifteen minutes late. He definitely would have called. Something had to be wrong. Liz snatched her phone from her pocket and dialed his office just as headlights turned up the road. She froze, her finger poised, ready to hit the call button.

The vehicle neared and the familiar outline of Michael's car came into view. All worry and fear flew out the window to be replaced by relief. That respite was short-lived. Fury filled her bosom and she charged down the porch steps toward him.

He parked and hopped out. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

"Where on earth were you?"

"I—what? Is everything okay?" Confusion filled his eyes and he glanced at his watch. "I'm only fifteen minutes late."

Her face was flushed and every part of her body ached from the tension that had been coiled tightly inside her. "You were fifteen minutes late and you've *never* been late before." She poked him hard in the chest. "You should have called."

"I'm sure that's not accurate." His voice was quiet and he frowned at her hard expression. "I—my phone died. I'm sorry, Liz. I didn't think I'd be late."

She threw her hands into the air and started pacing. "This isn't about you not showing up on time."

"It's not? But it sounds like—"

Liz whirled around and faced him. "I thought you were *dead*."

"*Dead?*" He opened his mouth, closed it, then pressed his lips together. He probably thought she was crazy, which only fueled her frustration.

How could she explain to him why this was such a big deal? Anything she told him would probably sound ridiculous. Even she could hear it a little in the words that came from her lips. She shut her eyes tight against the memories that flooded her mind. It was impossible to get him to understand when she was the only one who knew what it felt like.

Liz lowered her voice, making sure to use every ounce of self-control she was capable of. “Do you realize what it was like to be told *Jack* was dead?”

“Liz, surely this isn’t quite the same—”

She cut him off. “I’d waited for *him* to come home. *He* was late, too.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes. He moved toward her, and in seconds, he’d enveloped her in a tight hug.

Her breaths came out in short, sharp spurts. The buried emotions that had been dredged to the surface overwhelmed her. None of this made any sense. Michael wasn’t Jack. They didn’t have the same job. She wasn’t doomed to experience the same thing over and over.

But she couldn’t deny the fear that had gripped her heart in a vise.

Michael’s embrace grew tighter and he rested his chin on her head. His hands moved up and down, the motion soothing.

Her heart rate slowed, as did her breathing, and instead of the fiery emotions that had consumed her moments ago, she was instead filled with grief and embarrassment. Michael made an attempt to pull back, but she kept her arms wrapped around his back, preventing him from getting a look at her.

Not yet.

True to Michael-fashion, he didn’t push her.

Liz rubbed her face against his shoulder, then finally took a deep breath and stepped back. “I’m sorry.”

He let out a strained chuckle as he lifted her chin so he might get a better look at her face. His rough thumb brushed at her cheeks, though there were no tears. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “I seriously overreacted.”

Michael shook his head. “I get it. I should have made sure to call you when I realized I might be late.”

Liz peered at him, completely at a loss for words. It couldn't be possible to find a guy who saw her in this state of mind and was still interested in her. Neither one of them had any need for a relationship at this point in their lives, save for the companionship.

A niggling thought crept into her mind. No one was that perfect. He had to be hiding something. It probably wasn't anything big, but it was inevitable that she'd figure it out. The question was if that something was worth terminating a relationship over.

Forcing a smile, she shrugged off that strange, cold feeling. She couldn't listen to her doubts right now. She'd just allowed herself to relive the trauma of Jack's death. Her eyes widened as realization hit her over the head. Maybe it wasn't Michael who was hiding something.

It was her.

She was hiding just how much losing Jack had affected her.

Michael studied her, concern etched on his lined face. "Are you okay? Do you still want to go dancing tonight or would you rather stay in?"

She hated just how much his second offer sounded so good. It would be easy to curl up on the couch with a warm blanket and read a book that Jack had secretly enjoyed. But she couldn't keep holding herself back.

It was time to get back into the saddle, in a manner of speaking. "I'm fine. Let's stick with our plans."

His brows creased. The way his features now appeared drawn and more strained only increased the guilt she carried over her outburst.

Liz let out a sigh and gave him a wide smile. "Honestly, we can do whatever you'd like to do. As long as I'm spending time with you, I'm happy."

His face broke into a soft smile and he leaned down to press a firm kiss to her lips. When he pulled back, that worry

didn't seem as apparent. "I couldn't have said it better myself."



## *Michael*

*M*ichael took a quick look out of the corner of his eye in Liz's direction. The ride to the country club had been quiet but not as strained as he would have expected, given their most recent spat.

She'd come out of left field with her anger, and he had honestly not thought that his being a few minutes late would trigger her.

If being slightly late was enough to elicit her anxieties, then he couldn't help but wonder what else might have the same effect.

He'd never been the type of guy who was willing to live his life on the edge. He hated the feeling of something bad being right around the corner, waiting for him and ready to pounce. The irony of what it meant to be in law enforcement wasn't lost on him. Sometimes he did have to worry about what might be lurking in the shadows.

But he refused to let that be something he had to deal with in the safety of his own home and with the people he loved.

Michael took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as they pulled into the country club's parking lot. His hands gripped the steering wheel like a snake wrapped around its prey. He was too old and set in his ways to make changes to himself. But if it meant having Liz by his side, he might have to figure something out.

No, not *might*.

*Would*.

He would figure something out because he'd been waiting for her for the better part of his lifetime. She had baggage, but so did he.

Michael put the car into park and immediately climbed out and walked around to open her door. She smiled at him, and he

smiled back. The grief was still there, behind her eyes like a flickering light of a candle that had been placed in a window.

That pain made his heart ache. Her wounds were still so new. He understood them better than anyone. But Jack had been ripped out of her life without notice. At least he'd had the chance to tell Ellen goodbye. Liz hadn't been given that privilege.

He reached for her hand, slipping his fingers between hers and holding her tight. His other hand came around and covered their clasped ones. She looked up at him, her features warm and worth every second of unease he'd felt in their car ride.

It wasn't just her looks, though Liz had the countenance of an absolute angel. She was the kind of woman people came to when they needed help or support. Where some people seemed to appear in a constant state of irritation, Liz was welcoming.

At the same time, she wasn't a pushover. If he got caught doing something wrong, he wouldn't want to be anywhere near her when she found out. Even after raising six boys, she was exactly the kind of woman he wanted to continue to grow old with, and he had her. It'd be silly to start second-guessing their relationship now.

He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently. "I'm always going to be here for you, Liz. I want you to know that."

She didn't reply right away. They took a few steps, getting closer to the country club's entrance until she stopped and faced him. "I don't want you to promise me that."

"What?"

It was statements like these that made it difficult to be in a relationship with this woman. But she'd proven herself to find logic in even some of the strangest conversations they'd shared.

"As much as I would love to believe that statement, I can't."

He shook his head. "Do you even hear yourself?"

She nodded, holding both of his hands in hers. “For the first time, I’m seeing clearly. I know you won’t always be here for me because life is fragile. You could die driving your car down the highway and get hit by a semi from behind. You could choke on a chicken bone and die that way. You could—”

Michael held up a hand. “As much as I’d love to hear all of the different ways I could die, I’d prefer you get to the point.”

She gave him a sheepish smile. “I simply don’t want you telling me you’re always going to be here when you won’t.”

“First of all, it’s a saying. Of course when I say *always*, it’s a generalization. Second, I want you to know I’ll fight tooth and nail to make sure I do everything in my power to bring that statement to fruition.”

“But if it’s all the same to you,” she said and her eyes darted away momentarily, “I’d rather not pull unwanted attention to the fact that our lives are so unstable. At least for now.” She met his gaze and let out a sigh. “I’m sorry. You must really be thinking that—”

Michael placed his finger on her lips. “What I’m thinking is that you’re worth every extra moment and silly request. I’m not going to back down. You might as well get used to me hanging around.” His eyes traced around every smile line, imperfection, and piece of her until they found her gaze once more. “I’m happy when I’m with you, Liz. We’ve already settled that this isn’t just some passing fancy. I plan on keeping everything we’ve found together.”

His eyes shifted to her lips, then bounced back to her eyes. A small flicker of heat started in his stomach. He needed her to know how serious he was. She should feel safe with him, confident. True, there was always the possibility that something could happen to him—or her for that matter—but there was one thing he knew for certain.

“Liz, nothing would make me happier than taking you to a courthouse right now and making you my wife.”

Her eyes widened and she blinked a few times. The shock was written all over her face. But whether it was due to the

statement itself or the timing, he couldn't be certain. Liz let out a small laugh and pulled away from him so he no longer touched her face. "Don't say something just for the sake of saying it. You're teasing me." She glanced up at him. "Aren't you?"

He shook his head and put his hands on her shoulders, not caring about the people who were coming and going around them. "When you love someone as much as I love you, you'll do whatever it takes to keep them close. I can't explain it, but there's something growing in here..." He brought his fist to his chest. "...that is telling me I need to make it clear what you mean to me. I can't lose you, Liz."

Her brows pulled together and she let out another strained laugh. "You're kidding."

Michael blew out a harsh breath. "Why can't you see that you're still just as important to me as you were when we were kids? What do I have to do to prove to you that I'm not going anywhere? Want me to call up Judge McClane? 'Cuz I'll do it. Don't tempt me."

The corners of her mouth quirked up. "You're serious." There was hesitation in her voice, but also something else. A hint of recklessness, maybe?

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close against him. "I couldn't be more serious if my life depended on it." Pulling out his phone with his other hand, he wiggled it at her. "I have him in my contacts. We could make this official right now."

She pushed at his chest, her gaze darting anywhere but at his face. "I don't know how we even got on this topic. It's ridiculous. We're not some young couple in the throes of love."

"Aren't we?"

Her eyes shot to meet his and there they settled.

"You're right on one thing. We're not young anymore. Each of us has done this before. That gives us a definite advantage. We know what to expect in a relationship. As far as

I'm concerned, there's no risk. I want you, Liz. More than I want anything. At this point in my life, you are the one thing that makes sense."

"Who could argue with that?" she whispered.

He smirked at her as he activated his phone's screen, lighting it up. "What do you say, Liz? Will you marry me? Tonight?" Michael half-expected that she'd pull away from him and brush him off. He wouldn't blame her. But at this moment, he prayed she wouldn't. It took everything inside him to keep his hands from shaking, to remain steady. It was strange that his nerves were getting to him now. Maybe that was something that would continue to happen no matter his age.

Liz studied him, drawing out this moment far longer than was comfortable. "You realize this is crazy, right?" she murmured.

"Love is crazy sometimes," he responded.

"We haven't even discussed the logistics of it. Where we would live. How our finances would be worked out. Expectations..."

Of course she would be the logical one—something more he loved about her. The hope and excitement in his chest wavered. And of course she was right. They couldn't just go to Judge McClane and ask the man to marry them. It was nearing nine at night. The man was fifteen years older than the two of them. He was probably asleep already. Slowly, his hand lowered.

"Okay."

That one word was all it took to make him choke on literally nothing. His breath? The lump in his throat he'd been attempting to swallow? He coughed and peered at her. "Did you just say—"

"Yes, Michael," she whispered as her hand came up to touch his cheek. "There are hundreds of reasons I should talk some sense into you—into myself." She shook her head as her smile widened. "But we're at a stage in our lives where all we

need is one *good* reason to jump in with both feet. I love you, too. More than I thought was possible after Jack.” She swallowed and pressed her lips together, emotion thick in her voice. “I can’t think of any situation where this relationship we have wouldn’t work. We’ve been dating for several months and, yes, I know there’re some things I need to work on.” Her face flushed prettily. “But I know it will be so much easier with you by my side.”

The pounding in his chest grew more haggard and his knees buckled momentarily. “This is really happening.”

“Only if you want it to.”

Michael laughed. “More than anything.” He swept low and covered her mouth with his, stealing a deep and sensual kiss. For the most part, he’d held back. He didn’t want Liz to fret or feel guilty over Jack. He’d experienced similar emotions when he started dating again after Ellen had passed.

And Liz’s love story with her first husband had been one for the books. He hadn’t expected any of this to happen as quickly as it had. It almost didn’t feel real.

His lips roved over hers, promising her that there was more to come. That he could make her happy. But most of all, that he’d never do anything that would hurt her. When he pulled back, she gasped, her breathing heavy. His heart thundered erratically, his blood pulsating through his body with a dangerous roar. He pressed his forehead against hers, allowing every part of him to settle.

Liz’s breath mingled with his and she brought her hand up to the side of his face. Her feathery touch brushed at the hair near his temple. Chills swept through his body, and all he could think about was pulling her in for another one of those kisses. But they had more important things to do.

He grabbed her hand and strode down the steps of the country club. She shuffled after him, her frantic laugh making him smile.

“Michael! Wait!”

Spinning, he faced her, his heart dropping into his stomach. Was she already reconsidering? Doggone it, he knew he should have waited. Backtracking now only made his chest ache like he'd been thrown against a stone wall. He couldn't read her eyes. She didn't *appear* as though she wasn't ready to go through their spontaneous nuptials.

"I know we don't *need* witnesses, but wouldn't you like some?"

The corners of his mouth twitched and lifted into a grin. "Yes," he drawled. "Who do you have in mind?"

"You call the judge, and I'll make my own calls."

Together they continued toward his car. This was happening. It was actually happening. Before the evening was up, Liz Baker would be his.



MICHAEL FACED LIZ, his chest swelling with love and pride. Her hands were in his, and they stood in front of Judge McClane in his living room. The older man was less grumpy than he'd anticipated. Michael liked to assume that it was due to the nature of the moment. Two members of the community were coming together in love and devotion. Liz smiled brightly in front of him, a stark contrast to the fear she'd expressed mere hours ago.

Behind her, Adeline met his gaze with a grin and a nod. Sean was out of his eye line, but he'd arrived with Adeline just as thrilled to be part of the occasion. The judge was speaking, but all he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears. It was like he had left his body and was floating overhead somewhere, watching the wedding take place.

As on edge as he was, there was also a calming sort of peace. This was where his life had been leading him. Ellen was taken far too soon, but if he hadn't experienced her love and her loss, he wouldn't have been prepared for when Liz became a possibility. It was all so surreal.

Liz squeezed his hands just as the judge asked him the question he'd been waiting for.

Michael squeezed back. "I do," he said firmly. The judge turned to Liz and repeated the question. He held his breath. This was it. Yes, they'd managed to find a clerk who'd been able to wrestle up the necessary forms. Yes, they'd both been able to sign the documents, and there was no waiting period. But here, right here, she could change her mind.

"I do."

His heart soared. Without waiting for the judge to make it official, he swept her into his arms and pressed a firm kiss to her lips. "I love you so much," he murmured next to her ear.

"I love you too, Michael." Those words coming from her mouth were music to his ears.

Cheers erupted around them from the three other people in the room. Adeline swooped in and gave Liz a tight hug. Sean shook his hand, then pulled him in for a hug with a pat on the back. When they pulled back, they stared at each other. "Welcome to the family, Sheriff."

The realization of what he'd just done and how it affected this young man flooded his mind. Sean had lost a father only a couple years ago. Now his mother was married to someone new. Michael wasn't under any assumption that Sean would start treating him like a son would treat a father. He assumed they'd be like they always were.

And yet something small grew inside him. This was the closest he'd ever get to having children. Liz's kids were full-grown, but they were still children in their own right. He'd just have to see how their family dynamics progressed. He turned and gravitated toward Liz who was now facing him. Her cheeks were flushed and she looked genuinely happy.

Adeline and Sean moved across the room to say goodbye to the judge before leaving.

Liz placed her hands on her cheeks and whispered, "I can't believe we just did that." She set wide eyes on him. "I'm supposed to be the reasonable one in the family."

“Who says?” He chuckled and pulled her close again.

“I’m the head of the household.”

Michael jerked his chin in Sean’s direction as the young man left the room. “I think he can handle that role, now.”

She laughed. “But seriously. How am I going to tell everyone else?”

He shrugged. “Maybe you won’t have to. Because I don’t know about you, but I can’t see Sean or Adeline keeping this a secret.”

Liz laughed louder. “I think you may be right.”



## *Liz*

*L*iz climbed out of bed as the dim sunlight drifted into the bedroom. She gazed down at Michael. Bliss. That's what this was. Pure, unadulterated happiness. She couldn't believe that she'd allowed herself to stand in her way for so long.

The fact that she'd forced herself to only view Michael as just a friend was laughable now. He was the one thing she'd been missing from her life since Jack passed. It was just disappointing that it had taken her so long to get to that realization.

She leaned over and brushed some of his hair from his face. He continued to sleep soundly—more so than Jack ever had. But then Jack was always up with the sun. Michael's angled face was frozen in an expression of peaceful slumber, and she wasn't about to pull him from what seemed to be a happy dream.

Michael's shirt was strewn on the edge of the bed and she lifted it from its place. Bringing it to her nose, she breathed in deeply. His scent filled her, making her stomach tighten. Without hesitation, she slipped her arms into it and buttoned it up over her t-shirt.

Liz slipped from his bedroom and into the main part of his house. She'd only been here a handful of times. Even while they were dating, they'd spent more time at the ranch than here in town. Most of the windows were covered by closed blinds, so the house was dark and quiet as she moved throughout it.

It was strange to be here in this manner. Ellen had been gone for so long that there wasn't much sign of her. Pictures still hung on the walls, wedding pictures and vacations they'd taken. She traced a frame with soft fingertips as she stared at Michael and Ellen's happy faces on the day they'd gotten married.

Her focus shifted to more images as she moved around the room. There were awards from his career and various works of art that were likely picked by his late wife. Despite the house having a bachelor feel, Ellen was definitely an influence, but not so much that she felt she shouldn't be there.

Michael had been alone for so long. She didn't know how he'd managed to survive that on top of losing his love. He didn't have any children to keep him preoccupied.

Her gaze landed on a bookshelf that was partially hidden in the corner of the room. It wasn't something she'd ever noticed when she'd visited before. As if against her will, her feet shuffled toward it. Michael had alluded to the fact that he was interested in reading. This was the only indication that what he said was true.

On the shelf were various classic novels. Yes, there were those by Dickens, Fitzgerald, and Orwell. But what caught her attention was that he had some by Austen and the Bronte sisters. With trembling fingers, she pulled out a familiar book. She ran her hand over the worn cover of *Wuthering Heights*.

Jack had given her a copy of this when they were engaged. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her copy. Funny that Michael had a similar edition. She flipped the book over and found a water spot where the cover had warped.

Her heart beat a little faster, ticking up when she turned the book over once more to stare at the cover. It couldn't be. Her finger slipped under the cover and she opened it to reveal the title page with Jack's familiar handwriting.

*My love for you resembles the eternal rocks beneath.*

"Jack knew I liked classics."

Liz gasped and spun around to find Michael leaning against the wall of the hallway that led to his room. His brows were creased as he stared at the book in her hands, then lifted to meet her gaze. "There was one time when we got into a—discussion—if you could call it that." His lips twitched. "It

was more like he refused to let me think that only men wrote good classics.”

He pushed away from the wall and moved toward her, clad in only a pair of flannel pajama pants. Michael reached for the book and turned it over in his hands. “This was the last one he lent to me before...” His gaze cut to hers and he handed the book back to her. “There is no one that man loved more than you. The sun rose and set with you.” He reached out and traced his hand along her jawline. “I don’t blame him.”

His touch sent tingles of thrill through her. How could she have been so lucky to find a man who wasn’t trying to replace Jack? Not only had he demonstrated it in the way he supported her and comforted her, but in the way he talked about Jack with reverence. She looked down at the book in her hands. “I had no idea you guys were as close as you were.”

Michael lifted a shoulder. “I wouldn’t say we were *close*, but we had a pretty good friendship.”

“And you were never—jealous?” It wasn’t something she’d even considered until this moment.

He chuckled as he took the book from her hands and placed it back on the shelf. Then he took her hand and led her to the couch. He sat and pulled her beside him. “Maybe when we were young there might have been some jealousy.” He lifted her hand and kissed it, then moved her sleeve so he could trail additional kisses up her arm until he reached the underside of her elbow. “We each shared our lives with other people—Jack and Ellen. They helped mold us into who we are today. I’d like to look at it this way. He had his turn. God knew you needed him in your life. Just like I needed Ellen. But now we get a second chance at happiness. And I’ll never squander this opportunity.”

She sucked in a sharp breath and shivered. “I like that way of looking at things.”

“I thought you might.” He cupped his hands on either side of her face and pressed another kiss to her lips. “I still can’t believe it. I can finally call you mine.”

Liz leaned in to kiss him again. “Well, believe it, because there’s no going back now.” She ran her fingers through his mussed hair. “But I suppose it might make it more believable if we tell everyone. What do you say? Dinner at my place tonight?”

His eyes narrowed and his happy expression faltered.

“What?”

Michael gestured around the room. “We’re married, Liz. This isn’t *my* place anymore. Everything I have is yours.”

Her eyes widened as the realization of what she’d said washed over her. “I didn’t mean—”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t worry about it. This is still new.”

Liz wrapped her arms around his neck. “Well, just so we’re clear, what I have is yours too.”

Michael pulled her closer, settling her into his lap before planting another deep kiss on her that made her tingle all the way down to her toes. If this moment was frozen in time, she could be happy stuck here forever—being loved by Michael.

But this was real life and they had things to do.

Liz pulled back and traced a finger across his chest. “As much as I’d love to spend the day sitting here, we should get something to eat and maybe we could head to town before we call everyone for dinner later.”

He groaned, but the smile on his face still warmed her.

She dragged herself from his embrace and pulled him to his feet. “I make a killer french toast.”

Michael’s hand held tightly to hers as they moved to the kitchen. Each stolen glance only confirmed she’d made the right decision last night. This was where she was meant to be.



LIZ MET Michael's eyes from across the long table. He grinned and she looked away. It was strange to be in this room with her family and carrying this secret. Each and every one of her sons except Sean had no clue about her new marital status. It wasn't that she was concerned about their reaction. It was more that she didn't quite feel ready to share something that seemed so special.

And yet, at the same time, she wanted to scream it from the rooftops.

Adeline glanced from Liz to Michael and back once more. Then a sigh escaped her lips and she put her fork down a little too forcefully. "Come on, Liz. I can barely take it. I don't know how on earth you can keep this from everyone."

All eyes swung to Adeline with varying degrees of shock before they bounced to Liz. She picked up her napkin and dabbed at her mouth. "I would have thought Sean was the one who would bring it up first."

The general feeling of the room shifted from shock to confusion as everyone but Adeline and Michael glanced in Sean's direction.

Her son shrugged and took a bite of his steak. He chewed almost thoughtfully. "I've had my share of messing up secrets." He was doing his best at holding back a smile as he shot a pointed look at Michael. "After thinking it over, I realized something. Personally, I think you did this all wrong anyway. You should have come to us—and you know—asked the right way."

Adeline dug her elbow into his side and he jumped.

Brock groaned. "Okay. Enough's enough. We get it. Something happened last night between Mom and the sheriff. So tell us already."

Piper's eyes widened and she sat straighter in her seat. "You're *engaged*. That has to be it with all the cryptic talk and the way they keep looking at each other."

"Wrong," Adeline muttered though her smile betrayed her.

Michael stood and placed both hands on the table. “Your mother and I got married last night.”

The entire room went so still they could have heard a feather land on the floor. Everyone now looked in her direction as if they’d be able to confirm Michael’s statement without her saying a word.

Then the room burst into sound. Everyone spoke at once, and excited flurries of sound enveloped her. Not one person appeared upset. On the contrary, everyone in that room had a smile on their face. She locked eyes with Michael, her happiness overflowing and flooding every part of her. “It’s true.”

The voices settled.

“Well, it’s about time,” Finn offered from his seat beside her. He reached out and grasped her hand. “We want you to be happy, too.”

“I *was* happy—” Her eyes shot to meet Michael’s. “But it’s nice to share that happiness with someone again.” She met each one’s gaze for a moment, hoping that her next statement would sink in. “My happiness stems from my family. And you are all a part of that. I don’t know what I would do without any of you.”

There were varying degrees of croons and sighs. “And now Michael gets to have something he’s never had.”

His brows furrowed but only for a moment. The curiosity that emanated from him was short-lived as she continued.

“He gets to be a part of this family, too.”

Everyone in the room glanced at Michael and nodded their assent. Jess rose from her seat and moved over to him, drawing him into a tight hug. Out of everyone in that room, theirs was probably the closest relationship shared. It likely had something to do with the time they spent together when she’d been hunted by those drug dealers.

Liz didn’t miss the emotion written on every line of Michael’s face. He gave her a soft smile and mouthed the words, “thank you.”

It was even more clear in this moment, while everyone rose and moved to congratulate Michael or herself, that this union was meant to be. Every sign pointed to it.

Once dinner was cleaned up, she found herself walking the property with her new husband by her side. Twenty-four hours ago, she was angry with him for something that seemed trivial. But he'd known how to help her through it. If someone had told her at that moment that they would have shifted gears and gotten married, she would have laughed in their face.

Michael's thumb trailed over her knuckles back and forth. She covered their hands with her free one and leaned into him. "So what's the plan?"

"What do you mean?" he murmured into her hair.

"What's next? We're married."

"Yes, we are." The smile in his voice started a fresh wave of chills.

"And..."

"And..."

"*Michael!*"

He laughed. "Okay. Let's start with the obvious. Where are we going to live?"

Her heart skipped. "I like the sound of that."

"I didn't even say anything."

"*We.* I like it." She peered up at him.

Michael slowed and faced her. "Me too." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "What do you think? Which one of *our* places should we live at?"

She bit back a smile at his question. "I don't know. This one is pretty crowded." Liz gestured toward the ranch house. "I love spending time with my family, but right now I'd rather spend time with you—alone."

"I know what you mean," he said with a husky voice. "So maybe we keep both options available. Besides, sometimes I

might need to stay close to town—with my job.”

His job.

Right.

Michael was the sheriff, which meant he was needed for some of the riskier encounters in town. She swallowed and nodded. “That makes sense,” she hedged.

“What’s the matter?”

Liz rolled her lips between her teeth. “It’s just...” She shook her head. How could she ask him to reconsider his job? He wouldn’t. Of course he wouldn’t. He’d worked too hard to be where he was.

“Liz, talk to me. We’re partners now. You can tell me anything.”

She sighed. “It’s silly.”

He dipped his head, meeting her eyes with a steady gaze that told her he wouldn’t budge until she told him what was on her mind.

“I was just thinking... I don’t like the idea of you being called to dangerous situations.” Now that the words were out of her mouth, she knew what would happen. He’d try to convince her that his job was as safe as it got and that she didn’t have anything to worry about. Maybe that’s all she needed to feel a little more confident. He was so good at that sort of thing.

His brows furrowed. “There’s nothing I can do about that, Liz.”

Michael’s words were like a slap in her face. She blinked, waiting, hoping he would elaborate in a way that would make this all better somehow.

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, we’ve discussed this a little already. My job is about as safe as it can get considering—”

“Considering that you have to carry a gun.”

He chuckled. “Jack carried a gun, Liz.”

“Yeah. For bears and wolves, not other gun-wielding maniacs.” She hated the way her voice sounded strained. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she closed her eyes briefly. “I just—please just—” Her eyes opened and flew to meet his. “Please be careful.”

Michael didn’t even hesitate. “I promise.”



## *Michael*

The following morning, Michael walked into the police station on a literal high. He had this secret that only his family knew.

### *Family.*

That's what they were now. He had a full-blown family, and it had happened in a matter of hours. Six sons and six daughters. And two grandchildren with one on the way.

It's a good thing he'd always wanted a large family. Because having all of this thrown at him would have been a lot to handle. He couldn't wait to see Liz's—and his—family continue to grow. As much as he tried to wipe the smile from his face, he couldn't.

The second he rounded the corner to his office, he was met with applause. His colleagues were smiling, cheering, even catcalling. He waved at them dismissively. "Alright. Alright. Get back to work." It was nice to know that his work family approved, not to mention he didn't have to make some grand announcement. He'd have to remind himself to thank whoever leaked the information.

Deputy Anderson hurried to his side with a folder. He held it out to Michael and smiled broadly. "You remember those instances of vandalism we had to deal with a few months ago?"

Michael accepted the folder and flipped through it. "Yes."

"I think I've figured it out."

He glanced at his deputy. "Oh?"

Anderson nodded. "In the next town over, there's been more hits, but this time it's worse. They've killed some cattle."

Michael froze. "What?"

"Cattle. The rancher found—"

"I heard you. Where did this happen?"

“At the ranch just north of Slate Rock Ranch.”

His brows furrowed. The northern border of the Callahan’s property. “Wolfstone?”

Anderson nodded. “I’ve been in communication with the local sheriff over there and they think they have some leads. A witness says they think they got a license plate number.”

“That’s great.” He clapped Anderson on the back. “We’ll pull up their information, then put a team together to bring them in.”

“It’s not that easy,” he hedged. “We already pulled up their information and they’re not local.”

Michael’s shoulders drooped. “Of course they aren’t. Because what local would be stupid enough to kill a couple cattle when the owners could shoot them on the spot?”

“We think they’re a bunch of college kids who keep coming out this way to dare each other to break the law.” Anderson shifted and pointed at the paperwork in the folder. “With all the information we’ve been gathering, we’ve noticed they aren’t going far from this location. I’ve looked it up, sir. It’s a home owned by someone out of state. They use it as an Airbnb.”

Michael’s jaw tightened, ticking back and forth. “I’m beginning to feel you have a plan.”

Anderson nodded. “I thought we’d put a notice out about the license plate, and if they come to town, we can grab them. But we should also have someone take regular drives by that property. It’s going to keep happening if we don’t do something about it.”

He nodded. The deputy was right. Currently, their town wasn’t the target of anything more than some belligerent criminals. It wasn’t like Liz would have to worry about him bringing in a couple kids. Michael held the document out to Anderson. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. It’s a solid plan. Keep me apprised of the situation.”

“Yes, sir.”

The workday dragged on worse than any day he could remember. His thoughts continued to shift to Liz and their conversation the other night. For some strange reason, he couldn't get it out of his mind. It was ridiculous, to be sure. He'd been working for the sheriff's department since he'd graduated from high school. There was more danger working as a manufacturer or in an industrial park.

Her concerned features wouldn't leave him alone, and it got to a point where his head ached from trying to ignore her worries. The niggling thought that she might have a point taunted him. But everything he'd said to her was correct.

In the last ten years, the majority of concerning calls had occurred within the last three. It was a fluke. He was trained. He had a great set of deputies. And Copper Creek was still a small town with honest folk.

The paperwork on his desk continued to build due to his lack of focus and the fact that people kept putting files in front of him. He wasn't getting anything done here. It would be better to make his way home and clear his head.

Michael rose from his chair and stacked the files in a neat pile before grabbing his jacket and heading out the door. Tomorrow would be a new start, and he'd be refreshed and ready for it. One *off* day didn't mean he couldn't do his job.

He smiled and nodded to those he passed as he moved through the building and headed out to his car. The sun shone down on him, making his car uncomfortably warm but giving him something else to think about other than the work he hadn't completed and the words Liz had said.

Michael came up behind a car that was going about ten miles under the speed limit. He was just about to pass it when they swerved a little over the line into the other lane and then back.

He sighed. It was barely after two in the afternoon. No one should be that drunk this early. His eyes darted to the plate and an unsettled feeling filled his chest. He typed it into his computer and looked it up. It was a Colorado Springs plate.

Where did Anderson say the criminals were from? Out of town. Doggone it; he should have paid better attention.

Michael turned on his lights and pressed his alarm briefly. Almost immediately, the car pulled to the side of the road.

He peered out his window, but the tinting in the car was too dark to be able to see how many people might be in the vehicle. Pulling his radio from the dash, he pressed the button. “I’ve got a traffic stop on the highway between mile marker 41 and 42.”

The radio crackled, but there was no response. He waited for a few moments and then the voice came through. “Will you need backup?”

He hesitated. Normally he would have told them not to worry about it. But there was no telling who was behind the wheel and how drunk they might be. “Yeah. Send someone out.”

“You got it.”

Michael stared at the car, wishing not for the first time that he had X-ray vision. He put the radio back and opened his door. His hand hovered on his gun after he undid the restraint. With careful steps, he approached the driver’s door. If this turned out to be one of those miscreants who was responsible for all the trouble going on in town, he didn’t know what he would do. He definitely wouldn’t tell Liz. If she found out that he’d tried to speak to whoever it was alone, she’d be livid. His heart beat a little faster and his hand twitched. He should just hang back and see when his backup would arrive. But then they might take off.

He pressed forward until he reached the side of the car. The window rolled down and a smiling woman with red cheeks met his gaze. She fidgeted in her seat and her hands gripped the steering wheel like she was terrified he was going to arrest her right then and there.

“I’m so sorry, officer. I dropped my phone and couldn’t reach it. I know I shouldn’t have tried to get it while driving.

I'm just—so embarrassed.” Her voice shook and she glanced in her rearview mirror before lifting her eyes to meet his.

All the tension in his neck, shoulders, and torso released and he let out a deep, pent-up breath. This was why he shouldn’t have given what Liz said a second thought. He’d let her get into his head and he wasn’t his best self. A few weeks ago, he wouldn’t have even been concerned about approaching this vehicle. Now, he was worried that something would happen.

His hand dropped to his side and he offered her a smile. “Unfortunately, distracted driving is going to result in a ticket.” Michael dipped his head so he could get a better view of her back seat, surprised to find two young men in the back. They sat perfectly still, silent. Odd.

She dropped her gaze. “I know. I’m so sorry.” The scarlet coloring on her face deepened and she nearly looked like a ripe cherry. “I was just waiting for a call from my sister. She’s going to have her baby soon and she doesn’t have anyone to help her. I’m supposed to be her support at the hospital and—”

He held up his hand. “You could have seriously hurt someone if they’d been driving in the oncoming lane. I’m going to need your license and registration.”

She nodded and a tear slipped down her cheek. “I’m—I’m sorry.” She repeated as she reached across to her glovebox. Her hand shook when she held them out to him.

Michael grasped them, his hand brushing against hers. She flinched. His eyes narrowed and he looked back at the men seated behind her. His eyes met hers once more. “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to come with me.”

Relief flooded her expression and she nodded, her hands reaching for the door, but then one of the men grabbed her shoulder. “You don’t have to do anything he says, Sarah. You’re not under arrest.”

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then looked up at him and shook her head. “He’s r—right.”

“Actually, due to the way you were swerving back there, I’m of the opinion you might be under the influence. I’m going to have to ask you to exit the vehicle.”

Her eyes widened and she glanced at the mirror again. Tension hung in the air. It was clear these men didn’t want her out, and she didn’t want to be anywhere near them. Michael pulled the door open and gestured for her to climb out.

It only took moments. Flashes of everything occurred in quick succession.

The second Sarah was out of the car, she scrambled, darting across the street and into the field. The rear door banged open, knocking Michael back a few steps. He reached for his gun, but the man who stepped from the car had one already cocked and loaded.

He got off three wild shots before he jumped into the driver’s seat and sped off. Michael jumped backward to avoid being run over, then pointed his weapon at the speeding car but didn’t fire. Where was his backup?

Michael took a quick look in the direction Sarah had escaped, but he couldn’t see her anywhere. The car disappeared around a bend in the road. He holstered his weapon before charging across the street.

The fence was made with wooden posts and two strands of barbed wire. The space between each strand was wide enough for a small person to slip through, and a tiny piece of fabric was caught on one of the barbs. He paused at the fence and his eyes narrowed as his focus raked across the field.

“Sarah,” he hollered, “I’m not going to hurt you. But I’m going to need you to come with me.”

His heart was still pounding ferociously and there was a strange kind of feeling spreading through his arm. Something both hot and cold.

Michael glanced down at it and let out a curse. Liz might actually kill him.

“Sarah,” he roared louder this time, just as another police car arrived. “I can’t come in there to get you, but I can send

one of my guys after you.”

A breathless Deputy Anderson arrived at his side. “What’s going on... Sir! You’re bleeding.”

“Yeah.” Michael grunted, his hand covering the wound. “There’s a girl in there. She’s either one of them, or she’s a victim, but she’s refusing to come out.”

Anderson dragged his attention to the field. “Are you sure?”

Michael cursed again. “Of course I’m sure. I saw her go in there. Now are you going to get in there and find her? Or am I?”

“I don’t think you’re in any condition—”

“Exactly,” Michael growled.

“Shouldn’t we call an ambulance?”

Michael spun on his heel and stomped toward his car. “Don’t you dare. I don’t need the whole town knowing I got shot before my bride finds out and has a chance to put me out of my misery first. Just find the girl and bring her back to the station.” He moved past another officer who ran toward Anderson.

The second he got in the car, he tore at his sleeve, revealing the wound on his upper arm. Luckily, the bullet hadn’t penetrated anything. It had been a graze, but it was still bleeding more than he would have liked. He muttered another expletive as he shoved his car into drive and turned around to head back to town. He’d have to notify the sheriff in the next county over to keep an eye out for that car.

There was no way Liz wouldn’t find out about this. Between the town they lived in and the way the nurses at the local hospital gossiped, she’d know before he made it home.

**25**

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## *Liz*

*L*iz smiled at Ingrid as the woman placed some new painting supplies into the bag. Two women entered the store, their faces red and excited as they darted right for Ingrid.

Daphne Pratt made it to the counter first. She placed both palms on the surface, eyes wide and breaths heavy. “Ingrid! I was just at the emergency room with my son, and you’ll never guess who I saw there.”

Liz fought the instinct to roll her eyes. More gossip. That was one thing she would miss about living at the ranch. There she didn’t have to be privy to everyone speculating on what did or didn’t happen around town.

Ingrid paused ringing up the supplies that were in front of her. “Who?”

Gritting her teeth, Liz attempted a sweet smile. “Ingrid, dear, I’m in a bit of a rush.”

The woman ignored her.

Daphne took a deep breath and let out a string of words that made Liz’s blood run absolutely ice cold. “The sheriff was shot.”

The blood drained from Liz’s face and her knees buckled. She had to hold onto the counter with both hands as Daphne’s words sounded hollow and far away.

“There was a lot of blood—enough that one of the doctors wanted him to go to the hospital in the city, but he refused...”

“He’s such a strong man...”

“... I wonder what happened...”

“Stop it!” Liz screeched.

All three women whirled around to face her as if they hadn’t even realized she was there and listening.

Ingrid gasped and her hand covered her mouth. “Liz, I’m so sorry. I completely forgot that you are dating—”

“We’re *married*,” she bit out.

All three women stared at her with varying degrees of shock and maybe with a hint of pity.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. They didn’t end up sending him to —” Daphne started.

Liz didn’t let her finish her sentence. She left her wares on the counter, grabbed her purse and headed out of the store. Her head pounded, but it was nothing compared to the drum solo her heart was doing. She was lightheaded to the point she probably shouldn’t be driving, but the hospital was only a few blocks away. She threw her purse on the front seat and got behind the wheel.

Something inside her urged her to stay calm. There was nothing she could do in this situation, right? Wrong. Michael had to agree with her now. He wasn’t some man who lived on his own with no one who cared about him. He had a family to think about now. He had *her*.

Liz arrived at the hospital, got out of her car and turned to face the building. Somewhere in there, her husband was hurt and bleeding. Now was not the time to be furious with him. He needed her support and love. Their discussion on an early retirement would have to wait.

She burst through the front doors like a soldier storming the enemy’s camp. Rushing toward check-in, she met the gaze of a startled clerk, then slammed her hands down on her desk. “I need to see my husband.”

The woman was familiar. She probably even knew who Liz was. But at the moment all Liz could think about was finding Michael.

“Mrs. Baker, your husband died—”

Flashes of this exact same scene flooded her memories and lights flickered behind her eyes. She swallowed hard. No. No, she’s wrong. She opened her eyes and met the woman’s concerned gaze. “I want to see—”

An orderly placed a hand on the clerk's shoulder. "She means the sheriff."

The woman blushed brightly. "Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. I thought—" She shook her head and turned to the computer. "Of course you're not talking about—" If it was possible her flush deepened even more. She cleared her throat and without meeting Liz's gaze, muttered, "He's in room 107."

The orderly smiled warmly at Liz. "I'll take you."

Liz nodded as the kind woman slipped out from behind the desk and gestured toward a large set of double doors. "Right through here."

Their steps were quick as her heels clicked along the tiled floor. Liz shot a look at the woman and swallowed hard. "How did you—know that Sheriff Donahue and I got married?"

The woman blushed but not nearly as bad as the receptionist had. "My brother is the clerk who gave Michael the paperwork for your marriage license. He's never been very good at keeping secrets. I'm surprised the whole town doesn't know by now."

"Well, they will after today," Liz murmured.

"Yeah, probably." The woman smiled again, her arm touching Liz's briefly. "He's fine, by the way. It was just a graze."

"But Daphne Pratt said there was a lot of blood."

The woman nodded. "Yes, there was. But when we cleaned him up a little more, we realized it wasn't as serious as we thought."

Liz huffed. "Any injury from a bullet is definitely serious."

They rounded a corner and the woman slowed her steps. Liz's focus zeroed in on the placard with the numbers one, zero, and seven, then glanced at her escort. "Can I go inside?"

She nodded. "I don't think anyone is in there with him at the moment. We were just about to discharge him."

Liz took a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips. She placed her hand on the handle and pushed the door open. Michael sat shirtless on the examination table, looking absolutely miserable. His head snapped up the second the door clicked closed.

The lines on his face were deeper, making him appear ten years older. They stared at each other from across the room and time slowed. He was fine. Michael wasn't dead. Her chest hitched and tears spilled down her cheeks.

Michael climbed down from the exam table and moved swiftly across the room. "It's okay. I'm going to be fine."

She shook her head. "It's not *okay*, Michael. It's *not!* I've already lost one love. I can't lose another." Liz wrapped her arms around him, leaning into him. Her legs buckled, and he adjusted his hold on her to keep her steady. She held back the sobs that threatened to escape.

He didn't speak right away, just held her. It was like he didn't want to risk angering her, which only made the situation worse.

Liz pulled away from him and brushed the tears from her cheeks even as they continued to fall. "You can't do this anymore. You see that, right?"

"Do what?" The uncertainty in his voice sliced through her like a knife.

"Be sheriff! You can't keep putting your life in danger every day."

"But I'm—"

"Don't you dare tell me you're not. I gave this a chance. I was willing to believe you. But I'm beginning to suspect you were just trying to placate me. How many other times have you been shot at or attacked?"

His mouth dropped open as if he had a rebuttal, but nothing came out.

"See? There. Right there, I knew it. This job is more dangerous than you were letting on. Why would you even

want to keep it when you know you have so much more to lose?”

His brows creased and his jaw tightened so hard there was a tick in his cheek. He looked away and ran a ragged hand through his hair. “This job is all I know, Liz. It’s my life.”

“*I’m your life now. My family—our family is your life.* Can’t you see that? If something happens to you, people get hurt. It’s not like before when there was no one—” She cut herself off when he shot her a sharp look. Liz pressed her lips together and reached out to touch his cheek, her voice softening. “I didn’t mean that you weren’t cared for. You are. By the whole town. But it’s different now.”

If only there was a way to express this without sounding like she was pointing out he didn’t have much before they’d gotten together. Words were failing her as her desperation climbed. “Please,” she whispered, “just tell me you’ll resign.”

He scowled at the floor. “I can’t do that.”

She dropped her hand and stumbled back a step. “What?” her voice croaked.

Michael looked up at her and shook his head. “I can’t. This is my town—my home. It’s my job to protect it.”

“You’ve done that. Let someone else take over.”

“You don’t get it, Liz. This is part of who I am, and as long as the people of this town keep electing me to be their sheriff, I won’t walk away.”

Her hands tightened at her sides. “You would choose this town and your job over me?”

His features faltered. “It’s not like that, and you know it.”

“Do I? I’m your wife. And I get that I haven’t been in this position for very long. I understand we did this on a whim, but despite all of that, we both made a commitment to ourselves and each other.” She blinked away the tears that pooled in her eyes and turned away from him. “If you keep this job, all you’re doing is putting yourself in a very real position to make me a widow twice over.”

“Liz—” he said with exasperation.

“No. If you can’t even consider the words I’ve said, then maybe you should stay alone at your place tonight.” She held her breath. It wasn’t a threat she’d wanted to stoop to. But his unwillingness to consider what she’d said made it hard not to go there. He needed to know the seriousness of this situation.

His next words were so quiet she nearly didn’t hear them. “Think about what you’re asking of me. This ultimatum. It’s breaking my heart.”

She whirled around, agony seeping into the words that seemed to form in her mind. “Don’t you dare put this on me. *I’m* not breaking your heart. It’s *your* choice, and by making it, you’ve broken mine.”



## *Michael*

**E**ven a week after their argument, Michael couldn't make sense of why she was so doggone upset. Okay, to an extent he could understand her worries, but that was where his sympathy ended. His career—his whole identity was not something up for discussion. She couldn't demand that he resign any more than he could demand she stop working the ranch.

His focus on the words in front of him as he stared at a report in his hands blurred. Every time he tried to get to work, he was bombarded with thoughts of Liz and what she'd said to him. The longer he thought about what had led to their argument, the more upset he became.

He'd been in law enforcement for the majority of his adult life. The risk was always there. She didn't mind before; why should it matter now?

Michael scowled and tossed the report on his desk. The only sound in the office was that of the fluttering pages. He sighed and got out of his chair to look out the window. One way or another they had to come to a compromise. At this point neither one of them was bending. On that same note, neither one of them was saying the one thing he feared most.

That their marriage had been a mistake.

His stomach knotted uncomfortably.

If he was forced to quit his job, then he'd be able to save the relationship they'd developed. But if he put his foot down and demanded the respect his office required, then he'd risk losing Liz due to her own stubbornness.

He hadn't dared go to the ranch to talk some sense into his wife. She would have turned him out anyway. At least that's what he thought might happen based on the strong-willed nature she possessed. He'd hoped that she would have come to him and told him she'd overreacted. But that didn't seem very likely at this point.

Dragging a hand through his hair, he let out another frustrated breath. There was no winning. Even if Liz stepped back, deep inside he knew she'd probably resent him. The only option he saw was finishing out his term as sheriff and finding a new job.

All of these thoughts bumping around his head only fueled the irritation and anger. He needed to get out of his office. It was beginning to feel even more cramped than usual. How could the universe do this to him? How could he finally get Liz into his arms only to have her ripped right out of them?

Michael whirled around and stormed out of his office, pretending not to hear his secretary call after him. He jumped into his cruiser and started the engine. It didn't matter where he ended up. He just needed to figure out a solution, and he wasn't going to do that locked up in his office.



MICHAEL DIDN'T KNOW what prompted him to show up at his cousin's ranch. Yes, she'd been gone for years, but his relationship with Zeke had lasted. They weren't the kind of friends that went out drinking or watched sports. Theirs was a friendship where they could sit on the porch not saying anything and that was enough.

He stared at the large house from his vehicle and contemplated how Zeke would react to his unsolicited visit. The last time he'd shown up without an invitation had probably been when his cousin passed.

Maybe they didn't have the friendship he thought, after all. He put his keys back in the ignition, ready to leave, when someone tapped on the passenger side window. He jumped and spun to face the intruder only to find Sean leaning over and peering into the cab.

Michael nearly started the car anyway in order to escape. The last person he wanted to speak to was the son of the woman he'd angered.

Instead, he let out a sigh and unlocked the doors.

Sean climbed in and sat, facing forward. He offered Michael a smile, but that was it.

Michael fidgeted in his seat. He couldn't drive away now—he was stuck until Sean decided to get out. Michael let his head thunk against the headrest of his chair. If Sean thought he'd say the first word, he was sorely mistaken. He hadn't come here to have a chat with the kid.

After five minutes passed, he couldn't take it a minute longer.

"Did your mother tell you to come talk to me?"

Sean started and shot a look in his direction. "What? No. Why would she?"

Michael gestured toward Sean. "Due to the fact that you've hijacked my vehicle for no other reason than to sit here in unbearable silence."

The corners of Sean's mouth lifted. "I'm sorry. I wasn't aware my presence was so unbearable to you. I can leave..." He reached for the door handle, and Michael felt the tightness in his chest ease somewhat. "Then again..."

Michael sighed. "What?"

Sean shrugged. "I thought you could use someone in your corner."

Torn between elation and irritation, Michael didn't know what to say. To have someone backing him up validated every single terse thought he'd had over this situation. But to have Liz's own son picking sides with someone other than her, gave him the distinct feeling of needing to reprimand him.

Sean chuckled. "I suppose you're curious why I'm here then."

"You could say that."

He turned slightly to face Michael. "You'll recall that Adeline and I were the ones who wanted the two of you together."

Michael didn't offer a response.

“We don’t think we were wrong in who we picked. You’re perfect for my mother.”

He snorted. There was no way Liz thought that anymore. And unless she wanted to file some paperwork at the city, then she was stuck with him.

“I mean it. From the time you two started dating, we could tell we’d made the right decision. I haven’t seen her so happy since before my dad died.” Sean looked down at his hands in his lap and his voice grew quiet. “When he died, I think something broke in her. She’s always been so strong—knowing exactly where she stood in our community and her place at the head of our family. But when my dad got in that accident—she changed.” Sean glanced over at Michael. “I know we shouldn’t lean so much on other people. But if being married has taught me something, it’s that we should count on other people. I think it’s the reason we were put on this earth. We’re not meant to do things on our own.”

His wise words wrapped around Michael, and he shifted his focus out at the house once more. When two people fell in love, they were promising to lift the other up and support them—to be that one thing that was missing from their lives. He hadn’t been very compromising the last time he’d spoken to Liz. “Are you telling me this so that I will do what your mother requested?”

Sean shrugged. “I’m not here to tell you to do anything. But if I was, I’d be here to remind you not to give up. You obviously love my mom very much, and she loves you. But even mature adults need to be reminded what’s important.” He flashed Michael a smile and reached for the door handle.

“Sean?”

He paused and looked over his shoulder.

“How did you get to be so smart?”

Sean grinned. “I’m not. Not really.”

“Do you think I should resign?”

Sean settled back in his seat, his features growing more pensive. “I can’t say. I certainly see where my mother is

coming from. She's lost one husband. She had probably resigned herself to being alone for the rest of her life—well, besides us kids. And now she has a second chance at spending her life with someone else. Do you realize how rare that is?"

A ghost of a smile crossed Michael's face. "I think I might have an idea."

"Right, sorry." Sean chuckled. He rubbed his jaw and met Michael's eyes more steadily. "When you got hurt, her mind went to the absolute worst-case scenario. I'm not making any excuses for what she said or how she reacted. I'm just putting it into perspective."

"I know all of that." Michael couldn't keep the frustration out of his voice. This was a problem he was well-versed in. Liz had some worries that he couldn't do anything about. All he could do was be there for her.

"*And...*" Sean continued, "I told her that she should think about where these worries are stemming from. She chose to marry *you*, knowing full well who you were and what your career entailed."

A snort escaped Michael's throat and he squinted as he looked out the window. "I bet that didn't go over all too well."

"My mom's stubborn. But she's not against listening to reason. I'm almost certain you're the same way."

Michael swung his gaze over to Sean.

Sean placed his hand on the door handle. "I know you guys will figure things out. Just don't take too much longer. Mom's been in a mood since—you know."

Michael's gaze followed Sean as he stepped from the vehicle. It was strange that Sean had such a mature outlook on relationships. He was still a kid in many respects, which was the only reason Michael wouldn't take what Sean said at face value. It would be irresponsible to listen to Sean when it was his mother who was upset.

Sean had an inside scoop, and maybe it was the cop side of Michael that made him hesitate, but he wasn't willing to bet that Sean had his best interests at heart.

Right now it would be best to look at this ultimatum from every angle, much like he would any case he was investigating. Michael contemplated tracking down Zeke. The man would likely have better advice, if indeed that's what he was just given.

The radio on his chest crackled. "Sheriff, we need you back at the station. Someone is here to speak to you."

He leaned his chin to his chest. "I'm a little busy. Call Anderson."

"Sir, they're requesting you specifically."

Michael groaned. If this turned out to be one more instance of someone requesting his help just because they wanted a supervisor, he was going to lose it. He clicked his radio. "I'll be there in ten."

So much for spending some time with Zeke. He turned on the engine and then pulled his cruiser down the driveway toward the road.

Landscape passed by his window in a blur. But he wouldn't have even bothered admiring it with the state of mind he was in. Ever since his argument with Liz, everything seemed gray. She had seemed to be the one thing that had brightened his life.

His chest tightened. How was it fair that he had to pick between the two loves of his life? The answer was clear. It wasn't fair. No one should have to pick between the two things that make them the happiest.

Michael's hands squeezed the steering wheel tighter. Deep down he knew he wouldn't be able to give up Liz. The second she'd made that ultimatum, he knew what he'd choose. She probably did too, which was why this was so hard.

He'd always put more priority on people. It was one of the reasons he loved his job so much. But Liz was more important, and if she didn't want him working in this field anymore, then he'd have to find something else. Maybe he could shift from his position as sheriff into something else in the office. Or he could run for another office.

Shaking his head, Michael let out a snort. That wouldn't happen. If he were honest with himself, he would end up just retiring early and finding a way to make himself useful on Liz's ranch as much as that idea displeased him.

He pulled into the parking lot and put his car into park. In a matter of moments, he passed through the doors. "Okay, what is going on and who is demanding that I—" His gaze landed on a familiar woman.

She still wore the clothes from when he'd pulled her over a week ago. Had she been wandering around town this whole time? Deputy Martinez sat beside her on the bench, her arm around the woman. They were talking quietly, but the second he'd spoken, Martinez looked up.

Michael glanced around the room, which seemed to be humming with energy. Several officers paused what they were doing to look in his direction. It was almost like they expected him to do something like arrest the girl.

His brows furrowed as he strode across the room and stood before the woman. Her head popped up and she stared at him before her eyes dragged down to where his arm was in a sling. Her face flushed and she looked away once more.

Martinez rose from her position beside the girl and pulled him aside. "She's here to cooperate. She wanted to speak to you specifically because of what happened."

"Well, of course she wants to cooperate. It wasn't like she was the one responsible for what happened. For heaven's sake. Next you're going to tell me she was the mastermind of the whole thing."

The look on Martinez's face was enough to make his head whip around and stare at the woman once more. "You're kidding," he murmured.

"She *was* the ringleader until the men she was with insisted on bringing a gun for their most recent run. It's some kind of game her sorority plays. But I'll let her tell you about it. Just know she's willing to give us everything we need to pull these guys in."

Michael's gaze didn't leave the woman who seemed to shrink before him. All this trouble. All the worry and concern in their town. And it was all due to this woman. He dragged a hand down his face and let out a sigh. Maybe he *was* getting too old for this sort of thing. Nothing would make him happier than to be with Liz at that moment.



## *Liz*

*L*iz placed her chin in her hand as she rested her elbow on the kitchen table. Dinner was over and everyone had gone their separate ways—just not her. The last week had been absolutely terrible without Michael around. This was probably what it would feel like if they'd really split up, or worse, if he'd been fatally wounded.

She shivered.

For the last seven days, she'd not slept well at all. It was like losing Jack all over again. Liz would roll over and reach to her side for Michael only to find his pillow cool and no one lying beside her. Every time she closed her eyes, she envisioned him lying in a pool of his own blood.

Several times she'd considered changing her mind regarding her ultimatum. She'd go from knowing she was right, to wondering if she'd been too hard on Michael, to finally praying he'd just come see her and they could talk it out. But inevitably, she'd circle through those emotions once more. It was like a never-ending cycle; round and round her thoughts went until she ended up with a headache.

Her eyes rested on the chair at the head of the table—the one where Michael had started sitting since the first family dinner he'd shared with her children. It had sat empty all evening. While everyone updated one another on various activities going on, her gaze continued to flit to that spot, wishing he was there.

So now she was miserable and all because her new husband was too stubborn to see that he was hurting their family with his choices. How could he not understand that any danger he put himself in would put her heart at risk? It was selfish for him to choose his career—a dangerous one at that—over his new family.

Maybe he didn't understand what it meant. He'd never had children with Ellen. This was a new experience for him. That

made some semblance of sense. So why hadn't he come to the ranch and offered to discuss matters like reasonable adults?

Because she had been overbearing and unreasonable.

No. She'd spoken her mind. She was level-headed, and she knew what she was doing to protect her family. If Michael couldn't see that, then there was a bigger problem they'd have to deal with. She had more experience with herding children and caring for them than he did.

She sighed, folding her arms and placing her face within them.

Jack wasn't nearly so stubborn.

Okay, that wasn't right. There were several times when he was so bull-headed it had taken everything in her power not to hog-tie him and force him to see reason. But when it came to his family, he was more easily swayed. Jack had always left the family stuff up to her. He trusted her.

Michael didn't.

At least that was how it felt in this dark moment of hers.

"You okay?"

Liz froze. Each one of her children knew what was going on. She didn't know who spilled the beans, but somehow they all got the gist of it after she'd returned from the hospital. And right now they were the last ones she wanted to receive advice from.

A kitchen chair dragged across the tiled floor and Jess settled into the seat. She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Because it sure seems like you could use a sounding board right about now."

"With all due respect, Jess, I'm perfectly fine," she murmured into her arms.

"I'd beg to differ." Jess shifted in her seat, causing the wood to creak. "The thing is, you were never anything but supportive and knowledgeable when it came to each and every one of our relationships. It's hard for us to see you struggling."

Liz turned her head to peek at Jess. “Well, relationships in general go through different phases. What’s important when you’re younger might not necessarily feel as such later in life.”

“I can see that.” Jess tilted her head slightly, and a small smile touched her lips. “But you have to admit that some things remain constant no matter how we change and mature within our relationships. So if that’s the case, then maybe I can help you figure out what to do with Michael.”

“What to *do* with him? Sweetie, there’s nothing to *do* with him. We are married, and I don’t plan on getting a divorce. He just has to come to terms with the fact that I’m right.”

“Are you?”

Liz snapped up in her seat and set narrowed eyes on Jess. “Pardon me?”

“Are you right?” she repeated softly. “It’s a genuine question, Liz. Have you evaluated everything from every side? Have you considered Michael’s feelings on the matter? Do you know what the most important thing is you desire from this relationship?”

Her gut reaction would have been to tell her daughter-in-law that she didn’t know what she was talking about. But the longer her words settled, the more she realized she hadn’t thought about *everything*—at least not deeply.

Liz’s gaze dropped to her hands that were now in her lap. “What do you suggest?”

“First, you should consider where Michael is coming from. Why did he make the choice he made? Why is he being stubborn?”

A hint of a smile tugged at Liz’s mouth. Good, they think he’s being stubborn too. It wasn’t just her.

She met Jess’s gaze. “That one’s easy. Being Sheriff is like his identity, much like being a mother to all of you is mine.”

Jess’s eyes widened and she leaned over to grasp one of Liz’s hands in her lap. “Your identity is more than just being a mom, Liz. You are so much more than that.”

Liz patted her hand. “That’s sweet of you to say, but—”

“But nothing. I’ve seen the way you have held this family together over the last two years. I don’t think there is anyone as strong as you. No one else could have handled it.”

“Thanks, but again, that’s more related to my role as a mother.”

Jess lifted a shoulder. “You’re free to think that. But I can assure you no one would ever reduce you to just that label. Yes, it’s a big one. And of course being a mother is a hard job, but you’re more than that. You’re a wife. You’re a rancher. You’re a community member who cares about the people who are in your life. And there’s so much more that I can’t list them all.”

Warmth that began in her chest sped through her body at hyper speed. It wove itself along every nerve ending, into her face and to the tips of her fingers. “I had no idea that you believed all of that, Jess.”

She squeezed Liz’s hand once more. “Of course I do. Because I aspire to be just like you over the next twenty years.” She pressed her lips into a tight smile. “Only, there’s something I feel you should focus on while you’re trying to sort out everything with Michael.”

“What’s that?”

“Is it really necessary to ask him to sacrifice so much when your relationship is still so new?”

It wasn’t that big of a sacrifice. Michael had been a sheriff for years. Why would he fight so hard to keep a job where he could be killed at any moment? It didn’t make sense.

“Don’t you think he ought to be happy too?”

“Of course he should, but—”

Jess shook her head. “There are no buts, Liz. Either he does or he doesn’t, and you have to decide if you want to be the thing that stands in the way of his happiness.”

“But I’m not standing in his way. Our family—his *new* family, should be enough.”

Jess seemed to pause for longer than necessary. But then when she spoke, she sent more chills down Liz's back. "I don't disagree, Liz. In my opinion, I know that family is the most important thing. But I've also experienced death firsthand. Let me put it this way. Life is too short already to spend it worrying that something *might* happen. People deserve to hold onto what little happiness they find even if it means they put their own lives at risk."

"I'm going to have to disagree with you, Jess. This isn't just about him. It's about all of us. He has more family to think about."

Jess sighed, releasing Liz's hand and resting back in her chair. She folded her arms and set a firm stare on Liz. "Okay, let's try this a different way. Why do you love him?"

"What?"

"I know you heard me. Why do you love Michael? What is it about him that makes you excited to see him day after day? What makes you wish he were here right now at this very moment?"

Liz's brows knit together as she dragged her gaze from Jess's face. "I love that he's fun to be around. I love that he can make me laugh. I love that he has a passion for everything in his life..."

"So you'd agree that he's a pretty happy guy."

"Sure."

"And what if he *lost* that glow of happiness? What would you do?"

Liz frowned. "I'd help him get it back." That was a dumb question. Of course she would do everything in her power to bring that light back. She forced a smile. "Sweetheart, I know what you're trying to do. And while I appreciate it, I don't think it's necessary."

Jess lifted a brow and a smile played at her lips. "I don't think any of us are so good at relationships that we don't need some help once in a while. In fact, I think you're so used to

helping everyone else you don't see it when it's you who needs something."

"Excuse me?" It was hard not to feel cornered by her statement.

Jess let out a little laugh and looked away. "I don't mean any harm by it. But we all have seen how dating Michael affected you. Then when you got married—you were *so* happy. Each and every one of us wants you to hang onto that happiness because we care for you so much."

"Have you considered that my argument with Michael is because I want us to be happy together?"

Jess sighed. "That's what I have been saying. It might make you happy knowing he's out of harm's way. But it's a double-edged sword. If Michael isn't happy in whatever job he finds next, then you won't be happy either." She blew out a breath and gave Liz a pointed look. "Part of being in a relationship is figuring out what the other person needs and facilitating it to the best of our ability. I just feel like you didn't give him a chance to keep the job he loves."

Her words couldn't have hit any harder if she'd slapped Liz across the face. Had Jess really just told her that she broke the first rule of committed relationships because she wouldn't let Michael present his side of things? For the first time that evening, she was stunned. She wouldn't have dreamed of making a similar demand of Jack when they were first married. Why was Michael any different?

Jess's voice was soft and maybe even a little timid. "We get it, Liz. You were scared for him. And you've been through a trauma. But now that the dust has settled, maybe it's time to see if you can come to a compromise of sorts? Afterall, he *was* already a sheriff when you fell in love with him. From his point of view, maybe it's a bit harsh to expect him to give up the job he's so passionate about. We don't want to see you lose him out of fear."

Liz shoved her chair back and rose from the table. In her fifty years of life, she'd never been one to sit back and let

things slip through her fingers. When she knew what she wanted, she'd do what it took to get it.

The thing she wanted most in her life was to spend what she had left of it with her family. Michael was her family now. And he needed to know that. He needed to feel like he was a part of something. Maybe he'd come to the same understanding that she had, or maybe not. She'd have to cross that bridge when she came to it.

Liz met Jess's eyes briefly. "I'm going to think about what you said and head to bed."

Jess nodded.

Everything was far too raw for her to call Michael tonight. Any discussion she might have with him could turn south. She had to tread carefully. It's like Jess had said, she couldn't let this discussion be led by fear. That was where she went wrong the first time.



## *Michael*

*A*nother blasted week of not seeing Liz. But it hadn't been all his fault. Michael had fully intended on stopping by and speaking with her the day that Sarah had shown up at the station. But then her visit had triggered a slew of other time-consuming issues to resolve.

Though she was the mastermind and the whole idea had been hers, the acts themselves were not. The entire situation had been dipped in a vat of gray paint. Martinez didn't want to pin her with the higher charges due to her willingness to cooperate. If it were up to her, Sarah would get a slap on the wrist, a fine, and some community service to help fix what got ruined. That would include painting, fixing broken fences and learning a few things on the various ranches they'd targeted.

Michael had been glued to his desk with several different reports that had been filed since the start of this whole fiasco. And the more time he threw at it, the grumpier he became. According to Sarah's confession, she was only an accessory. She drove the car and gave the guys the ideas—but what would a jury think of that? A jury made up of the people living out in Copper Creek would likely push for a steeper punishment. So why was he leaning toward Martinez's idea so heavily?

The only thing that made sense was the look of fear on Sarah's face when he'd pulled her over. He could practically taste her terror. And he was beginning to think it had less to do with being pulled over and more to do with the men in the back of the car.

Michael sighed and raked a hand through his hair. He knew how this was going to go. Sarah would be offered a deal, and they'd get the guys who had actually done the damage.

A knock sounded at the door and he glanced up to find Anderson standing in the doorway. "The girl's lawyer is here and wants to speak to you." Anderson looked over his

shoulder and stepped into the room. “Did you decide how we’re going to handle this?”

“Yeah.” He held up the file.

Anderson shoved his hands into his pockets, hovering at the door. “Martinez thinks you should—”

“I’m well aware of what Martinez thinks.” He pushed out from his desk and got to his feet. “Thank you, Anderson. I’ll visit with them now.” Michael moved past his deputy and down the hall toward the conference room where most of their meetings were held. He hadn’t expected to see Sarah again after she posted bail, and yet here she was.

He tapped the folder against his leg. He really shouldn’t have been the one to decide on this. With the wound in his arm still healing, he was probably too close to the situation to make a clear decision. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he had leaned toward Martinez’s opinion. He couldn’t trust himself to be as impartial as he wanted to be.

Michael slipped into the conference room where an older gentleman was murmuring something to Sarah. They both turned their gazes toward him when he pulled out a chair and sat across from them.

Sarah shifted in her seat, her eyes dropping to where he still wore a sling. Her face reddened and she looked down at her hands.

“Good afternoon, Sheriff. I assume you have the documents I’m interested in taking a look at?”

Michael nodded. He tossed the file, frisbee-style across the table, his expression grim.

The lawyer picked up the folder and flipped it open. Sarah didn’t even bother looking over his shoulder to read it. She remained stoic as she avoided looking directly at him. Her lawyer grew still, his brows pulling together. His gaze bounced to Michael when he closed the file and placed it on the table. “Please explain this to me.”

“What is there to explain?” Michael looked toward Sarah. “It’s all there, in black and white.”

“Yes, but you’re dropping the criminal charges.”

Sarah’s head shot up and she gaped at him.

“That’s correct.” Michael gestured toward the folder. “Based on Miss Newton’s testimony, we believe it would be in our best interest to put all our manpower toward charging the young men who committed the physical crimes. We made a recommendation to the judge for a fine and community service.”

Sarah’s lawyer leaned back in his chair. His lined face showed years of dealing with this sort of thing. There was no way he wouldn’t accept the offer. It was too good considering everything Sarah had given them. He shifted, dipping his head closer to Sarah. Their murmured conversation wasn’t loud enough for Michael to get any of it. But based on the way they were acting, it was clear how they were feeling about the deal.

The girl kept glancing at him, then nodding as she listened to her advisor. Then the lawyer sat straighter. “This plan stipulates several hours of community service *here* in Copper Creek. This may not be feasible with Miss Newton’s job in the city.”

Michael’s brows furrowed and heat swirled in his chest. Did these people actually have the gall to make requests? Were they suggesting that she do it elsewhere? His jaw tightened and he leaned forward in his chair. “I’m sorry, what part of paying for her misdeeds is supposed to be *convenient*?” He jammed his finger on the table, tapping it as he emphasized each word he spoke. “Miss Newton is to help the members of *this* community after she willingly brought and aided criminals here... in Copper Creek.”

Sarah’s lawyer held up both hands. “That is not what we were suggesting at all. Sarah is willing to put her job on hold in the city to complete her community service hours over the course of the summer. But she’d like to know if there’s somewhere looking for extra help where she might make a little money or find a place that won’t charge her rent. She’s more than willing to put in the extra work to get this handled quickly and quietly.”

Michael's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Her lawyer cleared his throat and glanced at Sarah briefly.

She nodded.

"Miss Newton comes from a family of wealth and status. If news outlets get wind of her *indiscretions*, she's concerned it could hurt her family and her family's business."

Michael's brows lifted a fraction. He hadn't gone so far as to check her background besides knowing she was a student at a university in the city. This revelation put a different twist on things he wasn't prepared for. If she had the money this lawyer was suggesting, then she could have gotten out of any charge they might have tried to pin on her.

He shifted in his seat and met Sarah's gaze. "Why are you here, then?"

"Pardon?" Her words were quiet.

"Why did you come back here? You could have easily had your lawyers handle all of this. What's your game?"

Her large brown eyes widened. "I don't have a game." She glanced at her lawyer once more.

"Then why come back here?"

"You don't have to answer that," her lawyer chimed in.

She swallowed hard. "We told you already. I want to make this right. I know what I did was wrong—"

Her lawyer held up a hand as if to stop her, but she pushed it aside.

"I don't want to feel like I didn't do what I could to fix a mistake I made. That whole week I spent after you got—" She looked down at his arm. "I just realized that I want to make a few changes, and what better place than here?"

Michael snorted. "We're not some rehab resort town where you come to *change*. This town is full of people who care about each other." His sharp voice made her flinch. "This town is where everyone works hard for a common goal, and if you

think you can just spend a summer here and figure any of that out, you're sorely mistaken.”

She dropped her gaze. “I’d like to try.”

Doggone it. She *sounded* remorseful.

Either he was getting soft, or he was just too tired to deal with this case anymore. Either way, he could feel his defenses lowering.

Her lawyer folded his arms and set a steely stare on Michael. “My client doesn’t have to be here. It’s like you said, she could have stayed far away from this case, from this town, and from you. But she chose to come back. I’d say that’s an easy win for you, Sheriff. Take the win and let’s get this all hammered out so she can move her essentials here for the next couple of months.”

Michael’s gaze bounced from Sarah to her lawyer and back. “You’re serious.”

Sarah nodded.

Her lawyer sighed.

“Fine. I think I know of a place. They have plenty of room and they’re growing. You could probably be of some use to them. But the work you do at Slate Rock Ranch won’t count as your community service. You’ll have to check in with me regarding that.” He nodded at the file. “But of course you already know that. If you sign off on our agreement, I’ll have the judge look it over and everything will be settled.”

Sarah didn’t smile. But why would she want to? She was essentially giving up her summer to be a servant here. Based on what her lawyer had hinted at, she was probably losing a lot.

Her lawyer stood and held out his hand.

Michael did the same and they shook. He met Sarah’s gaze. “I’ll be in touch once I speak to the owner of the ranch. If they can’t take you, I have other options I can check into.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He nodded, a gesture to brush her off. Michael walked around the conference room table and her voice stopped him.

“Are you okay?”

Michael froze in the doorway. His features pinched and he turned to face her. “Of course I’m okay.”

“Taggart didn’t hit any major organs?”

“Sarah—” her lawyer warned.

Michael shoved his good hand into his pocket. “I can assure you if he did, I wouldn’t be up and walking around.”

A brief flicker of relief filled her face. “That’s good.”

He stood there awkwardly. “Was there anything else?”

She shook her head.

“Okay.” He turned on his heel and headed for his office. Now that the case was settling down, maybe he could come up with a plan for Liz. He needed to go to her place to make her talk to him. The longer they prolonged this argument, the less it felt like they were still married.

Liz was his wife, and he wanted his life to reflect that.

He strode through his office door and stopped cold.

Liz stood, leaning against his desk. She looked up, meeting his gaze. Her features were more worn down than the last time he’d seen her, and all he could think about was how much he wanted to pull her into his embrace and kiss her like there was no tomorrow.

“Hello, Michael.”



## *Liz*

Enough was enough. She'd waited far longer than she should have. Michael was proving to be more stubborn than she ever thought possible. He should have shown up at the ranch long before now.

So here she stood in front of him, nearly ready to blurt out the only thing that had been in the back of her mind since their argument.

She was wrong.

She'd overstepped.

Would he please forgive her?

It wasn't often she said those things. And she'd be darned if she ever got in a situation again where she needed to say them. There was this sense of pride she had—Liz Baker didn't make mistakes.

Huh. Actually, she was supposed to be a Donahue now.

She shrugged off the thought and folded her arms. Her eyes darted down to where Michael held his arm in a sling next to his chest. He hadn't moved—hadn't breathed—since his eyes had landed on her.

Good, she'd caught him off-guard. Maybe they'd be able to have this conversation less painfully. Liz moistened her lips. “Well?”

He looked like he didn't quite know what to say. “Well, what?”

“*Well*, are you going to ask me why I'm here? Or are you going to spend the entire day gawking at me?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, lifting slightly. “I would never dream of gawking at you, Liz.”

“*Well*, you could have fooled me.” She bit back a smile. “Because your eyes haven't left me since the moment you walked through the door.”

“That’s because you’re a sight for sore eyes.” He moved a hesitant step toward her. “I’ve missed you, Liz,” he murmured.

Emotion caught in her throat, preventing her from speaking.

Michael took another step toward her. “I’ve wanted to come by the ranch more times than I could count.”

“And why didn’t you?”

This question seemed to catch him off-guard once again. “Because you didn’t want me there?”

A sharp bark of laughter escaped her lips, but it was void of any humor or joy. “That is the dumbest excuse I have ever heard.”

“It’s true. When a woman tells a man she doesn’t want him to come—”

“I seem to recall I told you not to come *if* you couldn’t abide by my guidelines.”

His progression toward her slowed and stopped. “Your *guidelines* were impossible to follow.”

She shut her eyes tight. Her request wasn’t impossible. It was simple.

Well, at the time it had been simple. But the more she considered it, the more she realized she needed a fresh outlook. Liz took a deep breath and opened her eyes once more. “I wanted you home, Michael. I just didn’t want you to come home if you were going to end up leaving us.”

The look on his face said it all. Michael was either confused or he was growing impatient. Either way, he wasn’t speaking and the tightness in her chest continued to grow.

“I have a confession to make,” she said.

He didn’t move. It was like he was once more turned to stone. She let out an exaggerated sigh.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the argument we had and the ultimatum I gave you. And I’ve come to the realization that I... was... wrong.” The words practically clawed their

way out of her throat for as much as they caused her pain. She hurried to add, “I should have never asked you to choose between me and your job. We’re married now. I’m supposed to be your partner—your helpmate. And instead, I drove a wedge between us. I’m sorry.”

He shook his head and took another two steps toward her, closing the distance between them. “Wait a minute. You want to apologize and tell me you were wrong?”

She held up a hand. “I don’t think I’m wrong about the dangers of your job nor the risks you take on a daily basis. I must make that much clear. What I did wrong was tell you to pick between the two of us.” Liz tilted her head, emotion rising in her throat and brimming in her eyes. “I don’t want to lose you, Michael, and that possibility became far too real to me when you were caught in the crosshairs. I can’t go through what I did with Jack. I just can’t.”

He reached out with his hand and grasped hers. “I wouldn’t ask you to.”

She let out a small laugh. “You might not realize it, but you are. Each and every time you go to work, you are making a conscious decision to put yourself in danger. You can’t possibly tell me that your days are free from risk.”

“I can tell you that they’re free from extreme—”

Liz shook her head vehemently. “It’s not the extreme stuff I’m worried about.” She blew out a frustrated breath. “Okay, I am. But it’s also the little things—the day-to-day stuff that I never considered being a problem before. Like the traffic stop. If you had asked me how dangerous I thought those would be—especially around here—I would have said about as dangerous as giving a parking ticket.”

His expression tightened. “Liz—”

She blew out a breath. “*Michael.* I’m right and you know it.” She pulled her hand from his and placed it against his face. He leaned into her touch and closed his eyes. “But what I’ve realized is that I can’t survive if I’m going to constantly be worried about you.”

His eyes flew open. “Liz, I’m willing to—”

“I’m not going to ask you to resign.”

They stared at one another, blinking. Then she laughed. “I came here to have an open conversation. I want us to find a good place—together. You didn’t deserve my outburst, and you should be able to work where you want. I need to remember that you had a life before me.”

“You are my life, Liz,” he murmured. “If it comes down to it, I realized that I need to choose what makes me happiest. And that’s you.”

Warmth filled her entire being. “You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear you say that.” She shook her head. “But it isn’t necessary. I have a long way to go to heal from the anxieties I developed after Jack’s accident, and I’m sure you’re going to have to help me in that respect. That isn’t to say that you shouldn’t *consider* ways to adjust your responsibilities here to better ensure your safety.” She let out a soft laugh. “But I’m not going to be the one to stand in your way. At least I’m going to try not to.”

Michael’s eyes seemed to widen with awe. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “As much as I have this innate need to control things, I just can’t. I can’t guarantee that one of my boys won’t get hurt when they’re out in the field working. I can’t guarantee that one of my grandbabies won’t fall and skin their knee. And I can’t guarantee that you won’t get shot. Our existence is not meant to be spent in a giant bubble. I guess I lost sight of that.”

He pressed his lips together. “You made several good points, Liz. Back when we had that argument.”

Liz glanced away. “I can’t imagine I made much sense.”

“You reminded me that I’m not alone anymore.” He took in a deep breath and released it through pursed lips. “Okay, so I know that I was never alone. There are people who would have missed me.” He set a steady gaze on her. “I have a family

now. A big family—and I need to remember to think about them when I make decisions like whether it's time to retire."

Michael's smile wasn't really sad, but there was something missing from it that she'd grown used to. Liz pulled him into a hug. "Your family is going to support you no matter what you decide. We love you, Michael."

His arm slipped around her, and he angled himself so his slinged arm didn't become wedged between them. She pulled back and looked down at it. "Is it still bad?"

"It's fine. I just get tired and use the sling every so often." He winked at her. "I want you to know I will never willingly do anything to jeopardize what we have. If I'm on the job and something doesn't feel right, then I won't even go near it." His lips quirked into a smile. "Besides, I think I'm getting a little too old for some of the stuff I do. Maybe it's time to adjust the role I play here. Perhaps it's time to take a more administrative one."

"That would be a wonderful idea." She rested her head against his shoulder. It was comforting to know that the two of them had been able to meet on common ground. She had no intention of terminating their relationship. There was something in her core that refused to let that happen. Relationships weren't disposable, not even if there were disagreements. "I'm so glad we figured this out. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." Michael pulled away from her. "You'll never guess what's been happening around here."

"What's that?"

He walked her over to his desk and settled her into his chair. Michael leaned against his desk and flashed her a smile. "You remember all of those instances of vandalism that happened over the last few months?"

She nodded.

"Turns out that traffic stop was related."

Her brows pulled together. "What did a traffic stop have to do with the vandalism?"

“The girl who was driving that car can connect every single occurrence.”

“*She* was responsible? But I thought you said she looked like she was a victim.”

Her name is Sarah, and while she gave the group of guys the idea and she drove the car, she didn’t actually participate beyond that.”

Liz sucked in a breath. “Well, I hope you’ve caught her.”

“Sorta. Turns out she’s willing to help us get the guys who did most of the damage in exchange for a lesser sentence.”

“Really?”

Michael pushed his hand into his pocket and nodded. “She’s going to pay a fine and complete several hours of community service.”

Liz’s features scrunched and her eyes narrowed. “Do you really think the people of this community would want that? She was responsible for several thousands of dollars in damages. If she’s going to be spending time around here, don’t you think everyone might be a little unhappy?”

He lifted a shoulder. “It’s not really up to them. We’re catching the guys who actually did the damage. At this point, the only ones who are aware of who she is and what might happen are in this office. As far as I’m concerned, it could stay that way. We just need to find her a ranch to stay at.”

“*What?* You can’t possibly be considering having her *live* here.”

“Why not?”

“She—it was because of her that you were shot.”

He frowned. “No, it was because of the boy who decided to pull out his gun that I was shot. She had nothing to do with that.”

Liz pressed her lips into a firm line. “I don’t like it.”

“Maybe you just need to give her the benefit of the doubt. Don’t we all deserve a second chance when we’ve made a

mistake?”

She stared at him in disbelief. “Why are you so... good?”

He chuckled. “Is that a compliment?”

Liz leaned forward and grabbed his hand, holding it with both of hers. “She’s a criminal and one who basically facilitated your injury. And you still want to give her a chance to be better.”

“I guess I like to see the best in people.”

“How did I get so lucky to find a man like you?”

He tugged her to her feet and deftly slipped his hand around her waist. “Now, that’s where you’re wrong. I’m the lucky one.”

She tilted her head, amusement playing on her lips. “Maybe we’re both lucky. We both found love not once, but twice.”

“I like that.”

“And I’m doubly lucky that you seriously have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

He gave her a boyish grin. “I think I have a pretty good idea.” He dipped his face lower, and his warm breath caressed her cheek. “And I’m all in.”

Michael brushed his lips against hers, sealing this promise and all others with a tender kiss.

## **EPILOGUE**

***One month later***

***Michael***

*M*ichael took off his hat and raked a hand through his hair before replacing it. “Thank you for agreeing to this. You were the first rancher that came to mind.” He shot a quick look at Zeke. “I know it’s not ideal to have another woman at the ranch when you’ve already got your hands full \_\_\_”

“It’ll be fine. I’m sure my girls will whip this one into shape.”

They both looked toward the house where Brielle chatted with Sarah as she guided her toward the house.

“And thanks for not telling anyone—including your daughters. Though Miss Newton didn’t mind folks knowing why she’s staying with you, Liz and I thought it would be best if we keep this whole thing under wraps.”

Zeke grunted. “As long as she doesn’t cause any trouble, she’ll be allowed to stay here as long as it takes.” He glanced at Michael out of the corner of his eye. “You get any word on the kid who shot at you?”

Michael looked down at his arm. It had healed up good by now but thoughts about what could have happened were starting to sink in. He rolled his shoulder, then squinted at the sky. “Last I heard, he posted bail and is awaiting trial along with his delinquent friends.”

Another grunt.

Michael turned toward Zeke. “Speaking of which, I’d keep an eye out. Miss Newton might be targeted by them for turning them in. If any of them come snooping around—”

“I’ve got several rifles and shotguns, Michael. I know how to handle animals who don’t belong on my property.”

Michael gave him a pointed look. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t matter what you meant.” Zeke faced Michael, his arms folded and a dark expression on his face. “I run a ranch with my seven daughters. Do you think I kept them safe all these years with luck? Absolutely not. The men here know not to even look sideways at my little girls. And everyone in town knows the same.”

Michael bit back a smile. “Nice to see Sean was brave enough to risk it.”

Zeke’s face colored. “Sean’s still got a lot to do to make up for the shenanigans he pulled.” His shoulders relaxed and his arms dropped to his sides. “He’s a good kid, though. Hard worker, too. All the Baker boys are.” He peeked at Michael. “They have a good mom.”

Michael couldn’t help the way his chest swelled with pride. “That she is.”

“I’m glad you two worked things out.”

Michael groaned. “Does anyone *not* know about that?”

Zeke shrugged. “I don’t think there’s anything this town doesn’t know. Which brings me to another thought. I don’t know how you’re going to keep Miss Newton’s status secret for long. The town is too small to not notice a new young woman living at my residence.”

“I think I’ve got a solution to that.”

Zeke’s expression didn’t change. It was the one thing Michael had never gotten used to. He was too hard to read.

Michael swallowed. “Just tell everyone she’s my niece and leave it at that.”

Zeke snorted. “Do you live in the same town as I do? No one is going to just drop it. They’re going to want to know why she’s here.”

“Why would my niece be visiting? Maybe her parents tossed her out. Maybe she’s learning a new trade.”

“Well, which is it?”

Michael stared at him blankly.

Zeke rolled his eyes. “For heaven’s sake, Sheriff. You have to get your story straight if you want this to work. Even I know that. You don’t know how many rumors circled when Adeline and Sean got engaged and married so quickly. This town has never been one to mind its own business. It’s like they have nothing better to do with their time.”

“Fine, then just tell people she’s visiting for the summer while her parents are away on an extended trip. She’ll be gone in September anyway.”

Zeke huffed and turned away from him. “Works for me.”

“And your daughters? What have you told them about Sarah?”

Zeke glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “Adeline is the only one who knows the truth. The rest were going to be told tonight at dinner. But I guess that’s changed now. I suggest you let Miss Newton know of your plans so she doesn’t mess anything up on her end.”

That was probably a good idea.

Sarah and Brielle emerged from the house empty-handed and made their way toward them. Sarah met Michael’s eyes briefly, then looked away. Brielle stopped right in front of her father. “Did *you* know that Sarah almost got arrested?” She placed a hand on her hip and shot a look in Michael’s direction.

Michael groaned, dragging his hand down his face. “I thought we’d discussed keeping your history a secret?”

Sarah’s eyes widened and she glanced from Michael to Zeke. “I thought they already knew?”

Michael turned to Brielle. “As far as anyone else is concerned, Sarah is my niece and she’s only here to visit for a few months. She’ll report to me on all her community service, as agreed upon by the judge. No one else is to know, not even your sisters.”

Brielle blinked. “But what about Adeline?”

“She’s already aware,” Zeke interjected. “And I expect you to listen to the sheriff on this one. We don’t need any more reason for scandal to follow our family.”

Brielle nodded.

It almost appeared as though Sarah flinched at Zeke’s words.

Michael met her gaze. “You gonna be okay?”

She folded her arms and nodded. “This is what I wanted. I knew what I was getting into.”

Zeke snorted, and Brielle let out a soft laugh.

“Oh sweetie, you have *no* idea what you’re getting into. Working on a ranch has got to be one of the most thankless jobs you can get.”

Sarah didn’t argue, though the way she pressed her lips into a tight line made Michael think she didn’t agree with Brielle’s statement.

He jerked his head toward his cruiser, motioning for her to follow him. When they were a few feet away from the others, he stopped and faced her. “This is a fresh start for you. I don’t know what your life was like in the city, but maybe you can make a few friends while you’re here.”

Her brows lowered, her gray eyes darkening. “No offense, but you’re not my father. I’m here to pay for my mistakes and then I’ll be out of your hair. I don’t need any new friends, and I don’t need to get close to anyone.”

Michael opened his car door and shrugged. “Suit yourself. But there’s a lot that goes on around here in the summer months. Dancing, rodeos, moonlit rides... you might even find the young men here are a worthy time investment.” He was teasing, and it was so worth it when her face colored and she snorted.

“I doubt it,” she muttered.

Michael let out a chuckle. “Right. Well, be sure to check in at the station once a week to report on your hours.”

She nodded.

He climbed into his vehicle and put the car into drive. Sarah’s form shrunk in the rearview mirror. She’d be fine. The time she spent in Copper Creek would do her some good.

His thoughts turned to Liz. Connections and relationships were important. They were the things that grounded people and made them want to be better. Would it be so bad if she found some friends and a young man to care for while she was here?

Probably.

Sarah was right. She just needed to serve her time and head back where she came from, and he’d help her do just that.



LATER THAT EVENING

## *Liz*

Liz sat holding hands with Michael on the porch swing, watching her sons and their wives engaged in a very competitive family cornhole tournament. Her new puppy was running around trying to chase to bean bag. The evening was perfect, and the family dinner they'd all shared had been delicious. Each couple had made their favorite dish for a tasty potluck.

"Jack made those cornhole boards for the family," Liz said, pointing to the six game platforms that the rest of the family was using on the front lawn. "He had each son help him with one. The boys enjoyed working on the project with their father. But it was Tate who really took to the woodworking. I had fun sewing up the bean bags."

"It's good for them to have some fun after all the hard work they put in each day," Michael said.

"I'm so blessed," Liz said, squeezing Michael's hand. "When my boys were all little, I was busy taking care of them and helping with the ranch. I didn't stop and think that, someday, they would bring six lovely women who are like daughters into my life. And grandchildren!"

Michael returned the hand squeeze. "You and Jack raised six outstanding boys, who've turned into fine young men. They had you and Jack as role models for choosing their wives. No wonder they made such good choices."

"Thank you," Liz said. "And thank you for not being threatened by memories of Jack."

"He was my friend," Michael said, wrapping an arm around Liz. "I'll always respect him."

They sat in silence together for a few minutes, enjoying the laughter and the banter from the brothers and their wives enjoying each other's company and a little friendly competition.

“Tell me more about how they all became couples,” Michael said. “You mentioned they have a few interesting stories on how they fell in love.”

Liz turned and gave Michael a kiss on his cheek. Michael smiled and squeezed her shoulder.

“It all started with Ian and Jess. And you were an important part of their story.” Liz chuckled and shook her head. “Did you know that Ian had been going to the diner just about every day for six months, just to sit in her section so he could get to know her? Jess says he never even said much.”

“Ian saved her life,” Michael said, looking at Liz. “Sometimes actions speak louder than words.”

“You helped save her too. She needed someone to turn to that she could trust.”

“Just doing my job,” Michael said, his face taking on a rosy hue. “It’s been so good to see her gain confidence and continue her schooling. Who got together next?”

“Let me see,” Liz said, looking out at her sons and their wives. “Well, Ruby came to town for the summer, and Cal just about lost his mind. She was his best friend’s little sister, but she wasn’t so little any more. She’d graduated from college and was heading off to her dream job in New York City.” Liz hesitated. “I’d been worried about Cal. He had a hard time staying in a relationship. I think he was taking Jack’s death pretty hard, but he was trying not to show it.”

“How did they end up together if Ruby was off to New York City?”

Liz smiled and squeezed Michael’s hand. “They both realized that love and family were more important than anything else.”

Michael chuckled, and Liz joined him. “I’m glad we figured that out too,” he said.

A cheer erupted from the yard, and Liz watched as Tate lifted Noelle in his arms and swung her around.

“Tate and Noelle were next,” she said, pointing at the couple celebrating their win. “Tate rescued Noelle from an avalanche.”

“Wow,” said Michael. “That’s pretty intense.”

“I know it sounds cliché, but it was love at first sight for Tate. Not so much for Noelle, who thought that Tate had kidnapped her! Noelle has had a hard life, so it was difficult for her to learn to trust. It was Tate’s woodworking skills that helped Noelle trust him. Tate has been so patient with her now that he understands. And she says therapy is really helping her find forgiveness and see her past in a different light.”

“Sounds like they are good for each other,” Michael said. “And it also sounds like quite the dramatic beginning to their relationship.”

“Oh, their meeting was nothing compared to Brock and Piper,” Liz said and shook her head, a sigh escaping as she remembered. She looked out into the yard. Little Brooklyn was watching all the action from her stroller. Then Lucky ran up and started licking her toes, which of course elicited lots of giggles from Brooklyn. Liz loved her little granddaughter with all her heart.

Michael raised his eyebrows. “Tell me about it.”

“One day, out of the blue, Piper showed up at the door with a baby.” Liz nodded her head in the direction of little Brooklyn in her stroller. “She said it was Brock’s baby, and his ex-wife had died shortly after giving birth. Brock’s wife had left about a year before that, and he was heartbroken. To top it off, Piper was his ex-wife’s sister and looked incredibly like her.”

“That must have been hard on Brock,” Michael said. “How did he react?”

“Not well. He was definitely depressed and not thinking clearly. And he’s always had the shortest temper of all my boys. But we all did what we could to help. Piper was just going to drop off the baby and run, but Brock insisted that she stay and help him. I think he basically bribed her. Then it was

one battle after another.” Liz hesitated, and Michael stayed quiet, letting his wife think. “I honestly don’t know how we survived those first few months. But they are so happy together now. And Brooklyn is a happy, healthy little one. Brock built them a house with a huge garden on some of the family land. And Piper has a flexible online career that she enjoys.”

“I just noticed that Finn and Piper have the same color hair. Does that run in your family?” Michael asked.

Liz cleared her throat. “No, actually. Finn is adopted, although he didn’t find out until recently. I think the thing that finally helped him accept it is Christine’s son, JD, who he loves as his own. He’s loved Christine since they were kids. Really, there was never going to be anyone else for him. It just took Christine a while to feel the same.”

Liz watched as Finn and Christine let JD throw one of the bean bags. Finn had the biggest heart of all her boys. She was relieved that JD’s father stayed out of the picture and let Finn take on that role. She loved her grandson as if he were her own. Just as she’d always loved Finn with the same fierce momma love as all her other boys.

Michael spoke up. “I guess that just leaves Sean and Adeline. I have to admit, I never thought my niece would get married. She’s headstrong and a force to be reckoned with. Just like her mother was sometimes.”

“That’s for sure.” Liz nodded. “Sean is a good match for her. He was bound and determined to do whatever it took to save the ranch and protect his family. Even if it meant sacrificing his happiness. I’m so relieved that everything turned out in the end.”

“Maybe that first grandchild will soften up Zeke,” Michael said.

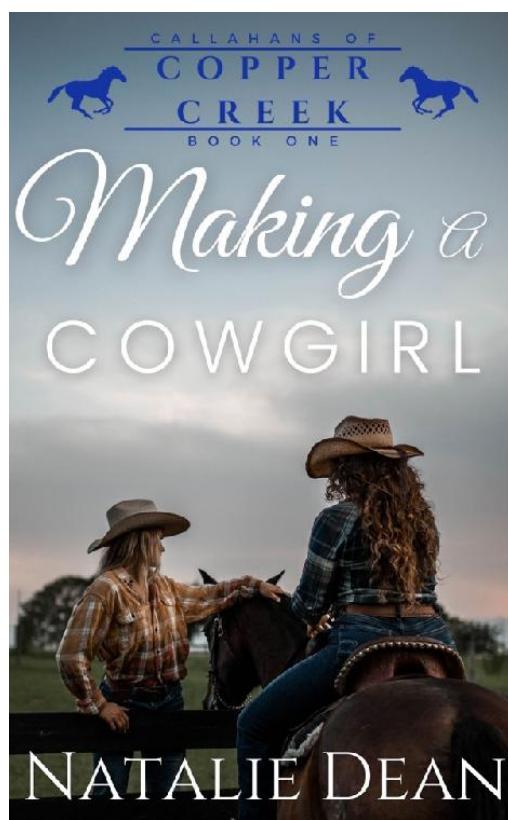
“The baby will hopefully bring our families closer, at least,” Liz added.

Michael looked lovingly at her and squeezed her hand. “Thank you. For inviting me to be a part of your family. For

giving me sons and daughters and grandchildren. And for giving love a second chance.”

Liz’s eyes welled up with emotion. “Thank you,” Liz said, wiping a tear that slipped down her cheek. “For not giving up on us. And for restoring my hope and excitement for the future.”

She hadn’t expected her life to turn out this way, but God had taken care of her. Michael’s presence helped heal her heart and give her stability. And she and her boys were going to be just fine. They had the ranch, each other, new members of the family, and a whole lot of love.



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## **ABOUT AUTHOR - NATALIE DEAN**

Born and raised in a small coastal town in the south I realized at a young age that I was more adventurous than my conservative friends and family. I loved to travel. My passion for travel opened up a whole new world and new cultures to me that I will always be grateful for.

I was raised to treasure family. I always knew that at some point in my life I would leave my storybook life behind and become someone's mother, someone's aunt and hopefully someone's grandmother. Little did I know that the birth of my son later in life would make me the happiest I've ever been. He will always be my biggest achievement. The strong desire to be a work-from-home mom is what lead me down this path of publishing books.

While I have always loved reading I never realized how much I would love writing until I started. I feel like each one of my books have been influenced by someone or something I've experienced in my life. To be able to share this gift has become a dream come true.

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have enjoyed creating them. I truly hope to develop an ongoing relationship with all of my readers that lasts into my last days :)

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