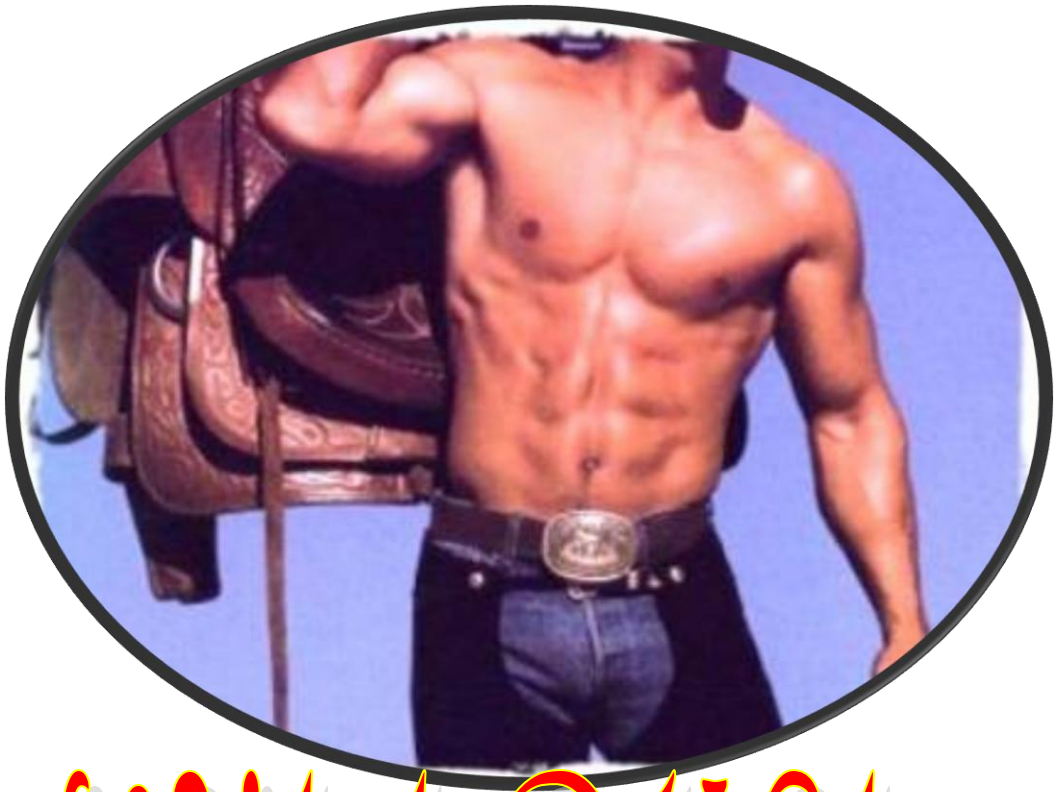


Lilitha Wards



Wild Rush

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Lietha Wards

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The King's lady

Chapter One

“Good afternoon ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We will be landing in approximately ten minutes. We hope you have a good evening and thanks for flying with Mountain Air.” After the announcement was over the speakers the seatbelt light came on with a reminding ding.

Lizzette leaned over and snapped the belt over her son’s jean clad lap, “we’re landing soon and you need to wear it.” She said with a smile when he looked up from his comic book. He pushed the cowboy hat he wore higher on his brow so he could see her better. He insisted that he was going to learn to be a cowboy if they were moving to ranching territory so Liz found him a hat and he loved it. He even slept with it the night before.

“Like when we took off?” He asked his pale blue eyes wide with excitement.

“Yes.”

“Is Uncle Jackson going to meet us there?”

“He’s supposed to.”

“I can’t wait.” He said trying to look out of the window to the approaching city, “Do really they have real cowboys there.”

Liz swallowed hard at that question, “Yes honey they do.”

“Wow, can we go horse riding?”

“We can do anything you want.”

“I want to rope a steer like you see in the movies.” He said excitedly.

Liz lifted his hat and ran a hand over his blonde curls ruffling them, “You are brave.”

Since he was born they’d lived in Phoenix Arizona with her aunt, in a totally urban setting. However Micah always was fascinated with cowboys. He’d watched all the John Wayne movies and had numerous toys with that theme. Maybe it was because his uncle kept telling him how cool it was to live in

cowboy country. Micah adored Jackson.

He was her only brother and they were quite close even though they lived far apart over the past five years. Their parents were killed in a car crash when she was twelve and Jackson gave up everything to keep them together. He told her time and time again that he didn't regret one minute of it, but she wished that he had a life instead of raising his baby sister. She was his world besides her precious son.

Her son was almost five and it had been longer than that since she was home to Sulphur Springs Montana. However, her aunt had passed away and her kids inherited her estate, which was fine with her for it was time she went home to Jackson. She missed him terribly.

As for her aunt, she was thankful for her. She didn't need anything except a place to stay all of those years ago and she was the last of her immediate family besides her brother. Now she was going home. Although it sounded wonderful, the only problem was, Micah's father was still living there too and he didn't know about his son.

He'd made it clear years ago that he wasn't interested in a relationship except that one thing that created Micah. She was deeply in love with the man and gave herself to him, and only him. After that, Micah came first and she didn't want another relationship. She made her brother promise not to say anything before she left thankful that her aunt took her in for the past few years and in turn she nursed her until the day she died. She had a string of illnesses, but Liz actually enjoyed being with her and was grateful for the years that they had together. It was convenient for everyone involved, because her two children, their cousins, were all grown up and had busy careers. They were grateful for Liz's help with their mother. At least she had a place for her and her son to stay four years since he was born and not run into his father.

She didn't deny that when she thought about Dutch, Micah's father, that her heart had a mind of its own. It didn't help that her son was a spitting image of him either all the way down to those pale blue eyes, but unlike Dutch's, there was no bitterness in Micah's. She made sure there was a lot of love in his life and it showed. He was curious and independent, not afraid to take risks, well she could probably give that bit to his father, because Dutch was much the same.

She could remember the first time she set eyes on him as if it was yesterday. She was unsuccessfully trying to change a burnt out light bulb in her brother's hardware store. It seemed like a lifetime ago even though it'd only been five years. She was so naïve back then. In some ways she still was.

"Gosh!" She exclaimed teetering on the unsteady ladder to change the light bulb. She paused and glanced down at the wood planked floor thinking that it wouldn't be that hard of a landing if she slipped.

Who was she kidding? Hardwood hurts. She'd just have to be careful. She climbed up the other two rungs and was satisfied that she kept her balance. The bells above the door tingled letting her know that they had a customer. Her brother Jackson would have heard it in the back and tended to whoever it was.

Carefully she reached up and took the screen down from the ceiling and swapped the bulbs. *There*, she thought *that wasn't so hard*. It felt good to accomplish that even though she had a fear of heights. So what if she was on an eight foot ladder and had to lean off to the side to reach the burnt out light because it was directly over one of their display shelves. She did it.

Feeling a little more confident she set the burnt out bulb on the top of the shelf on some paint cans and stepped up again to refasten the screen. However, this time, her balance was lost. The ladder scooted out from under her like a banana peel and as

she went one way, the ladder went the other.

With a squeal she felt herself fall backward and braced for the impact. But it didn't happen. At least not with the hard floor.

A pair of strong arms easily caught her like she weighed no more than a feather as the ladder clamoured to the floor with a loud noise. She looked up into the most shocking pale blue eyes she'd ever seen and her breath caught in her throat.

Instantly she recognized who they belonged to. She'd seen him once before since they moved there, but only at a distance, and he was an example of a perfect male form, but up close, he was gorgeous. Unfortunately the media thought so to, and so did all of his female fans probably not giving him a moment of peace. It was none other than the local Hockey hero Dutch Rush.

He was handsome all right, *and* large, *and* jaw dropping, and obviously very very strong! Today, however, he looked like a regular cattleman all the way from his striped blue and white western cut shirt to his cream worn Stetson, and quite frankly, he was still a dish. Like the rest of him, he had strength in his clearly defined jaw, noticeable by the bulging muscle that kept popping out as he stared down at her like he was slightly put out by her accident. His nose looked like it was broken once or twice, and along with the day's worth of stubble he wore, it just added to his attractiveness. Liz wasn't attracted to pretty boys, and Dutch wasn't pretty, but he was definitely nice to look at in ruggedly handsome way. Again the media would have agreed, because whenever there was an article done on his team they would plaster his face all over the front page of the news.

She swallowed heavily, "Hi." She said to which the man's blonde brows lifted in surprise then lowered in annoyance.

"Hi? Woman, do you have a death wish?" he said irritably.

"No." She smiled completely unaffected by his tone. Being used to abruptness from a hockey jock was nothing new.

Jackson played since he started walking.

Good lord, he thought looking at her worry free expression, *she was nuts*. You'd think she be a little shaken up after such a fall. Regardless of his irritation, he did feel slightly concerned, "Did you hurt anything?"

"No, I landed perfectly in your arms." She grinned now.

Dutch's eyes ran over her face. She was quite pretty. Her eyes were blue but they were a deeper sapphire shade compared to his and she had long straight black hair that he noticed was quite soft as it draped over his hand that gripped her shoulder. "You could have been hurt." He added gruffly.

"Liz!—" Jackson's voice preceded him as he rounded the corner at a run, "—I heard a crash—" he stopped abruptly when he saw a large cowboy standing in the middle of the aisle holding his sister in his arms and then cocked his head in confusion.

Lizzy looked over at her brother trying not to burst into laughter at the bewildered expression he wore, "I fell." She was certain that her being held like a damsel in distress by a famous hockey player who was dressed as a cattleman was a just a little surprising especially when he didn't see the event unfold moments ago. First of all, it wasn't like her to throw herself into a man's arms, even if it was Dutch Rush. Secondly she was sure only another ten seconds would pass before Jackson tore the man to bits for holding her the way he was with no apparent reason.

"Fell?" he said glancing back and forth between the two.

"From there." She pointed to the open screen of the light fixture.

He saw the toppled ladder and the open screen of the light fixture, "Good lord, are you okay?"

"I am—" she averted her finger to Dutch, "He saved me."

"She fell on me." He corrected. It was true. He was headed down that particular aisle and it was either catch her, let her land

on him, or move back and let her hit the floor. He chose chivalrously which wasn't a common move for him, but he couldn't see her get hurt. Moreover he probably wouldn't have even been in that aisle if he didn't catch sight of nothing less than godly perfection in tight jeans. She had a great ass and it lured him down there just in time. He was actually more of a leg man, but that tight piece of anatomy in denim was too difficult to resist and he was curious of what the rest of her looked like. He wasn't disappointed.

"Did I?" She said averting her surprised eyes toward him finally showing some sort of apprehension of what could have really happened. "Gosh I'm sorry."

When they widened, Dutch was almost hypnotized. She wasn't pretty at all, she was quite beautiful. His annoyance seemed to shield him from it for a moment, but now that he had a good look at her, he liked what he saw. Normally he preferred blondes, but the contrast of sapphire blue to ebony hair was very exotic to him. What's more, is that she felt incredibly soft and warm in his arms. Then he came to his senses and realized that he still held her with a male acquaintance, probably her husband, watching them. *Lucky bastard*, he thought. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, he set her right and stepped back.

"Thanks." She said still smiling, "I'll be more careful."

"Good to know, because I'm normally not that chivalrous." He meant it as a jab, but she laughed as if it was a joke. A pretty laugh that actually made him pause to look at her again. It was a laugh that was free of bitterness and hurt. Quite frankly, he was darn close to being spellbound.

Dutch wasn't easy to get along with and he was harder to get to know. He held the record every year for most visits to the penalty box but he played so damn good that he had gotten away from discipline more than once. Most people avoided him because of his temper, but this little gal seemed to be completely

immune. Part of him found that attractive, but his instincts warned him to be careful. He was already finding her likable and he didn't even know her.

Jackson came up and shook his hand making him tear his eyes off of her, "Thanks. I couldn't bear to think of my sister getting hurt. She even faints at the sight of blood."

Only after a wave of relief went through him at hearing the word 'sister', Dutch was surprised at the other man because he rivalled him in height, which wasn't common. If he took a moment to notice him properly without getting distracted by the ebony haired bombshell, he could see the similarities except for the brown hair, he had her blue eyes. Yet, the height difference was actually unexpected because she couldn't be any taller than five four, but Jackson's eyes were level with his own and he was six foot six.

As for his tasty looking sister; even though he wasn't interested in a woman at the moment, he normally preferred taller women, but that little thing was quite the package. Too bad he couldn't play with it. It was true she was stunning, but not his type. He preferred relationships that weren't relationships and zero attachments. A woman like Liz, seemed to be an attached type. She was odd, but seemed sweet and laughed like she didn't have a care in the world, whereas he was as mean as hell, and would probably crush her to bits with his attitude. She may not seem to notice it now, but that would easily change when she began to realize that he really didn't have a sense of humour like she thought. Truthfully, he liked woman who didn't form emotional attachments and were good in bed. "No problem." He finally answered.

"Can I help you with anything? I'd like to give you something for free for what you just did, but we just bought the place a month ago, but I'll give it to you at cost though."

"That's not necessary." Dutch had money, lots of it, and

didn't need any handouts.

It was then Jackson looked at the other man, really looked at him. Before, he was worried about his sister and didn't take a moment to place him. It was odd really because he was famous, internationally famous and Jackson sort of followed his career. It just made him realized how worried he was about Liz which was nothing new. His sister was quite independent and outgoing besides being too darn trusting. She should have known better to try and change the bulb without help. "Dutch Rush, right?"

He nodded and filled in the rest knowing it was coming, "Formerly of the NHL, but now just a rancher."

"It was your knees wasn't it?"

"A knee, yes." He answered. Being questioned about his injury was nothing new to him. He was used to it from all sorts from the media to his fans so it didn't bother him anymore. At first not being able to play anymore did, but he redirected his energy back into his father's ranch and found himself actually enjoying it.

"sorry to hear that, I thought you were great. I use to play too, but I never made the pros. I might have, but then our parents died, and someone needed to look after Liz. Me being away playing all of the time wasn't stable. She was only twelve and I didn't want to lose her."

"How's that working for you?" Dutch actually felt bad for him. He didn't know how he could have lived without hockey five years ago. He loved the game. However, now he was a multimillionaire and decided to retire at twenty-eight before he lost the use of his knees. He came home to take over his father's cattle ranch, which was his second love next to hockey at the time. Now it was his first. He'd had enough of the fame and fortune and fast women—well maybe not the women, he grinned inwardly.

"It's okay, she's worth it." Jackson said and meant it. Except

for his aunt in Arizona, Liz was the only family he had left. "Anyway, enough of my life, what can I do for you." He added with a smile.

Dutch shrugged, "I need horseshoe nails for fencing. Three-quarters if you don't mind." Being famous was a pain sometimes. Although it gave him plenty of women and made him a ton of money, it was too bad he couldn't just turn it off and be ordinary when he wanted to. His father died about a year ago, and that was the only time he'd been home since he was drafted in the League. There were too many horrid memories, but now he was ready to face those demons and try and live normally.

Jackson sensed that he didn't wish to have someone bow at his feet which he was perfectly willing to do. He followed Dutch's career because they were the same age, and he admired him for what he had accomplished in his short career. He nodded after giving him a friendly smile and indicated for him to follow him. "This way then."

Dutch paid for his supplies and refused the discount, "How about you tell me of a good finishing carpenter instead." He reciprocated, "Then we'll call ourselves even."

Jackson displayed a wry smile, "How good?"

"I have a contractor out at the ranch to redo the house, but it's old and needs good finishing carpenter. He brought in one, but I didn't like his ideas."

"Do you need the work done immediately?"

"No, it's a Victorian mansion that's over a hundred years old, and I want it to be done properly. The old oak banisters, stairs, things like that."

"I have after work on the weekends if you're happy with that."

"You?"

"Me." He grinned. "I had to have some sort of income after I quit hockey, so I went back to college."

This time Dutch actually smiled, which was rare for him. For some reason he knew he could trust him to restore his grandmother's house properly. Maybe it was because of his honesty or that he gave up a life that he obviously missed to raise his sister. He was a good man, it was written all over him. Finally he nodded, "I'd be grateful if you came out to have a look."

"I'll pop out today after we close the store. I'll bring my portfolio."

Liz was in the back listening to the conversation. She had never met anyone like Dutch before, even though she grew up around the hockey players when she'd watch her brother play. None of them ever appealed to her. They were macho, conceited and complete womanizers. They drank hard most times and played hard. So why did this one? Maybe it was because he seemed dangerous in a way, and for some reason that excited her. Of course it didn't help that he was gorgeous either.

The lurch of the plane landing brought her back to the present. Micah was beaming with excitement.

Chapter Two

"Liz!" Jackson saw his sister and nephew emerge from the crowd. Micah rushed forward to his uncle and was scooped up in strong arms, "You are almost as big as a man." Jackson said kissing his nephew on the cheek causing him to giggle. "Show me those muscles."

Micah flexed his bicep just like his uncle taught him. Jackson squeezed the small muscle making a very convincing sound of awe.

"Mom says I'll be as big as you." Micah said grinning from ear to ear showing a dimple to the left of his mouth.

“She’s right. You have those Forsythe genes.”

“These are levis.” He said with a puzzled expression.

“Right you are!” He roared with laughter while setting his nephew down as his sister stepped forward.

“Hi.” Liz said.

He gave her an affectionate hug, “I’ve missed you.”

she sighed, “me too. I’m so glad to be home.”

“Wait until you see the house. I redid the third room for Micah.”

“I can’t wait.” She said and meant it. Jackson had a great talent with wood. She couldn’t even imagine what he had in store for Micah.

“Is it a surprise?” came a excited voice.

Jackson looked down at his nephew and grinned, “You’ll see.” He reached down and picked him up to toss him on his shoulders. “First, let’s go get your luggage, then well go home.”

“Okay.”

When he showed Micah his room he released a boyish whoop and ran to jump on the covered wagon bed he made him. “This is awesome!”

“Jackson , this is incredible!” Liz said taking in the western theme, with the exception of the Dutch Rush rookie of the year poster, “Gosh, he looks young there.”

“I found it online. I thought it was important.”

She nodded without meeting his eyes, “I think it is too.”

“Is he in hockey still?” he asked indicating to Micah.

She smiled, “Yes, he did really well last year. I think he’s awfully young, but you’re right. I think it’s important to him that he know his father somehow. Is there a team here yet?”

Jackson hesitated slightly then beamed, “There is as of last year. We even made it to the state Tyke championships.”

“That’s wonderful! He’ll be so happy to know that he can be

in hockey again this fall. We should get him signed up.”

“I’ll take care of that.” He paused for a moment unsure if he should say what’s on his mind. In the end he thought he should broach the subject, “Dutch may come around now that you’re home Liz.” He cast her a sideways glance, “You know that I’ve always thought he should have known about Micah so maybe you should consider it.” If Jackson wasn’t all that sure that Dutch still had a thing for Liz all those years ago, something had happened recently to tell him he did. It was nothing significant because Dutch didn’t talk about his love life, but the one time he mentioned Liz to him it had been several weeks since he’d heard from him again.

“Maybe.” She took a deep breath, “I wish things could have been different, but he made things so clear all those years ago.”

“He’s been a force to be reckoned with since you left.”

She shook her head denying that, “If you follow the media, he always was wild and I don’t think that’s my fault He’s always been plastered all over the newspapers and tabloids for his wild exploits. Anyway, he told me he didn’t want me, didn’t want a commitment, marriage or even a girlfriend.” She watched Micah investigate his room with a permanent grin completely oblivious to the two adults. “I don’t want him to hear Jackson.”

“Sure.” He reached over and grabbed the doorknob, “We’ll be downstairs buddy, are you hungry?”

“Starved.” He answered rooting through the cowboy books on the shelf.

“I’ll order pizza then.”

“With mushrooms.” He answered still sorting through the books.

Jackson shot an amused look at his sister, “Sure thing.” He shut the door, “I swear is IQ triples each time I see him.”

“Try reasoning with it.”

He laughed before he continued, “As I was saying about

Dutch, he's been more wild since you left so I think you leaving has bothered him." He reached up and scratched his head, "I had to bail him out of jail."

She didn't seem surprised, "Yes you told me—"

"I told you about the one time." He confessed sheepishly.

"There was more?" her brows shot up, "Jackson—"

He lifted his hand and cast a wary glance at Micah's door with his sisters rising voice.

She pinched her eyes shut for a moment praying for patience and the next time she talked it was a whisper, "There's been more than once—good lord. How many?"

He scratched his head again and turned it away so she couldn't see his guilty expression.

"Jackson." She said in a warning.

"At least four."

She rolled her eyes heavenward, "Why should I be surprised, he's so damn ornery."

"He's been through a lot." Jackson offered.

"sure he has." She said waving an arm, "He's rich, has women crawling all over him, and is famous." She stopped seeing his sincere expression, "Why do you think that? Has he said something?"

"No Liz, but there's something awful that he buries deep inside that causes him to do these stupid things. Every now and then it looks like he wants to say something, but stops at the last minute. Maybe he wants to talk about you—ask how you are—I don't know. All I know is this guy has reasons for telling you the things he did that day."

"Yes, and it was because he wanted a lover Jackson, not a relationship." She added with exasperation.

He actually was uncomfortable discussing his sister's intimate relationship with Dutch and raised both of his hands in surrender, "Okay, I've opened a can of worms, I quit."

She smiled, "You did start it."

"I did, and I regret it."

"Good." She laughed walking away, "Order the pizza or Micah will unleash himself on you because he's a bear when he's hungry. I need to go and get the last of the luggage out of the car." She didn't act like it, but Jackson's words weighted heavily on her. She remembered that day he rejected her and what she said to him and his reaction to it. Maybe her brother was on to something. It was that brief memory that made her stop and listen to him.

Dutch was sitting down the street when he saw Liz come out of the house. She was wearing a knee length tan skirt and an off white camisole. She'd kept her hair long too. Good. He loved her hair. In fact he loved everything about her. It was nice to see her legs, but he had to admit he liked her ass in jeans better. Even better yet, was seeing it naked. Hell, all of her naked was a treat in itself, and when she was flushed with passion she was bloody magnificent. Only he never told her that and looking back on that day, he wished the hell he did. Maybe she wouldn't have left.

He watched as she opened the door of Jackson's Mercedes and removed a couple of bags before heading back into the house.

He reached over and started the engine of his truck and glanced once more at the house, before turning it around in the street and heading home. Things weren't the same when she'd left, left him. He told her he didn't want anything remotely resembling a relationship, but she was the closest person of the opposite sex that he'd come to care for. He'd gotten rip roaring drunk when he found out she left and spent a sobering night in jail because of it. Although, it might have had something to do with the bar he wrecked not the amount of liquor he consumed.

After she left, the life seemed to have gone out around

him. His mood went from irritable to intolerable. So much so, that several of his ranch hands quit. He had money though and was able to afford to pay his ranch hands a decent wage to put up with him after that.

He and Jackson hung out a few times a week. He liked the guy and made a clear point on not asking anything about Liz even though it was killing him. At least they had a lot in common; hockey—Liz. He'd heard that she moved somewhere down south and every month or so Jackson would leave town to go and see her.

Five goddam years!

He must be a cold hearted bastard not to ask about her. He wasn't sure if Jackson knew about him and Liz, but he never let on that he did. Once or twice he noticed an odd look in his eyes, but it wasn't anger. It took him a while to figure out that it was compassion—maybe even some sort of sympathy. Then out of the blue the week before last when they went out for a drink, Jackson mentioned that his sister was coming home to live. Dutch never said a word. He paid the tab and got up from the table and walked out of the bar leaving Jackson there alone. If he didn't know before that something had happened, he did now. It was rude what he did, and he should have called to explain something because he respected Jackson. However, when he got home there was a message on his answering machine. It wasn't much, but the words that were said made a difference. *Don't worry about it man.* Obviously Jackson did know something. After that, he found a bottle of whiskey and took it to bed with him.

Hell, she looked good—no—she looked incredibly sexy, just like she did all of those years ago. He still felt a stirring in his groin thinking of her and their one fantastic romp on the floor of his study. No other woman measured up to her since that day and he tried like hell to rekindle that passion with

another. It was the only way he could erase her from his mind, and it never worked. She bloody well wrecked him!

When Jackson mentioned her name that day he had to leave. It was that or hit him. He was angry and as far as he was concerned, he had every right to be. She left him and he'd obsessed about her since. You'd think after almost five years, he'd get over her. Hell, maybe he was crazy like his father. He swung the truck around in the middle of the road again and headed for the bar. It was that or no sleep tonight for him.

It was two in the morning when the phone rang and Jackson slept like a rock so she got up to answer it. It was the local police department. Dutch was arrested for fighting three men outside one of the local drinking establishments. They were not pressing charges but he was too drunk to drive. "Is he okay?"

There was a brief pause before the man spoke again, "Have you not *met* him? I'd be more worried about the other three."

"Oh for gosh sakes can't you just keep him there?" why where they phoning here?

There was a chuckle, "Jackson usually comes."

"Of course he does, because he's a sucker for strays." She sighed heavily hearing another chuckle, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes." She hung up to more laughter. Why did they think that was so funny? Jackson had confessed that he had done that a couple of times when she lived in Phoenix, but this was ridiculous. Dutch was a grown man.

Driving toward the station, she thought she should have woken Jackson, because even drunk she was sure he was still a man who could easily affect her. Even now her heart was thumping heavily in her ears.

When she went in the station she was surprised to see that Dutch was sitting on the corner of one of the officer's desks like he was just visiting. He stood up when he saw her albeit a little wobbly.

“There’s my Angel!”

“Oh lord.” She said rolling her eyes. She then looked at the man he was talking to, “Don’t you lock drunks up?”

“No, because we only have two cells, and there’s people in both of them. Last time we did that, he started fighting them too.”

“Unbelievable.” She said looking at him and shaking her head. He hadn’t changed a bit. He was still disgustingly good looking and it was all she could do not to fall all over herself and throw her arms around him. Being irritated with him was a good choice at that moment.

Dutch gave her a sloppy smile. He really didn’t look all that inebriated until he swayed again while walking toward her. “Actually they started it.”

“Sure they did.” She said not believing him and averting her gaze at the same time. She had enough trouble controlling her emotions without looking into those hypnotic pale eyes of his.

“Honest.” He said with raised brows.

She practically forgot how large the man was until he stood directly in front of her with an amused smirk on his face. She had to crane her neck to look at him. “Couldn’t you call one of your women to come get you?”

“They’re sleeping,” he said irritably getting a bout of laughter behind him, “Shut up Bill.”

“Hey, you said call Jackson. I did.” Said the officer, “No one told me he had a sister.” He said with distinct interest.

This time Dutch turned his head to glare at him, “A sister that’s off limits.”

“Come on Dutch.” Liz clutched the cloth of his sleeve, “If you punch an officer they will lay charges.”

“Tuck him in tight honey, that way he’ll not be able to get out.” Said Bill with laughter in his tone.

“He can tuck his own butt in.” she mumbled pulling him

toward the door.

Once inside the car Dutch lay his head back against the seat, "I'm going to pay for this tomorrow."

"You hardly even look drunk." She heard herself say while starting the car. Most men that she'd seen too drunk to drive could barely stand.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, "Well chances are I won't remember much but your pretty face in the morning and not know where the hell I saw you. Hell maybe I am dreaming."

She was hoping he'd think that come morning.

"You could stay with me and keep me warm."

"No thanks. I tried that once." She tried to concentrate on the road as she pulled out onto the highway so she didn't have to look at him.

"It was earth shaking wasn't it?"

"Be quiet." A deep chuckle hit her ears and it reached down and rattled her insides. He was too sexy for his own darn good and the problem was he knew it. Thankfully he'd fallen asleep shortly after and the long ride out to his place was undisturbed. However when she'd gotten there, she discovered that he actually passed out and had to go and wake some of the ranch hands to get him out of the car and to his room. It took four of them to carry his big heavy body in the house. It surprised her because he really didn't look or act that inebriated. She didn't stay. She couldn't get away from his place fast enough. It was hard though, because she wanted to make sure he was okay. She really wanted to be there when he woke up. She missed him so much but her heart couldn't take falling in love with him all over again.

Liz went through the next few weeks working at the store while Micah played around her. She loved the fact that she could bring him to work with her and he thoroughly enjoyed it. He

even made friends from the families that brought their children in. It was good because he was starting kindergarten in the fall besides hockey and some of the kids were enrolled in both. She was happy to hear that, until one particular day when a customer mentioned that Dutch volunteered to coach this year's Tyke hockey team. She was sure she paled several shades before she forced a smile and excused herself letting Jackson take over the sale. She made her way to his office and sat weak-kneed in the chair. A few minutes later he came in.

"You knew about this didn't you?"

"Yes. How do you think we made the state championships last year?" He explained, "We had the best coach in the league."

Her eyes sought out his. "I thought you were talking about you."

He shook his head slowly, "We coach the team together."

"I should have known," she said accusingly.

He took a deep breath and shut the door to the office before he turned back to her, "Liz, this is a town, not a city and sooner or later Micah would have to meet his father. You can't keep hiding from him."

"I'm not." She tried to deny, but she was. She never really went anywhere except to shop for groceries, and it was Jackson that ended up taking Micah to the park to play. She didn't tell Jackson that her heart ached still when she thought of him so she knew that seeing him again would be hard. She also didn't tell him that she'd taken him home those few weeks ago. Obviously he hadn't said anything to Jackson or remembered because her brother would have mentioned it to her.

"All right," he said raising a hand. He could see this was bothering her, "But you need to face this. Micah needs his father—"

"Dutch said—"

"I know what he said, but like I said before I think there's

something more going on with him on the inside. Things he never discusses with anyone. I also think that you were the only one to ever get under his skin.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jackson clenched his jaw. He couldn’t tell his sister that he and Dutch were good friends or that they spend a lot of time together even though they never discussed her. It gave him an advantage over everyone else to know him. Dutch was a private man and never talked about his personal life, not at all—ever, which was odd. Then he made the mistake of mentioning her to him a week ago, and Dutch left him alone in the bar. Those who didn’t know Dutch would think that he was angry, but Jackson could see beyond that. He was upset. Liz may not have realized it, and maybe Dutch didn’t either, but he cared about her. “I have a hunch.”

“Well,” she laughed falsely, “why didn’t you say so? I’ll just dive in faithfully because of that.”

“Liz—”

“I know you’re trying to help,” she said with sincerity regretting her words a few seconds ago, “But I’m so scared that Micah will be rejected by him. Can you imagine that? It would crush him when he finds out who his father is and he wants nothing to do with him—”

“He likes kids Liz. I’ve seen him with them last year during the season. He’s a great coach too.”

“This is different. Micah is his son.”

Jackson went to his sister and crouched down on the balls of his feet taking her hands and squeezing them, “Micah needs to know. Dutch needs to know. Think about what it would be like if we didn’t know our father.”

Tears filled her eyes at the mention of their father. He was a good man and a wonderful father. Finally she nodded, “I guess I need to give my son room to grow, but if he gets hurt, I’ll never

forgive myself.”

“He always has me if Dutch rejects him and all three of us will get through this together.” He knew damn well that Dutch wouldn’t reject his only child. He’d seen the man with kids and he loved them. He may have had a temper of a trapped wild boar, but you’d never know it with the team and the parents absolutely adored him for his patience with their children. If there were children around, he never unleashed his anger no matter how frustrated he got. However, there had been a few times that he’d wrecked a bar in the last year. Problem was Jackson sort of helped him.

Jackson was no angel, but he behaved because of his sister. Sometimes it was hard to get the wild side out of him and now that he didn’t have Liz around, he and Dutch became fast friends because they had a lot in common.

“—and you can’t avoid him forever.”

“If I didn’t still love him so much Jackson, I probably could face him.” She admitted reluctantly. To her surprise Jackson didn’t even seem swayed by her confession like he knew all along how she felt.

He smiled reassuringly and cupped his sister’s face, “any man would be privileged to have you love them.”

“Jerk.” She said breaking into a smile as tears spilled down her cheeks. She loved Jackson and this just showed her why. He was in his early thirties, unmarried and alone, but he still lived to take care of her.

He laughed and stood up while holding out his hand. “Come on, no use sitting around moping.”

“You’re so right.” She said taking his hand and letting him pull her to her feet.

“Why don’t you take Micah to the park and I’ll take care of the store.”

“I suppose with the extra help you really don’t need me.”

“I always need you sis.” He smiled, “But I think you need some time with Micah.”

“I think I’ll take that advice.” She said feeling better.

As it turned out, the next week there was a picnic for the Tyke team sign up. Liz had to go. Jackson informed her ahead of time that Dutch would be there.

This is going to take courage, she thought driving to the park, *but it had to happen sometime*.

When she pulled up in Jackson’s Mercedes she saw that half the town must’ve been event and she knew why.

“Wow!” said Micah, “there are a lot of people.”

“I guess hockey is popular here.” *And a particular hockey player*, she thought to herself.

Micah was out of the car before Liz undid her seatbelt, “You wait there mister.” She told him. He obeyed but he was jumping on the spot with excitement.

“Come on mom!”

Jackson had taken the work truck earlier because he was helping coach the team with Dutch and needed to be there to sign the kids for tryouts. Liz began to wonder if they were closer than her brother let on. It wasn’t unusual for Jackson to volunteer to do such a thing, but there was something odd about him lately. Maybe it’d been there for awhile and she didn’t notice it, but she certainly did when Dutch came up in a conversation. It almost seemed as if he was hiding something. As for the officer stating that Jackson bailed Dutch out a few times, he actually told her he did so that was no secret. She knew they had gotten to know each other when Jackson did the work on Dutch’s house, but there was still something niggling her that told her there was more to this relationship than he let her know.

It wasn’t long before she spotted Dutch, or more like the group around him that were mostly women, some of them

gripping their children's hands giggling and tittering like they were in grade school.

Unreal, she thought, *married, young, old, single, or widowed—they're all there*, but who could blame them. He was a sight. Minus his Stetson, but wearing casual tan chinos and a linen shirt with the top two buttons undone revealing a hint of chest hair like he just walked off a yacht, he looked undeniably gorgeous with his blonde tousled hair, sky blue eyes, and large muscular form. There was a slight breeze and every now and then it plastered that linen to his well sculpted chest.

It seemed the man could look good in anything from a hockey uniform to casual dress wear. If it wasn't his looks that drew attention, it was six foot six of hard muscle that did, making him tower above them all and it was only a matter of time when he spotted her.

Her heart tightened and her belly flip-flopped when his pale eyes suddenly lifted to hers as if on cue, then they slowly slid down to Micah. If she didn't know better, there was a glint of surprise there, but he was an expert at hiding his emotions except for anger of course. She convinced herself that she imagined it.

"Hey mom! That's Dutch Rush!" Micah exclaimed in awe instantly spotting the tall man in the center of a cluster of women.

"yes it is, he lives here and coaches the team." She said without taking her eyes off of him.

"Awesome! Can we meet him?"

If only her son knew how much that statement rattled her. She thought she did an amazing job at keeping the shakiness out of her voice, "I'm sure Jackson will introduce you, they coach the team together." A detail that her brother left out until last week. It looked like she wasn't the only one that kept secrets. In a way she glad for that. At least Micah will have someone looking out

for him if Dutch wanted nothing to do with him.

“Great!”

“Let’s go find your sneaky uncle.” She saw that Dutch was trying to move through the crowd in her direction and she couldn’t face him.

“What?”

She smiled down at him, “Nothing honey.”

An hour later she was still successful in not running into Dutch. No wonder why. There were at least two women hanging off him at all times and she was sure he wanted to see her alone. It was a relief to find the shade of an elm tree to sit under while Micah played with other kids in the playground. It was unbelievable how easily he made friends; mind you he was absolutely adorable with his blonde curls and pale blue eyes and attracted the opposite sex of all ages. *I shouldn’t be surprised*, She thought to herself.

“You look good Liz.”

She swallowed hard at the sound of Dutch’s voice. “I’m surprised that you made a break for freedom.” She said referring to the women.

“I told them I needed to take a leak.” He chuckled.

She almost smiled. It was amusing to know the only way he could get away from his admirers was to fake a bathroom break. If he was trying to surprise her, it was useless. She grew up with a brother who could be just as candid. However when she flicked a glance at him and saw his amused expression, it was obvious that he really didn’t have a choice because he was a sight to behold. Before the crowd was in the way, but now she could see how darn appealing he looked.

Yet she couldn’t help but feel slightly offended. As usual he was too darn confident and arrogant not seeming to care that five years had passed between them and that he could just come and speak to her as if nothing had happened.

He plopped down beside her, stretched out his long legs and leaned back on his hands, "Who's the kid?" he nodded toward Micah who was now being chased around the slide by three little girls about his age.

She sighed at the image. It must be in his lineage. "Mine."

He turned and looked at her with a carefully guarded expression, "I didn't realize you got married." The fact that she had a son with another man bothered him—a lot. He screwed up. He knew he did.

"I didn't."

"Sorry." He said not meaning a word of it, "He's quite cute."

"Yes he is." She said finally raising her eyes to his wondering if he recognized any of the similarities, but nothing in his expression revealed that. Instead he just stared back at her with unwavering confidence. Then her eyes studied his features. Although she was mentally working on facing him again, nothing had changed. He was still able to affect her as if it was yesterday when they created Micah. Right now her heart was tossing around in her chest. *Oh lord, why did he have to be so handsome*, "What about you?"

"Me? Married?" he chuckled as if the question was ludicrous, "Nope." He nodded toward the bobbing head of blonde curls now chasing a little girl around the slide, "Jackson said he signed him up for the team."

"Yes." So he had asked Jackson about Micah. That was interesting. Then he still felt the urge to get the truth from her. Obviously it bothered him that she had a son even though he didn't let on.

"He's got some competition. There are two hundred kids that signed up."

"He'll make it." She said with confidence. Unlike the other kids, Micah actually played and wasn't forced into it by a lovesick mother. Also he actually loved the game and was bigger than

most kids his age, and he was good. She had his father to thank for that, it must be in his DNA.

“You sound so sure.”

She cleared her throat, “He’s had good training.”

He never said anything but his eyes slid over her form.

When he didn’t respond she turned to look at him to see his perusal. He wasn’t even trying to hide it. “Stop it Dutch.” She didn’t know where she found the words to say that, because he still completely unnerved her.

“You were blurry the other night when you came to collect my sorry inebriated ass from the station. I’m just looking at you with a clear head.”

God he *did* remember, “Don’t get them to call me or Jackson again.” She said with a forced sternness. “If you do something that stupid you deserve to spend a night in jail.”

He ignored her and instead settled on continuing to tease her. “To bad you didn’t tuck me in. Imagine my surprise when I found out Eli undressed me and not you.”

“Stop it.” The odd thing was Dutch didn’t have a sense of humour, well he never used to so this jesting side of him was new. She actually liked it even though she was doing her dandiest to resist a smile.

“Eli is sixty five.”

She couldn’t help herself and burst into laughter.

“And ugly as sin.”

“Poor bugger.” She said still laughing and not meaning a word of it.

“It should have been you.” He even missed her laugh.

“You wish.”

He smiled. It was devastating to a woman, he knew it was, but on her it seemed lost. “Dinner?”

“No.” her eyes glanced off him. She tried her best to seem uninterested, but that gorgeous smile just liquefied her internal

organs.

“I’ll cook. Bring the kid.”

“His name is Micah.” She said defensively.

He didn’t mean to sound a little bitter, but it did bother him that she moved on. He never did, but he wanted her as much as he did yesterday, the day before, and every day since that first day he’d had her. He nodded, “That’s a nice name. Micah—what’s his last name?” Then he would find out the father’s first name, hire private detectives to find him just so he could beat the crap out of him for touching her and giving her a beautiful child. A child that he could have had with her.

Oh God, she didn’t think that far ahead! This whole scenario was stupid. Jackson was right in many ways by Dutch being aware of Micah. Moreover here he was, as big as life, as arrogant as ever marching back into her world thinking he had every right to do so. So she finally turned her eyes on his, lifted her chin while brushing her hair back off her cheek with her hand and said the truth, “Rush.”

Be careful what you wish for, popped into his head. It was a full five minutes before Dutch could even find the will to swallow. The whole time his pale eyes locked on hers to see if she was lying. She wasn’t. “Could you repeat that?” He finally said with a look of utter shock.

She felt some smug satisfaction knowing that she actually floored him. His expression was always so guarded. “I think you heard me.” She stood up and brushed the grass of her bottom, “Stay away from me Dutch.” She said before she walked toward the playground to get Micah.

Dutch should have moved but he just couldn’t. First of all, she wasn’t lying because if he actually looked at the little boy more closely as she walked over and took his hand. It was as obvious as a slap in the face. The kid looked exactly like he did at that age. Why didn’t he see it earlier when he first set eyes on the

both of them? Was he too blinded by jealousy thinking that another man had touched her? Jealousy? Dutch didn't get jealous.

That evening the phone rang and it was Micah who answered it. When Liz came down the hall, her son was happily chatting on the phone. She was about to ask who it was when he bellowed.

"Moooooommmmm!"

"Heavens Micah, you'll deafen whoever it is on the other end." She took the receiver while Micah just grinned sheepishly, "It's Dutch."

"Go get ready for your bath." She covered the receiver.

He laughed and ran down the hall.

"What do you want?" she said lifting the receiver to her ear.

"Now is that any way to greet the father of your child."

So that's how it was? It obviously took him some time to let things sink in and now he was completely accepting. Actually it was a shock to her because for some reason she suspected that he didn't want to let a child into his world. "Dutch, it's easy to hang up—"

He chuckled completely undeterred by her threat, "I asked you to dinner."

Oh, that sounded so darn sexy over the phone. "I don't want dinner. You made your intentions clear years ago and I thought I made mine clear this afternoon."

"I know I did and—you never said to stay away from my son, just you."

My son. That sounded quite wonderful to her which surprised her completely. She never realized how tense she was until the relief flooded through her at those words. Her biggest worry was Dutch not wanting to know Micah. However, it was short-lived because now she had to worry about how much he

wanted to get to know him. She wondered if he'd want custody, or some sort of shared custody, but she certainly didn't want to put Micah through that stress either. Then there was what he'd just said. He sounded almost solemn and she wondered if he regretted any of what he told her years ago.

"I would like to get to know my son now Liz."

"I can't have him hurt. He thinks the world of you, you know."

"Really?" Were his insides supposed to soar at those words? He felt like a brick wall was just lifted off of his shoulders. It took him several hours to overcome the initial shock of what she'd told him. Then he was enraged, but when that cleared, he realized that he deserved it. He'd told her years ago that he didn't want her for anything other than a lover. At the time he lied to her and more so lied to himself. He just didn't realize it until she was gone.

It must've been hard for Jackson not to tell him and he was sure that Liz had sworn him to secrecy. However, he understood those few looks he'd gotten from him now. So much for him not knowing that something went on between him and his baby sister. He was just surprised that he didn't thrash him for it. If it was his sister, he wouldn't even wait for an explanation.

"It's true."

"We should at least have dinner to discuss visiting—"

Panic seared through her. *Did* he want custody? "Dutch—"

"Let me finish—please. I have no intention of taking him from you. But I want to be in his life."

"You have no idea how hard that is for me to take. I've spent almost five years nurturing him and—" she felt as if her voice was going to crack so she stopped talking. He seemed to sense that this was hard for her.

"Look, I won't make this tough on you. I swear. I can't imagine how it was to raise a child without a father, but I'll help.

I'll pay—“

“I don't want your money.” She said and hung up the phone. He had no idea how hard it was to talk to him without letting her emotions show. She stared down at it expecting it to ring again but it didn't. Already she knew he'd be in a rage, but she was just as mad even though it was more at herself for her continued strong feelings for him, she was still going to blame him.

Dutch sat there and stared at the dead receiver. Hell, he kept screwing everything up. He hung it up and rubbed his forehead. He was sure he didn't say anything offensive. He should know. He knew every offensive thing out there because he'd just about said them all. Stubborn woman! Well, this isn't over. He stood up and grabbed his keys.

Forty minutes later there was a pounding at the front door. When Jackson opened it Dutch was standing there furious. “Liz?” he said arching his brows.

“Liz.” He said bluntly.

Jackson stood aside and gestured with his arm for him to enter. “She's in the living room.” Dutch was already down the hall with his long legged stride and determined pace, “Don't wreck my furniture. I just paid the house off.” He called after him.

Liz was curled up in a big chair reading when Dutch walked into the room. She looked up and her jaw dropped, “You just don't take no for an answer.”

“Not when it has to do with my son!”

“Calm yourself, I just tucked him in and that roar you possess will scare him awake.”

He took a deep breath and nodded, “I wasn't making you out to be a charity case.” He finally said.

She set her book aside, and folded her hands in her lap, “Well if you're here, sit down. No one likes to be loomed over.” The man was the size of a mountain standing there with his

hands on his hips.

"All right," He sat on the sofa next to her. "I want to be involved in his life." *And yours*, he wanted to say but the words never reached his lips.

"I understand. I do. However, I have some concerns."

"Like what?"

"I don't want any of your girlfriends near him. I won't have my son be a player like his father."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"Maybe I should rephrase that." She said remembering what he said to her four years ago.

"I meant—" he said holding up his hand knowing what she was going to say, "I have none of those either right now, and I wouldn't expose him to them if I did. The women I date are not child material."

She swore her heart fell at her feet with that statement. To know that he still had a healthy sexual appetite bothered her. She had no one since him. It was depressing and hurtful to say the least that a man who she was in love with, obviously still in love with by the way her heart was beating and her stomach was jumping around, didn't take that moment they shared when they created Micah as importantly as she did.

"What is it?"

Obviously he could see the hurt in her expression, "It's nothing."

Hope flared in him at the look on her face, "I meant it about dinner. Maybe tomorrow? I can do a wicked barbeque. Bring our son—" he paused for a moment because of that profound statement of 'our son'. He had a son. A beautiful boy that he definitely could credit Liz for. "—and I'll show him the ranch."

"He would like that Dutch." She managed a smile, "It's all he talked about on the plane ride here. To be a cowboy."

“I’ll teach him then.” Inside he swelled with pride thinking of teaching Micah how to ride. He always believed kids were untouched and unspoiled like adults were and he had a tolerance with them that surprised himself considering his rabid temper.

Lizzette thought that he actually sounded enthusiastic at the prospect of being involved with Micah, but she still couldn’t wonder about his lovers. However Micah needed to know his father if Dutch wanted to be involved, she would try, “No funny business.”

He gave her a look of mock innocence, “What? Me? Never.”

She pursed her lips and eyed him carefully, “If you promise to follow my wishes where Micah is concerned, I’ll agree.”

“For the time being Liz I’ll do that. However, I want him to know I’m his father, and I want him to be part of my life from now on. I think these decisions involving his future should be a mutual basis—“ he raised his hand when she started to protest, “—I can’t say I’m not angry about you not telling me, but I have it in me to understand why you did that. I wasn’t too keen on having a relationship at the time, and I might have been a little harsh about it.”

“Not too keen was a bit of an understatement.” She stood up and waved her arm toward a window, “A few weeks later I saw you with a woman Dutch. A woman! Here I was pregnant and you throw that at me!”

“A woman?” he stared at her puzzled.

“Yes! Do you have so many that you forget which one you had that few weeks after me.”

“No.”

“You kissed her. I saw you putting her into a car and kissing her soundly on the mouth.”

He frowned remembering, "That was five years ago."

"It was yesterday to me." She said crossing her arms under her breasts.

"I hurt you didn't I Liz?"

She turned her head to the side to look out the window or anywhere else for that matter so he couldn't see her eyes.

"Look." He stood up and placed his hands on her shoulders, "I didn't sleep with that woman. She was a past acquaintance that came to town to see me. I promptly set her in a cab to send her back to the airport."

She brought her eyes back to his and narrowed them suspiciously.

"I swear." He said raising his brows. "I have no reason to lie to you now. She was an old friend and nothing happened. As for five years ago, I figured once you calmed down after our argument, you'd see how good we were together and come back to me. I certainly didn't expect you to disappear."

She reached up and pushed her long hair back over her shoulder; a gesture that his eyes followed closely. She didn't seem to notice because she was still reeling from his confession, "You don't pine over women."

"No, I don't." he agreed.

She cocked her head slightly, "Really—me?"

He nodded, "You got under my skin all those years ago." He actually smiled, "I should have known that event produced a child. It was catastrophic."

She blushed.

"Pretty Liz." He said cupping her jaw with his large hands. His eyes softened as he stared down at her.

She stepped back as if she was burned and shook her head, "That won't happen."

"We'll see." He said not approaching her again, "Dinner tomorrow night, you and my son. I'll pick you up around six."

“Okay, but we need to discuss some things.”

“No problem.” He started to leave, then stopped and turned around to look at her.

“What?”

He grinned, “Nothing.” After that, he left.

Liz stood there perplexed, unsettled, and half turned on. “For crying out loud.” She muttered to herself, “How could a man affect a woman so darn easily.”

“You say something sis?”

She looked up to see Jackson standing in the doorway. “No.” she said successfully keeping the blush from rising in her cheeks.

“Everything go all right with Dutch?”

“He wants to be part of Micah’s life.”

“That’s a good thing isn’t it?” he said stepping in the room.

“I guess so. Like you said, I think it’s important that he knows his father.” She released a frustrated breath, “He’s just so darn aggressive.” She said walking over to the window, “I hung up on him, so he barged in here like he owned the place, then told me I was going to dinner with him. There was no asking.”

Behind her back Jackson grinned, “And that didn’t attract you to him at all in the first place?”

“Do you have anything else to do?” she shot over her shoulder.

He chuckled.

“You were right though, he does seem sincere in getting to know Micah.”

“He loves kids Liz. I know it’s hard to see because of his temper and his reputation for fighting, but somehow they get through to him.” He left her alone with those words to ponder over.

As Liz was staring out the window, Dutch was driving

towards his ranch and they were both thinking of the same thing. When Micah was conceived.

For two months, Jackson worked on Dutch's house doing the finishing carpentry that he needed done, and in that time she now realized that they became friends. However, it was Liz who would deliver the supplies that he needed at least twice a week. Dutch watched her, he always watched her, and soon Liz noticed. He never said much to her but there was one particular time that Jackson was working at the store and asked Liz to deliver some supplies so he could get a head start on the stairwell next Sunday morning. She brought them in the house, but when she turned to leave Dutch was blocking her exit.

Soon he had her backed against the wall in the hallway.

"Are you frightened?" Dutch asked bracing his hands on either side of her head to keep her there.

Liz shook her head, "why? should I be?" Of course she was—a little. He was huge, intimidating, and she was attracted to him.

"Because little girl, I don't think you know how dangerous I can be."

"You're not a brute." She said quietly while her eyes roamed over his tan unshaven face.

"A lot of people would disagree." He tilted his head to stare down at her, "A lot."

"I'm not them."

"No, you're different. I agree with that."

Liz tried not to let his nearness affect her but she couldn't help it. She just hoped that what was happening on her insides wasn't showing on the outside. But when she bit her bottom lip and looked up at him with her deep cerulean gaze his eyes dropped to her mouth.

"I think that if I kissed you it would scare the wits out of you."

“You’re probably right.” She agreed.

“Not used to being kissed?”

She shook her head and he gave her a look of disbelief.

“A woman who looks like you do? I’m not sure if I can believe that.”

“I’m reserved.”

He chuckled, “Sure you are.” Everything about her screamed wild passion. It was the self confidence and independence that actually attracted him to her. Her looks certainly weren’t a problem either. The more he watched her, the more he thought she was simply unique, with a hometown friendly attitude and positively gorgeous to boot.

Most of the women he had been with were selfish and needy, but he only used them for showpieces besides sex. Liz was different. He actually liked her more than any other woman he’d ever met. In turn it created a desire in him for her and he really needed to put his hands on her—badly.

“My brother is protective.”

“He left me with you.” He said with a lift of his brow.

“He thought he could trust you.”

“I don’t care what he thinks Lizzy.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“It’s nothing personal, I don’t care what anyone thinks.” He elaborated seeing her insulted expression.

She turned to leave but he refused to drop his arm and instead used his other one to knot in her hair.

This time she did look frightened as he turned her head toward his, “Dutch—”

He ignored her and tightened his hold on her hair, not enough to make it hurt, but enough to hold her there. Then he ran two fingers down her delicate jaw with his other hand, “you are driving me crazy.”

Crazy? Oh dear, she had to get out of there. Her heart

just started tap-dancing in her chest at those words. “Let me go.” She said in barely a whisper. Her breathing began to deepen, and she wasn’t sure if it was from fear or something entirely different. Then she realized as her eyes guided to his mouth, that it was different. It was excitement.

“No.” he added concretely.

His expression was completely unreadable, “Now I’m getting scared.” She breathed out unable to tear her eyes from his. He couldn’t be that mean, could he? He wouldn’t have caught her that day in the store if he was. Yet, his pale gaze held something dark and it frightened her.

“good.” He lowered his hand to her hip and began to pull her t-shirt out of her jeans.

Her hand covered his and tried to stop him, “quit it.”

He stilled for a moment and tilted his head arrogantly, “Why? You’ve been looking at me like I’m the last cookie in the jar.”

Was she? Yes, she was, but she was not anything near his kind of experience and told him that.

“So? A woman doesn’t have to be experienced to know how to please a man, nor does she need much coaching once desire kicks in.”

Her eyes widened, “Oh Dutch please.” She said softly, “I can’t.” She was still aware of his fingers in her hair, and his hand on her hip.

“I can.” He said bending his head.

She tried to pull back, but he was strong, really strong, and managed to hold her easily while his mouth took hers.

After his mouth met hers, she stopped resisting.

Dutch had his own difficulties, because he didn’t expect her to taste as good as she did. In fact she tasted like nothing he’d ever had in his life. Her lips were soft, full and completely inviting and he was sure she didn’t realize they’d parted in an

invitation until his tongue slipped inside and he swallowed her erotic gasp. Before long he felt her arms go about his neck and that meant his hand was free to pull her shirt out of the waist band of her jeans. He did just that, but he didn't stop there. His hands smoothed up her narrow waist, under her shirt, against the most softest bare skin he'd ever felt, just to cup both breasts simultaneously.

Then, in a movement he hardly remembered doing, he moved her back against the wall and had her pinned her with his body as he touched her, kissed her, and relished her uninhibited responses.

He pushed her t-shirt up over her breasts, undid her bra, and moved his large hands over complete perfection. This time he was sure it was him that groaned, but she matched him at the same time. Unfortunately for her she tore her mouth away to cry out at the intimate touch and he took advantage of it and lowered his head to suckle her.

Her fingers tightened painfully in his hair at that, but he didn't care. Dutch didn't mind a little pain to get to the brass ring and this filly was loaded with so much damn passion, he was starving to oblige her. Somehow he'd managed to move them into his study and kick the door shut. After that he became more aggressive as one of his strong arms moved around her lower back as he bent her over it to get clearer access to those perfect breasts. He groaned against her skin when he found out how flexible she was as she arched deliciously back over his arm. His other hand moved up her flat abdomen to cup her other breast and he slowly, expertly lowered her onto the carpet while continuing to sample one and then the other.

The carpet was new, and smelled knew, but she smelled a thousand times better, felt better, and God help him, he was going to have her. He would have sold his soul for her at that moment.

It was easy for him to reach down and undo the snap of her jeans, but getting his undone was a little more difficult considering his condition. He was so hard for her that he hurt and there was only one cure.

Liz couldn't think, even if her life depended on it. What he was doing to her was inexplicable and it made her feel so beautiful, she couldn't resist. The only time she was sure that she floated back down to earth was when she suddenly felt hard male flesh against hers and looked up into pale eyes dilated with desire. Somehow he'd managed to get her clothes off and his shirt was unbuttoned causing his hair roughened chest to move tantalizing against hers. To this day she couldn't recall her t-shirt being pulled over her head. Then he took her mouth again, hard, and unyielding, thrusting his tongue between her swollen lips and claiming her own.

She didn't realize how much of her clothing was missing until she felt something down between her legs and with a cry of pleasure arched off the plush carpet with the incredible sensation that started there, "I can't take it!"

Dutch teased her tortuously with his hand and revelled in her unbridled reaction. He wanted her hard and rough as his own need almost became unbearable, but she was so hypnotic in her reaction to him that he wanted to see more, to make it last. It was almost five minutes of sheer tortuous pleasure before Dutch shifted and pushed hard into her. Then it was gone.

He felt her stiffen and this time her cry was something totally different. It was pain. He was so clouded with lust that he moved a few more times before he realized that she'd become unresponsive. Then his mind started going back over it and recollected that there was a resistance. She was tight, there was no doubt, but it was a definite resistance. Problem was, he was so far gone that it took too long for him to notice, and he might have hurt her more than he thought.

“Liz—“ it came out ragged. “I can’t—“ he pushed his hips down again, withdrew and repeated the motion.

The pain was instantaneous and when Liz opened her eyes she saw Dutch was in a world of his own as his large muscular form moved over her. Then he seemed to try and stop, but by then she didn’t want him to. Even though the initial invasion hurt, what followed was a mind-blowing tidal wave of pure white hot pleasure. She reached up and pulled his mouth down to hers causing him to groan at her surrender and his rhythm changed. It became more forceful and faster. So much so, that they started moving across the carpet until the top of her head came in contact with the foot of his sofa.

Dutch reached up and placed a hand against the obstacle and another under her hip while he continued to move in her with unrelenting force all the while his mouth possessed hers.

Then something happened. Something she’d never fathomed in her whole life. A scorching wave of bliss enveloped her and caused her to scream his name. It was almost painful in degree, but she clung to him trying to preserve it forever.

Dutch was completely aware of her orgasm, and it’s what pushed him to his. With a roar he arched up and pushed his hips hard to hers feeling wave after wave of excruciating pleasure as he came deep inside her until he had nothing left.

Nothing was said for an entire minute. Both of them were breathing raggedly and covered in perspiration. Dutch rested his forehead on the back of his hand that had been gripping the front of the sofa cushion so he could look down at the woman under him. She looked back up at him with eyes wide with wonder. “You are fucking beautiful.” He finally said. It took him awhile to actually find words after that Marathon, but he did.

Liz wasn’t used to profanity, but the way he said that was profound and touched her deeply. In truth, she was speechless. Not once did she ever fathom that being with a man could have

her reaching the stars.

He saw it and smiled down at her arrogantly, "I take it you liked that."

"Oh lord." She breathed.

"Yes, I agree." He moved and she winced, "I need to pull out, bear with me." She nodded and he slowly slid out of her watching her expression carefully. Then he sat back on his heels and reached down to help her up tilting her head up so she would meet her eyes, "I would like for us to do this again."

"Now?" she said. She didn't think she could even walk, much less stand up.

He chuckled, "No. I don't think you can after that."

"You can?"

"Probably after an hour or so."

"Tell me you're kidding." She blinked twice in disbelief.

He shook his head with a sinful smile pulling across his handsome face.

Suddenly she was aware of her nakedness as she saw his and started reaching for her clothes.

Dutch actually would have preferred if she just sat there naked as a blue jay in front of him for the rest of the day because she was that beautiful to look at, but he knew that this was all new to her and allowed her to dress. He stood up and retrieved his jeans pulling them on but left his upper torso bare and his jeans unsnapped.

He waited until she pulled her t-shirt over her head and faced him, "I don't think I can at all."

She was in love with him. There was no way she would have let him get that close unless she was. The reality of it all made her deeply saddened, because she knew he'd never return it. It wasn't his fault because he never promised her a thing and she knew of his reputation. The week before he had gone to Houston for some autograph signing thing and there were pictures in the

tabloids of him with some Swiss model.

At the time, it broke her heart, but she knew what she was doing when she let him make love to her, and she'd silently promised herself that she would never regret it. She had been close to him once and it was earth shattering. However, she wouldn't be at his beckoned call like some woman without morals. Truth of it was, she did have high standards, but she broke those rules to be with him, but she wouldn't ever do it again.

"Of course you can. That was great. I understand you don't know that because you were a virgin, but take my word for it." Even though he said it, it didn't seem a reality until now. Inside he was alive with elation that he was her first yet nothing showed in his expression how much that really meant to him. He'd learned long ago not to let his emotions show and it was a hard habit to change, even for a doll like Liz. He even wanted to discuss this with her further, but couldn't bring himself to ask why she let him have her because again, that would reveal too much of himself.

"Oh I believe you." She said immediately.

"Then what's the problem?" he didn't get her. How could someone not want to experience that again?

"It doesn't seem right."

"There's nothing wrong with two people sharing what we just did."

"For you." She returned trying to hide her embarrassment, "I'm not a loose woman, nor will I be. I don't know how you managed—how we managed to let things get so far, but this won't and can't happen again."

He placed his hands on his hips giving her an unyielding stare, "You're wrong Liz."

She shook her head not the least bit surprised by his denial. She knew Dutch was used to getting what he wanted. He

was insistent, and it really didn't bother her. She knew he'd never hurt her—physically. The emotional issue was under debate. Even though he ranted and raved with the worst of them at times, he'd never lay a hand on her in anger. She firmly believed that. Not only that she grew up with a hockey playing brother and knew the attitudes that are developed under such tremendous stress of becoming a professional athlete. With money and a multitude of beautiful women vying for your attention, it developed arrogance. Her knowledge gave her a bit of an inside edge where he was concerned, "I should have known that you wouldn't listen."

He approached her in several strides, cupped her shoulders and looked down on her, "If you think I'm through with you, you're half daft. I don't take refusal well little girl."

She could see the anger in his eyes but she still wasn't intimidated. "You don't own me." She tilted her head up bravely to show him she meant it. Her brother was about this size, and she was used to him being overbearing even if he didn't have Dutch's reputable temper.

"No honey I don't. However—" he reached behind her and cupped her bottom to pull her against him, "I own this. If you so much as look at another man with interest, I'll make you regret it."

She pushed at him, "let me go."

He did and she stepped back glaring at him, "For a man who wants no ties, you sure have no problem making demands."

"I meant it about other men." He said tersely ignoring her statement.

"I give up." She turned around and walked out of the room slamming the door behind her. Like she would even consider letting another man touch her like Dutch did.

Dutch let her go thinking he'd really been an ass. He wasn't possessive at all, especially not with women. Yet, here he was

making demands on a woman, a sexy, god forgive him, mind-blowing woman without giving at all.

Later that night at supper, she was still preoccupied with what had happened earlier. She wished Dutch was more approachable about a relationship. For some reason she knew that his reputation spoke volumes. He rarely was seen with the same woman twice. She refused to fall into that category even though she was dangerously close.

“You’re awfully quiet.” Jackson said.

“I’m tired.” She said reaching for her glass of water and not meeting his eyes.

“So how did Dutch take you today?”

She coughed while in the middle of taking a drink, “Pardon?”

He waited until she was done coughing. “Are you going to live sis?”

She nodded and set the glass down. “Wrong tube—um, take me?” *Good lord, how did he take me?* What a thing to ask! She was so darn naïve, and Dutch had managed to corrupt her in one afternoon. *How did he take me? Well, Jackson, he took me across the floor on his study. I have the rug burns on my backside to prove it—oh gosh, she hoped she wasn’t blushing.*

“How did he take you delivering the supplies? I noticed that he’s a little abrupt with you.”

She cleared her throat, “He was fine.” *Amazing, sexy, and a hundred percent virile male.* She was impressed that her voice didn’t crack.

Jackson eyed her for a moment, “something wrong sis?”

“No, I’m just feeling a little under the weather.” She lied hoping it worked.

“We’ve both been working a little too hard.” He smiled, “Why don’t you retire early and I’ll clean up.”

He was so wonderful, she thought. He'd spent the last seven years looking after her when their parents died and they struggled until the inheritance came through so they could buy the store. Now, they were going to be okay, she was sure of it. "thanks." She stood up, "I open in the morning. You should sleep in."

"I'll think about it." He answered resuming his meal.

Liz glanced at him for a second before she left the kitchen. He looked lonely sometimes and even though he stayed strong for her, she wished he could find someone. She knew he was doing the work out at Dutch's for extra money, and it was needed, but he didn't seem to have a life of his own.

The next day she was working alone when Dutch came in. Jackson had to run to the city and collect supplies because roundup would be happening soon and they need to be prepared for those few weeks.

The bells above the door jingled bringing her attention to his large form. She was still angry about his possessiveness and his outrageous demands so she barely spared him a glance. However, she shouldn't have even done that from the heat that started inside her body which threatened to melt her internal organs. She couldn't get the images out of her head of what they shared the day before. His naked body spiked a fever in her, and from the mocking look on his face, he knew exactly that. She was busy stocking one of the shelves when he approached her.

"I need to talk to you."

"Go away Dutch, I'm still mad." She said without looking at him. It disturbed her too much. She knew as soon as she did, she'd cave and give in to his demands.

"Yeah well, you didn't leave me to happy either."

To darn bad. "I'll sick Jackson on you Dutch." She ignored what he said.

"That twig?" he let a smile pull at the corner of his mouth.

Jackson was far from a twig. He was close to his size, and being in many brawls let Dutch know that he'd be a formidable opponent, but he was deliberately trying to goad her and she knew it.

"You are aiming for a fight Dutch, and I won't oblige you." She turned and walked away.

He caught her arm and after a quick glance around to see if the store was empty, propelled her behind the counter into the back room.

"Dutch, I'm not a pet, quit manhandling me—" she protested. His grip was firm but not hurtful. She had to give it to him, for a large strong man, he knew his strength.

He turned her to face him, his eyes were blazing with anger. All night he couldn't get her out of his mind. He was aching for her and it was driving him crazy. He stuck a finger in her face, "I meant what I said yesterday Lizzy, don't piss me off when I'm already in an irritable mood."

"Is that news?" she shot back at him, "you always have this chip on your shoulder." She waved at him.

He shoved her against the wall and framed her face in his hands, "If you're not obliging, I'm certain I can find plenty of women that are."

"Got to hell.' She breathed. He wasn't gentle this time when he pushed her, but it didn't hurt as much as him saying that. That hurt. It really did, despite her objections she did want him, but not like that. She wouldn't be at his beckoned call when he had the urge. She wanted more but knew that Dutch didn't.

He released her and took a step back. He never roughly handled a woman before, but Liz was pushing all of those buttons. He'd seen her wince when he shoved her and momentarily forgot himself. Truth is, he'd never had a woman refuse him anything, but here was this inexperienced little thing defiantly telling him no. Problem with that is, he wanted her

more than any other women in his life and what they shared the day before had no equal in his experience with woman, but he'd never admit it.

"I don't chase women."

"I don't care." But she did.

"I won't chase you little girl." He added vehemently

"I won't be your slice of the week." She countered. He was angry, but she wasn't backing down and she certainly wouldn't give in to his bullying.

"Then what the hell do you want?"

"More."

"Liz," he shook his head looking down at her with an unreadable expression, "I can't give you that. I'm incapable of it."

"You could try."

"I have. It never worked. I get restless, angry, and I have no desire to have a wife, girlfriend, or even a consistent lover. I don't like explaining myself—like I'm doing right now—" he added more abruptly waving a hand in frustration, "—and sooner or later, someone gets hurt and it's not me."

Liz just stared at him. Her face must've been an open book from what he said next.

"There's no reason why we can't enjoy what we share right now—in the moment." Her face fell and he thought she was upset at his proposal, but from what she said next, he was wrong.

"Someone really did a number on you Dutch—I'm sorry for it."

For a flash of an instant there was an expression of shock on his face, then it was gone and it darkened to anger, "Mind your own damn business Liz, I'm perfectly happy with what I'm doing with my life now!"

"Yeah it shows." She said softly looking at his menacing expression.

She actually reached for him but he took a step back and released an explanative that made her blush before he turned and walked out of the room and the store by the force of the door being opened.

Liz should have gone after him. She realized that now. Maybe it would have changed things. Perhaps Jackson was right and Dutch held secrets that made him hide his emotions so well.

A week had passed and she hadn't seen or heard from him. Then another. Then one day on the third week she thought she'd seen him at a distance, with another woman. She tried to deny it, but she knew that large male form and the way it carried itself even from across and down the street. She watched as he leaned down to open her door and kissed her soundly on the mouth before she drove away. He didn't see her and she had an urge to step back into the store that she just came out of in case he did. The whole scene made her physically ill as she watched his receding back down the sidewalk. Unfortunately she was ill for several days and finally made a doctor's appointment thinking she had the flu.

Doctor Jacob Hartley was one of two Doctors in town and they met at a dance when she went with his younger brother Lance. She and Lance had a lot of the same interests and became fast friends, but that's as far as it went. She was too busy being in love with Dutch, and Lance wasn't interested in a relationship at the moment. He was a workaholic.

Jacob was married with a new baby girl at home, and like the rest of the Hartley's he was very handsome. He and his brothers possessed dark hair and dark eyes completely opposite of Dutch with his blonde hair and pale blue eyes. However, rumour had it that Jacob was just as much of a playboy until he met his wife Tess. She longed to have Dutch look at her the way Jacob looked at his wife, there was no doubt he loved her endlessly.

Now he leaned back against the front of his desk looking down at her with quiet scrutiny, “the flu huh?” A smile spread across his face, “When did it start?”

“Yesterday.”

Jacob reached behind him and removed a couple of tissues from the box on his desk, “Liz, you’re going to need these because the next question will probably have you crying in tears of happiness or utter shock. When was your last menstrual period?”

He was right.

After the initial blow which left her speechless for a few minutes, the tears did come and she snatched the tissues from his hand and bowed her head. “I never even thought—“

He pulled up a chair and sat beside her, “first let’s confirm it, then we’ll go from there.”

“I’m not married—oh God Doctor, my brother’s going to kill me!”

He gave her a supportive smile, “I don’t think so, Jackson seems like a man who loves his sister. A baby is a shock to everyone the first time whether it’s expected or not.” He cleared his throat, “Unless you don’t want—“

Her head snapped up knowing what he was going to say next, “I’d never! I may be upset—oh lord—a mess! But I’d never do that.”

Jacob breathed a sigh of relief. His daughter was only a few weeks old, and even though he had to ask the question it tore him up. “Well, then we should start planning your pregnancy. You need to take prenatal vitamins, and I want an ultrasound in approximately four weeks.” He reached over and grabbed a file off his desk. Scribbled in it and turned to her again, “Do you have any questions Liz?”

“Yeah, how do you tell the father? A man who wants nothing to do with me or possibly his child.”

He took a deep breath as his eyes studied her face compassionately, “I don’t know. I love kids, so even though I’ve seen it before, it’s hard to understand why someone wouldn’t especially when you look onto your own prodigy for the first time.”

“I’ll need to talk to Jackson.” She released a shaky breath, “together, I think we can figure this out.”

He covered her hand with his, “That’s starting to sound better. I’m glad you have someone.”

“He’s the greatest.” She said bittersweet. Jackson was, but she wanted Dutch to be a part of this child’s life. However, she knew that wasn’t going to happen. Dutch told her his ideas of commitment.

It was a week later that she left for her aunts in Arizona. Jackson and her decided that she should be stress free during the pregnancy and their aunt was needing some help, so Liz took that as a sign not to stay in town. That and seeing Dutch with another woman just helped the decision along. Her heart was broken and the best way to mend it was to get out of that situation.

The store was making good money and Jackson was able to hire a couple of employees. It was hard leaving him, but he’d visited at least once a month and more frequently after Micah was born.

“Liz?”

Jackson’s voice brought her back to the present. She turned around and forced a smile, “I’m fine—really?” she added when his expression showed concern.

He studied her carefully for any indication that she was trying to put on a false front. She was. However, she needed to do this without his interference. So, after a moment he nodded, “Dutch is my friend Liz, I know you understand that, but if he hurts my baby sister, I won’t hesitate to throttle him.”

This time she actually laughed, “I can handle Dutch.” She

didn't doubt his words for an instant, but Dutch had more practise with brawling, she was sure of it, but at least Jackson would give him a run for his money if it came to that.

If it was anyone else that said that, Jackson would have laughed in their face, but for some reason he didn't doubt his sister's words at all. He watched Dutch at the picnic that day whenever his sister was around the other man's eyes were unmistakably on her. After almost five years of being friends with him he'd come to realize that Dutch didn't watch women that way, not once, even when they threw themselves at him. Maybe there was a glance here and there, but nothing like the looks Liz was getting and she seemed oblivious to it all because she was blinded by his reputation.

If Jackson were to hazard a guess, Dutch had it bad. Really bad, but he didn't have a clue.

Chapter Three

Micah had spent all morning and most of the afternoon running circles around Liz after she told him they were going to Dutch's for dinner.

"Does he have horses?"

"Yes."

"Can we ride them?"

"I'm sure that—"

"Maybe we can rope cattle—and Uncle Jackson says he has his own rink and it's indoors and has ice all the time—can we skate?"

"Micah you should be polite and let someone finish talking—"

"I can't help it!" he blurted out before he ran to the window after a series of honks from a vehicle reached his ears, "Mom, he's here!"

He didn't even wait for her to answer and instead tore out of the room to go downstairs and answer the door. Liz fell her face in her hand. If he was this excited about their dinner date she could only imagine what it would be like when she told him Dutch was his father. As far as Micah knew, his father lived far away and that he'd get to meet him some day. She sighed, *looks like today is the day.*

Dutch was just getting out of the truck when the front door of the house flew open and his son came tearing out to meet him. Nothing could have equalled that moment for him. He swelled with pride at the excited look on his face. However when he Micah up to him, he seemed a little confused about what to do and stopped.

"Hi." He said shoving his little hands into the pocket of his jeans suddenly looking a little uncomfortable.

Dutch stared down at his child and felt his heart swell at the sight of him. If there was any doubt before that he belonged to him, it was gone. That pose alone was detrimental for he'd done it himself and Micah was a spitting image of him. Before he knew it he bent down and picked him up, "Hi yourself."

That seemed to open the floodgates for Micah started babbling a hundred words a minute asking about horses, cattle, skating, and could he teach him everything! Somehow bringing the boys eyes even with his made him seem a little less intimidating to him. "Yes, to it all."

"Wow!" Micah exclaimed.

"However," he turned and nodded to the interior of his truck, "Grab those will you, my hands are full."

"Are those for my mom?" Micah said looking at the large bouquet of flowers.

'Yes.'

'Oh she loves roses.' He picked them up when Dutch leaned him in the cab.

“I have a surprise for you, but it has to wait until I get you home.” *Home*. That sounded so profound. What he wouldn’t give to have his son live with him. Ever since Liz had told him about Micah, and he overcame the initial shock, he’d been thinking nonstop on the things he could teach him. Along with that came a flood of pride and love for his son. Part of him wanted to give Liz hell for not telling him, but he really didn’t leave any options open where their future lay. Hell, he treated her badly and knew it. At the time he just could see what he had until she had gone.

“I can’t wait.” He started to squirm, “I’ll give these to mom.”

Dutch set him down and after shutting the door of the truck followed him in the house. Liz was just getting her purse.

“Mom, Dutch got these for you and he said I have a surprise too!”

“Is that right.” She took the offered roses and glanced up at Dutch when he came through the door, “This isn’t necessary.”

Dutch shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans mimicking Micah’s pose only moments ago without realizing it, “I thought you’d like them.”

“How’d you know I liked roses?”

“Jackson.”

“That traitor.” She gave a mock frown.

He chuckled, “Are you ready?”

“Yes. I’ll just put these in water and meet you outside.”

He nodded, “Come on Micah, we’ll wait in the truck.”

Micah didn’t need to be told twice. He rushed out the door like his pants were on fire.

“He already worships you Dutch.” She said with a worried expression.

“Good.”

“Don’t hurt him, I’ll never forgive you.” She added.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He said seriously, “He’s my son.”

She studied his expression for a moment before she nodded, “All right.” She went to the kitchen for a vase and took a moment to put the flowers in them. No one had ever bought her flowers before and she wondered how often Dutch had done it for a woman. *It figures, she thought, that I couldn’t enjoy this one gesture without jealousy creeping in.* They were very pretty though. Lavender roses with baby’s breath.

When she went back out to the foyer he was still waiting and opened the front door for her when he spotted her.

“Thank you.” She said softly as she walked by him.

“Any time.” He murmured back.

Liz’s heart jumped at that sexy timbre. He knew exactly when to use it and regardless of her conditioning over seeing him again, it still vibrated through her.

When they reached the truck, he stepped in front of her and opened the passenger door.

She gave him a questioning look but didn’t say anything and got in. Micah was sitting in the middle babbling away, but she didn’t hear him because her eyes were still on Dutch. He gave her a sinful grin as he shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side. *Oh lord, I’m in trouble, she thought, I have absolutely no resistance.* It was almost as if he could sense it. Or he just took it for granted because he readily affected women like that. It would take every ounce of her will power not to let him see how it worked on her. This was going to be one long dinner.

Thankfully Micah was an endless barrel of questions aimed at Dutch. Much to Liz’s surprise he never got frustrated and answered every single one of them. There were times that she even had to ask him to give her a break to think, but not Dutch. It made her think that maybe he was serious about Micah.

“Oh gosh!” Liz sat straight in her seat when the house came

into view. Painted white, with forest green trim and a covered wrap around veranda, the house in a word, was a masterpiece. "This is beautiful!"

"Three years in restoration. Wait until you see the inside. Your brother is an artist." He pulled the truck into the circular paved driveway and cut the engine.

Liz heard the admiration in his voice and couldn't help but feel proud of Jackson. He really was an artist.

"Can you show me the Cattle Dutch?" Micah said staring through the windshield in awe at the distant corrals.

Liz saw him wince slightly at the sound of his name from his own son. Instantly she felt guilty. For some reason she didn't think that it would bother him as much. She knew this had to be resolved immediately. Micah was too young to correlate the fact that they had the same last name. He mentioned it once but Liz didn't elaborate and he'd let it go finding something else that interested him.

"After supper—"

"What about my surprise?" Micah interrupted.

"Micah." Liz warned, "Where are you manners?"

He gave Dutch a sheepish grin, "Sorry."

Dutch chuckled, "After supper."

"I can't wait!"

Dutch opened the door and Micah was out of it before Liz even got her seatbelt undone.

"Stay in the yard Micah, Dutch will take you to see the animals later."

"Okay mom." Came the reluctant voice.

When he led her into the house she realized that he wasn't kidding about Jackson's skills. Woodwork was incredible. "I feel like I just stepped back a hundred years." She said in awe.

"I love it too." He said while looking at her expression. "Come on, I'll show you the upstairs."

She gave him a suspicious smile, “Where your bedroom is?”

“Why Liz, are you trying to seduce me?” he said with mock surprise.

“In your dreams.”

“Oh honey, you have no idea what I dream about.” He said huskily while stepping toward her.

She could only imagine, “You said dinner—” she interrupted taking a step back causing him to pause and grin.

He laughed, “Chicken.”

She shook her head, “You know you’re a force to be reckoned with Dutch, I’m not heading into that territory.”

“Not yet.”

“Ever again.”

His hand came up and brushed a strand of long ebony hair off her face, “I like your hair down like this.”

“Stop.” She breathed.

A sensual smile spread across his face as his hand lingered there, “do you know that you’re the only woman who has ever said no to me.”

No she didn’t, but even thought she said the words, they weren’t convincing even to herself, “That explains your enormous ego.”

He cupped the other side of her face with his other hand after he tested her with the first touch. She didn’t move back from him so he explored it further, “My ego has nothing to do with that. I know the things I’m good at.” He added with an undertone that made no secret on what he was referring to.

She couldn’t argue with that, “Let go of me.”

“Ask nice.”

“Micah could come in.” How was it possible that a man could seduce a woman as easily as he could with just his voice? The tone he used made her insides vibrate.

“Good, then he’ll see his mother and father in an intimate

embrace.”

Her eyes studied his for a moment, “I’m sorry about that—him calling you Dutch. We’ll straighten that out tonight.” For the first time since she’d known him, she saw his eyes soften with a new emotion and all trace of his sexual teasing was gone. Then he released her while nodding.

“I’ll go start the grill. I promised you a BBQ.”

This time she reached for him, “Dutch wait—“

He paused but didn’t turn around, “If you like you could set the kitchen table.” He gently pulled out of her grasp and walked away.

It was then that Liz realized that Jackson was right on the money. Dutch held something deep inside and for an instant she saw him let it go and saw that there was a complex man underneath that was loaded with emotion. Her heart went out to him. All along she thought it was the element of danger that attracted her to him, when in fact it was that deeply hidden man that he refused to let people see. For now she would leave him be, but for Micah’s sake, she wanted that man to emerge.

Dutch was tossing the steaks on the grill with more force than needed. He’d end up bruising the meat, but he was seething inside. Liz was too intelligent for her own good. There was a reason why he had meaningless relationships with women who were not interested in attachment. How he caved and allowed her into his heart, he’d never know, but now she was like damn Velcro and he’ll never get her out.

Then there was Micah. Micah *Rush*.

Somehow, knowing that she had his son made her incredibly desirable to him, not that she wasn’t before, but it went a hundred fold. He was finding himself obsessing about her knowing that they created such a perfect child. Truth is, he wanted another after seeing Micah. He wanted a hockey team of them. Girls and boys.

His ire evaporated as he grinned staring down at the steaks. She was tough enough to have a few more of his kids too.

He was honest with her when he told her that she was the only one to refuse him. She was also the only one to ever stand up to him and see that his temper was a cover for deeper issues from what she said to him all those years ago. He'd hurt her physically then. He'd never done that to a woman, but she got under his skin. Not one day went by that he didn't regret that, but she wasn't upset with him in the least and knew there was something else that drove him to being the way he was. No one ever saw that before. He kept his feelings deep for a reason. Yet, she saw it and the empathy he read in her gaze was too much to bear, so he walked away. Several weeks later she was gone.

He heard the door open behind him severing his thoughts.

"Do you want a beer?"

He turned and looked at her with a expression of mock delight, "A good woman, my son and a beer? Honey we were meant to be."

She pursed her lips to prevent herself from smiling, "Don't bet on it." She said walking toward him with one in each hand.

"You drink beer?"

"Of course I do." She said with surprise, "Doesn't every one?"

He threw back his head and laughed, "No darling, not everyone does." In fact he was sure none of the women he ever dated drank beer. They drank wine and champagne.

"Do you like wine?"

"Yes, but nothing really dry—what?" He was just staring at her with an odd look.

He grinned, "It's nothing." Just when he thought she couldn't be any more appealing. It's no wonder he was attracted to her. It probably had something to do with being the little sister of a hockey player. Things that impressed other women

didn't even affect her and she knew how to handle herself around him and he had to admit, she was very easy to get along with. Also, she'd already made herself at home and he was glad he didn't have to pamper or entertain her. He loved the fact that she felt comfortable here and was self assured enough to even go in his fridge and get beer. Such a small gesture really stirred something deep in him.

"Then quit staring."

He chuckled and turned back to the BBQ after taking a few gulps from his beer. "Steaks are done, do you want to call Micah?"

"Sure." She said and turned to go find her son not seeing Dutch watch the sway of her backside as she left.

Liz had to admit, the man wasn't lying about doing a wicked BBQ. Those steaks had to be the best she'd ever tasted. Even Micah polished his off and licked his fingers afterward.

Conversation was pleasant and even humorous. Dutch had a great sense of humour when he wasn't raging and Micah was now looking at him with stars in his eyes.

She stood up and began to gather the dishes.

"I'll do that." Dutch stood also.

"No, I don't mind." She said placing her hand on his shoulder, "I was thinking that there were a few things that you needed to discuss with Micah." She added with a glint in her eyes, "I think it's important that you do that."

"It's all right?" He thought she would protest a little more over the subject or at least let Micah get used to being around him a little more. Again she surprised him. What's more is she actually gave him the privilege of telling his son the truth.

"Certainly." She smiled reassuringly. "I'll clean up, supper was amazing, thanks." She went to the kitchen.

"Mom says you're going to be my coach along with my uncle." Micah said as his mother was carrying dishes out of the

dining room.

“Is that all right?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to tell my friends at school—well the friends I’ll make.”

“There’s something else too Micah. You’re mom wanted me to tell you.”

“Okay.” He sat there hanging on every word.

“Did your mom tell you about your dad?”

“She says he lives here and that I’ll meet him soon.” He said excitedly.

Dutch was actually nervous. Something he couldn’t even recall being since he was a kid. However, this was his son and his acceptance meant everything to him. Part of him wanted to be angry with Liz over keeping him a secret, but he already knew it was his fault from the way he treated her. Now looking down at the product of the day they made love, his heart must’ve doubled in size. His son was possibly the most perfect child he’d ever laid eyes on. It never occurred to him that something else beautiful could have come out of that moment. If anything he owed Liz a great deal for this gift. Steeling his nerves he stared down at Micah and took a deep breath. There was no way to sugar coat this and Dutch didn’t have a clue on how to do that at the best of times, so he just said it. “Micah, I’m your dad.”

To watch emotions play across a four year olds face was quite amazing, thought Dutch. First there was puzzlement, then suspicion, but finally, he had to admit the last one made him swell with pride, it was apparent joy.

“You!”

“Me.”

“Wow!” he jumped off his seat and came up to him, “Really, you’re my dad?”

“One hundred percent.” He grinned, “Don’t you think we look alike.”

Micah narrowed his brow as he studied his father's features, "I don't know."

"We do. I have a picture of me at your age, and we'd pass as twins. You have my last name."

"Mom says it was my dad's last name. So—" he stared at Dutch with innocent eyes that only a four year old could possess, "If you're my dad does that mean I'm going to be as great as you?"

Dutch could have wept at that statement. "You already are Micah."

He beamed from ear to ear, "You said you have a surprise for me."

He chuckled at his son's quick switch in topics, "It's in the stable. Do you want to see?"

Liz had just finished doing the dishes when Micah came ripping through the door, "Dad bought me a pony!" he screeched with profound excitement, "A pony! He said he'd teach me to ride mom."

She winced at the volume of his voice but managed a smile, "That sounds wonderful." Her eyes lifted to Dutch's as he came through the door.

"I told him I'll teach him the next time he comes over."

"That's fine." She said trying not to notice the matching grins both boys wore. Gosh if her son was going to look like *that* when he grew up, woe behold the female population.

"Can I watch TV," Micah said looking back and forth between the two, "Dad says he's got all the John Wayne movies."

Dad, dad, dad. She had to stop herself from laughing at the overuse of Dutch's new title. Obviously Micah took it very well. "Sure."

"I'll set you up." Dutch said holding out his arm for Micah to follow him.

Micah scooted out of the kitchen and Dutch winked at Liz before he followed him. She couldn't help but grin at the excitement on both of their faces.

Liz made some coffee and Dutch returned soon after. "Cream?"

"Strong and black." He answered. "You actually made coffee? A woman after my heart." He said slapping a hand in the middle of his chest.

"Good, that's how I like mine." She said ignoring the heart statement. She poured them both a mug and set it on the breakfast nook he had in the center of the kitchen, "This is a beautiful kitchen. Everything is state of the art."

"It's the only part of the house I didn't keep authentic."

"You like cooking." It wasn't a question

"Yes, I do." He said sitting down opposite of her, "You look good." He said abruptly changing the subject back to a personal level. *And you look pretty damn good here, in my house*, he wanted to say, but as usual the words stopped in his throat.

She held up her hand, "We should discuss Micah."

He took a sip of his coffee while watching her over the rim of the cup, "All right." He set down his mug and crossed his arms under his chest while leaning back in his chair, "Talk." If she was going to continuously ignore his personal hints and talk about Micah, so be it. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk about this son, but he wanted to see if she still cared about him. It irritated him that she kept putting him off. He knew he could have had any of those women at the picnic the other day, married or not. He wasn't bragging, he knew the clues when he was given them along with half a dozen phone numbers, but Liz managed to act like he was a bare acquaintance regardless of what they shared in the past. Didn't that day mean anything to her?

It was easy to see the defensiveness cloud over his gaze. She knew that he was already getting possessive, "Dutch, like you

said, this is a mutual discussion. I won't keep him from you."

"I want him Monday to Wednesday and every other weekend." He said bluntly.

"Wait a minute—"

"We could make this easier on him if you moved in." he continued.

"Are you completely crazy?"

"No, I'm aggressive, and you knew that." He added unblinkingly.

"If I agree to that I'll hardly see him with hockey practice and your demands—"

"I gave you a solution to that."

Gosh why did he have to look so closed up? Yet there was a glimmer of that emotion again. Liz knew that if she disagreed there would be a fight, which seems to be what he was aiming for. What if she agreed? Not only would it floor him, but he'd see that she wasn't his enemy, that she loved him, loved her son, and wanted them both to be happy. "All right, but I'm not moving in. I'll agree to the days you want."

After he got over the initial shock, he actually shook his head like he was hard of hearing, "What?"

"I'm not your enemy Dutch. Micah needs his father. Jackson has been amazing, but he needs you." It was probably that moment in the foyer when they first arrived here. There was something deep within him that needed help and Jackson's words ran around in her head. She loved Micah, but for some reason she knew that Dutch needed him more than she did this time.

"You're serious." He honestly thought she'd disagree. He said that mostly out of anger because of her continual avoidance of his obvious affections. Although he did want Micah around him, he thought there would be a fight. Why is it that Liz always surprised him?

“I love my son.”

A feeling went through Dutch that he'd never experienced before. If only he knew what it was like to have a mother to love him like that to the point of letting him go. Liz was an amazing woman. He reached across the table and took her hand in his, “Stay with me.”

It was her turn to shake her head, “I can't do that.”

“Because of what I said all those years ago?”

She smiled, “You were honest Dutch.”

“I was an ass.”

Her brows lifted.

“I think we should try to be friends because of Micah.” He continued before he gave too much of himself away.

“I'm willing to do that.”

And I'm willing to wait to have you in my bed again, he thought to himself.

‘No funny stuff though.’

He gave her an expression of mock indignation, “Who? Me?”

“You're a womanizer, and I won't fall for it again.”

“Liz, you were never in that category.”

She nodded, not believing him in the least, “I should get Micah home to bed.”

“I'll go get him.” He released her hand reluctantly, got up and left the kitchen.

She fell her face in her hand when he left. She *was* in serious trouble. He was so darn masculine, she'd probably get pregnant again just being in the same room as him and he wanted her to stay with him? Everything about him was so sexual even if he wasn't trying to be. He positively dripped with it and trying to keep her expression from revealing how she felt was killing her. Does he have any idea how he affected the opposite sex?

Of course he did.

Women's hearts melted at the sight of him, just like hers.

"Hey."

She looked up and saw him standing there.

"Are you okay?"

"Just tired." She lied. There was actual concern in his voice and her heart skipped a beat.

"Micah's in the truck."

"I'll get my purse." She said getting to her feet and taking the mugs to the sink. She must've been preoccupied because she didn't hear him approach her until she felt his hands on her hips.

"Dutch—" she started to protest until his voice flooded through her.

"My real name is Jason—say it." He bent down and said huskily in her ear.

She shook her head and he chuckled, "You are trying to put on a false front Lizzy, but I'm on to you. It took me a minute, but I realized that your expression is always full of life—except today." He bent his head and touched his nose to the top of her head and inhaled, "I'm a little slow today because you're so damn distracting—"

"You have to stop—" she released a gasp as he pulled her roughly back against him. She could feel every contour of his hard body through her clothes.

"This plutonic thing for Micah's sake, isn't going to work—I want you, I've always wanted you and I still want you. I'll have you Liz and if you expect me to keep my hands off the mother of my son, you're out of your ever loving tree."

"Dutch—"

"Jason."

"Jason." She breathed trying to move away.

His hands contracted up to her waist and pulled her back against him again because she tried to step forward and away from him, "Do you have any idea how good you feel?" his arms

tightened around her under her breasts.

She couldn't take this. She loved him and he only wanted her body, "I can't."

"I remember you said that to me four years ago and it didn't do a hell of a lot for you then."

"Micah's waiting." She didn't know how she remembered that, but thankfully he did.

He turned her around to face him and pushed her body against the counter with his large one. His eyes were smouldering, "I know." He said huskily, "but our son won't always be with us. I'll get you alone Liz, I swear to God I will—" he pushed his hips into hers so she could get his meaning, "And when I do, you'll see how much you've got me riled up."

Oh lord she was heating up already. "Then I'll make sure—"

His hand threaded in her long hair and he lowered his mouth to hers cutting off her words.

The kiss alone was scorching and that didn't touch what it did to the rest of her body. This was the Dutch she knew, the one she loved. His assertiveness ignited her passion and so did that kiss!

He could seduce a woman with his mouth, never mind the rest of his body.

Dutch coasted his hand down to her backside, cupped it and pulled her tight against him. He couldn't get close enough.

Just then the sound of his horn honking interrupted them and he lifted his head, "Oh hell."

"Micah." Liz couldn't believe how easily she lost her train of thought, "Dutch let go of me."

He looked down at her and grinned. He still had a hold of her ass and his other hand was knotted in her hair, "Damn you look delicious."

"Let me go or I'll scream."

"You're turning me on."

So much for her threat, and so much for her own defence, she started laughing.

“Now—“ he kissed her forehead, “—that’s the Liz I remember.” He released her, but managed to thread his fingers into hers, “Micah’s got my patience I see.” The horn sounded again.

“You have no idea.” She knew she should have pulled her hand away, but when she tried, he contracted his fingers around it and gave her a warning look. So much for trying to build immunity. She actually liked to hold his hand, but knew that sooner or later it would cost her heart when he grew bored with her.

They didn’t say much on the ride home because Micah talked a mile a minute. Liz was glad he knew about Dutch because he was literally floating on air. In fact it took several hours after his bed time to try and settle him. Finally Jackson read him a story.

“Go say goodnight to Dutch. I’ll take care of the energizer bunny.”

She laughed. “thanks.”

“How are things by the way?”

She shrugged.

“Got you all mixed up?”

“Oh God, mixed upside down, backwards—who knows,” she said exasperated. “I don’t know if I want to strangle him or kiss him.”

“He cares about you Liz.”

“He cares about women.” She said walking away waving an arm in frustration.

Jackson let her go thinking that this was going to come to a head sooner or later, and it with those two, it would probably be explosive.

Liz made her way downstairs where Dutch was waiting.

"I could tuck him in."

"No, then he'll be up all night talking about the room that Jackson built him."

He chuckled and reached for her but she sidestepped him,

"Go home." She warned him trying to keep her expression firm. He didn't fall for it.

"This isn't over." He said with laughter in his eyes as he left.

She went into the kitchen to make some tea, not even bothering to watch him leave. He didn't need his ego fed anymore. Jackson came in five minutes later just as she was pouring tea, "Want some?"

"Sure."

"Is he asleep already?"

"Flaked."

She laughed and handed him a cup, "Dutch wore him out."

He just nodded and took a seat at the table, "So, do you want to talk about it?"

"About what I said earlier?"

He nodded.

She cast him a sideways glance, "No—" then she pursed her lips, "—he's just so darn frustrating." She burst, "My God Jackson, the man could make mother Theresa lose patience."

He chuckled, "I'm sure he thinks the same about you."

"Probably." She leaned back against the counter and sipped her tea, "He deserves it though."

"Probably." He mimicked with amusement. "But you captured his attention Liz whether you believe it or not."

"I don't. Every time I turned around there's at least two women hanging off of him."

He nodded, "And there probably always will be, he's rich, handsome, famous and mysterious. Don't women like that sort of thing?"

She widened her eyes, "How would I know? I've only ever been attracted to him. He's forceful, yet gentle, knows himself well and knows what he's capable of. I admire the self confidence that he has."

"I think he admires yours."

She smiled, "Well, I had a wonderful childhood and my big brother made sure I was well looked after so I didn't have many insecurities."

"I spoiled you."

"Well of course!" she said as if it was perfectly expected.

He laughed, finished his tea and stood up, "I've got to get to bed. I promised Dutch I'd help him down at the rink tomorrow. We've got to get the ice ready for tryouts next weekend."

She took his cup and gave him a look of pure emotion, "Thanks for everything Jackson. I don't think I've told you enough how much I love you."

"I love you too sis, just remember what I said about Dutch. I think he's lonely too."

"I will."

Jackson went to bed and she poured herself another cup of tea. It'll be awhile until she could settle down enough to sleep. That man had her so worked up.

Just then the phone rang and she answered it.

"What are you wearing?" came Dutch's deep sexy voice.

"I'm hanging up."

He chuckled, "Just give me something."

"I'm not a dirty girl Dutch."

"No, you're the mother of my child and sexy to the teeth, now tell me what you're wearing, and lie if you have to."

She actually found herself smiling into the phone at that statement. How a man could be so darn bold, she'll never know, but something inside made her be adventurous, "Blue satin with white lace."

A deep husky growl was all she heard.

"Thanks." He hung up.

She laughed and shook her head while hanging up the phone. He certainly wasn't boring, she'd have to give him that.

The next day Jackson met Dutch at the local Rocksville arena. What people didn't know was that Dutch paid the employees to keep the ice just right because there wasn't enough money in the budget to do it the way he wanted. Also he and Jackson volunteered to coach. They didn't receive any compensation but they did get just about all the ice time they wanted because of it.

He also organized local fundraisers to pay for the hockey equipment and uniforms that some of the kids couldn't afford. Maybe that's why he hadn't had to pay bail for a few of those last times for the bars he tore apart. Regardless, he always paid the damages. Despite everything Dutch did, he was still seen as a local hero and for some reason the townsfolk accepted his behaviour and it was never around the kids. Jackson knew he wouldn't be as lucky if it was him behaving in such a way.

"How's Liz?" Dutch asked.

Jackson would have thought hell just froze over and it must've been clearly written on his face.

Dutch shrugged, "Hell Jackson, it was just a question."

"One that you've neglected to ask in five years." He countered with an amused smirk.

He stared at him for a moment with his pale eyes. It really wasn't effective if the man was the same height as him because normally it would be intimidating but Jackson just grinned.

"What are your intentions with my baby sister Dutch?"

"None of your damn business."

"No? You opened that door, so finish it." Jackson said seriously.

He reached up and scratched his head tousling his blonde hair, "I like her."

"That's a little obvious Dutch."

He flashed him an irritated look, "I think I've said enough."

"I meant that you have a kid together. It's obvious that you like her."

Dutch nodded but never said another word.

That afternoon, Liz was trying to bake bread, but Micah was running circles around the table. His father phoned an hour ago and said he was taking him out to the ranch to teach him to ride his new pony. It seemed to be every twenty seconds he was asking if his dad was here yet.

"Not yet." Came her repetitive answer.

Just then she heard the front door open and so did Micah by his sudden disappearance followed by a boyish yell which meant he was hoisted on a strong beefy shoulder.

Soon the door of the kitchen opened and Dutch walked in with a wiggling Micah on his shoulder, followed by Jackson, "I smell fresh bread!"

After she glanced at the crew she rolled her eyes and turned back to her pan of buns. "they're not for you."

"Aww did you hear that Micah?"

"I did." He said erecting himself in his father's arms, "Mom gets mad if we start grabbing at her food when she didn't take it out of the pan yet." He said in a whisper that could be heard around the room.

"Is that right? Mom won't let me have a bun?" he teased.

"uh-huh." He answered grinning at his father's mischievous glint.

Dutch put a finger to his lips and reached around as she turned away to place the buns on a cooling rack and snagged one.

She smacked his hand with a flipper but he managed to hang

on to it taking a big bite and making a sound of satisfaction while giving her a triumphant look.

“I’ll make you pay for that.”

He leaned down and kissed her abruptly on the mouth before spinning away with Micah in his arms, “I’ll be back by supper.”

“You’re not invited.” She said glaring at his back.

“bye mom!” Micah said twisting around to look over his father’s shoulder while chewing on the other half of Dutch’s bun. Then they were gone.

“the nerve.” She said still looking at the empty doorway.

Jackson cleared his throat, “I already invited him.”

She turned to face him waving the flipper in his direction and giving him the same look, “I should smack you with this. You’re not helping.”

He held his hands up in surrender, but not before he stole one of her buns and ran out of the kitchen.

“I’m cursed.” She mumbled to herself, “Three men and one woman.”

Liz had to admit that dinner was fun. She never realized how close Jackson and Dutch were until she saw them together. They joked around like they’d known each other for years. It was then that she realized why Dutch now had a sense of humor. Jackson was always playful, but Dutch wasn’t. Obviously some of her brother rubbed off on him. Chances are it was always there but buried deep for some reason.

The friendship was surprising to her because she never realized how much they needed each other. It was no wonder that Jackson insisted that she let Dutch in her and Micah’s life. It was obvious that he’d come to care for him. Suddenly Dutch set his eyes on her and she didn’t have a chance to avert hers. A smile spread across his face knowing that she watched him.

She narrowed her gaze and shook her head causing his smile to break into a grin.

“So Liz,” he said not trying to keep the laughter out of his voice, “How good are you at arranging fundraisers?”

‘Fundraisers?’

Jackson broke in, “Dutch and I were hoping that you could arrange a party out at his ranch. We’ll be busy with tryouts and coaching besides our own businesses these next few weeks and were hoping that you could do this.”

Her brows rose, “For how many?”

“Considering it’ll be out at Dutch’s, I’m thinking that most of the town will be there.” Jackson teased but his sister didn’t hear his tone, she obviously only heard ‘most of the town’.

Her eyes widened.

Dutch chuckled, “We’ll sell five hundred tickets.”

“You want me to arrange a party for five hundred?”

“Considering your cooking skills, I wouldn’t mind if you catered it.”

This time she grinned, “You like my cooking?”

“Its heavenly.” Jackson agreed.

I like a hell of a lot more than that, he thought, “Yes, I agree. You can use my kitchen and hire who you need to help.”

Liz thought, why not? She spent most of her time with Micah because Jackson had several full time employees to help him out and he’d told her time and time again to relax and spend time with Micah. This was just a way that she could do that. He could come with her out to his father’s. This was a win win situation, “Okay.”

“Great!” Dutch was genuinely glad that she agreed that way he wouldn’t just have his son out at his place, but Liz too. His fulltime job was his ranch so he was always there if he wasn’t at the rink. That way he could spend some time with her.

Spend time with her?

When had he ever wanted to do such a thing with a woman?

"It'll take me a few days to create a menu." She said interrupting his thoughts.

"Take your time."

"I'll have to come out and do an inventory."

"whatever you want Liz." he grinned.

She knew exactly what he meant and it had nothing to do with catering. Again she narrowed her eyes at him.

"I can ride my pony then!" Micah interrupted.

"Yes, you can." Dutch agreed, then he inhaled deeply, "What is that smell?"

"Apple pie. I put it in when I went and made coffee."

"Marry me." Dutch said teasingly causing Jackson to laugh.

Liz was halfway out of her chair and paused. It was only a slight hesitation because no one seemed to notice, but she quickly recovered and rose from her seat to go to the kitchen. Obviously he didn't realize the impact those words would have on her. She didn't either, but having a vision of being with him the rest of her life and raising Micah and maybe a few more kids was quite profound and she saw no humour in it whatsoever.

After dinner and light conversation over the next few hours, Micah had curled up to his father on the sofa and fallen asleep. Liz saw Dutch cast several glances at him while talking to Jackson and there was no mistaking the pride displayed in his expression.

"I'd better get him to bed." Liz stood up.

"I'll do it." Dutch quickly said already scooping him up in his arms. Micah didn't even rouse a little. "Want to show me his room?"

She nodded, and walked ahead of him.

Dutch was amazed that his son didn't even wake up as his mother undressed him and tucked him under the covers.

"He sleeps like a corpse." Dutch said.

She smiled, "Most kids do."

"I didn't realize." Dutch was one of those kids that didn't sleep well, but he had reasons for it. "He has no worries I guess."

She saw something in his eyes, "No he doesn't. I like to keep things that way."

"I do to."

She placed her hand on his arm, "Regardless, he can wake, let's go."

Dutch looked down at her but didn't move, "You sure gave me a beautiful son Liz. Thanks."

She stared up at him knowing it wasn't often he felt gratitude towards someone. "It was a gift to me too Dutch."

"I wish I was there for you."

She felt her eyes water, "It wasn't your fault."

"How could you say that after all of these years? I said some terrible things to you."

She cast a glance at Micah who still hadn't moved, "I guess motherhood makes you realize how precious life is. I wasn't angry with you. I was scared, but Jackson was very supportive."

He cupped her face in his large hands, "I should have been there. I meant it when I said I was an ass. Because of it, I missed out on some precious years chasing you away like I did."

"You didn't. It was my decision."

"We should get married. I wasn't joking at dinner." He knew he sounded as if it was, but he'd meant it.

"This isn't a reason." She protested. Micah wasn't a reason to get married.

"It's a start."

"Not enough Dutch—"

"Jason."

She breathed deeply, "Jason."

He bent down and brushed his mouth across hers, "I'm going to go. I'll come and get you and Micah tomorrow so you

can start planning for the party.” He didn’t want to start arguing with her in front of his sleeping son. Maybe she was right. Liz was loaded with love and he couldn’t return it.

“All right.” She really should have been protesting these small shows of affection, but she liked them too much.

“I’ll see myself out.” He said releasing her and walking away.

Liz watched him go thinking that she’d love to be married to him for Micah’s sake and her own sanity. But could she trust him? Not only about the women, but not to hurt her. Then there was the big reason. He didn’t love her. He may have loved Micah, but to her, it wasn’t enough. Her parents loved each other deeply and she wanted that.

Chapter Four

Over the next few days Micah clung to Dutch like glue, but he revelled in it. They were inseparable and that gave Liz time to plan an amazing party. Jacob Hartley’s wife Tess helped her and over the next week they became fast friends. She had a son besides her daughter Emily, named Tyler who was several months older than Micah and they hit it off. Both of them made the Tyke hockey team the week before and Tyler was elected Captain. Dutch said that Micah was the better player, but he explained to him that it would look like favouritism if his dad and uncle made him captain. Micah didn’t really care as long as he got to play. Right now both the boys were out riding with Dutch, while Emily and Tess were helping with the decorations.

“So I took the information to the printers on the way here like you asked,” Said Tess, “I think half the tickets are already sold and they’re not even printed yet. Everyone I ran into asked for one.”

“It figures.” Liz chuckled. Tess was about a year older than her and even though they’d been practically inseparable over the

past two weeks, no one could mistake them for sisters. They looked exact opposites except for their almost equal height. Tess had blonde hair and green eyes, and was an absolute knockout. Liz didn't think she was ugly by any means, but she could certainly see why a dish like Doctor Hartley married her. "All of them women I'm sure." She continued. She was thankful for all of Tess's help and told her she couldn't have done this without her only about a dozen times that day.

Tess cast her an amused sideways glance, "I've been in that boat too Liz. However, I've learned that it comes with the territory. Jacob only has eyes for me." She smiled confidently, "I will tell you it took a lot of convincing on his part."

"I'm sure it did." She said with a smile, "He's a dish."

Tess smiled shyly, "that he is." Then she abruptly changed the subject, "Jackson says that Dutch is crazy about you."

"My brother wishes to see me happy. I think he would like to see us together, but Dutch is too wild."

Tess nodded, "You'll get no argument from me. Jacob stitched him up last month. He caught a broken bottle in the head." She pointed at an area behind her left ear.

"I didn't know that." She said wide-eyed, "He's going to get himself seriously hurt someday."

She shrugged, "Your brother had the makings of a black eye."

She rolled her eyes, "I hear stories, but they never tell me anything, so I give up."

Tess laughed, "They're boys. I grew up around the Hartley's. There's a reason why Lance is a lawyer. Colton wrecked a few bars himself. It's nothing I'm not used to. In fact, my own husband attacked an emergency room doctor when I had a ruptured appendix."

"I heard about that. Lance told me."

"Have you seen much of him?"

“Lance? No, he’s been in the store to see me a couple of times, but we’re just friends.”

“He told me that.” She winked at her, “I’m trying to set him up with one of the nurses that works for Jacob, she’s great. Her name is Tammy.”

“Good luck, he doesn’t seem to want a relationship and I’d like to meet her if you think she’s good enough for Lance.”

“I’ll introduce you because I know you’ll hit it off. And he doesn’t want a relationship because he’s a workaholic, but so was my husband.” Tess said with emotion, but he’s in love with his kids and likes to spend time with them.”

“I can relate. I haven’t hardly seen Micah since I came back, so I can understand.”

“Dutch is crazy about him too. Maybe you two should try and have another—“

Liz held up her hand, “Stop.”

Tess laughed, “We’ll you’re practically married anyway Liz and this is the modern age.”

“Not married in a few ways Tess, and that’s all I’m saying. Quit teasing me.”

She laughed again, “All right, it was cruel.” Tess may have sounded like she was teasing, but she actually meant it. In the past few days that she’d been at the ranch helping Liz set up for the party, she noticed how Dutch looked at her. Maybe he was a womanizer, but he certainly cared about Liz.

Just then a howl filled their ears and Liz’s motherly instincts set to alarm mode, “Micah!” she rushed out of the house to see Dutch loading him into the truck, “What happened.”

“he fell,” Micah was still howling. “I’ll take him to the hospital. I think he broke his arm.”

“I’m coming.” She said just as Tess came out of the house.

“All right.” He looked past her to Tess, “Are you okay here by yourself.”

“I’m fine. I’ll keep working. Phone and give me an update when you can.”

Micah’s howls decreased to sniffles as he held his arm close to him. Liz stared out the passenger window with a torrent of emotions going through her. It was an accident, she knew it was, but it didn’t help her in thinking that Dutch was careless with him. Yet, when she glanced at him she could see the guilt and concern etched in his face like it would be in stone. He didn’t need her berating him, because he seemed to be doing enough of it on his own.

Several hours later the doctor cleared Micah with a sprain and put his arm in a brace.

“what about hockey?” he said staring up at the doctor with red rimmed eyes.

He grinned over his head at Dutch before settling his eyes on him again. “If it doesn’t hurt to hold your stick with the brace on, you’ll be okay, but no hard playing for a few weeks.”

He was visibly relieved.

That same expression was mirrored on Dutch’s face, but it was more related to it being a sprain and not a break, “Sorry little man.” He felt his son’s pain as if it were his own.

“What happened?” Liz finally asked. She had to wait until she calmed down enough to say it without sounding accusing.

“He was climbing one of the corral fences and lost his footing.”

“I wanted to see the baby cows.”

“Micah, you need to be more careful. I near had a heart attack when I heard you cry.”

“Sorry mom.” He lifted his brace with the camouflage print, “This is cool though.”

She rubbed her forehead.

“Liz, I’ve broken plenty of things—”

“He’s not even five years old Dutch.” She interrupted not

able to keep her tone light anymore.

“I’m almost a man.” Came the voice next to her.

She pinched her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

“I know old he is. I feel guilty enough.”

“Mom—dad, can we go home?” Micah said not happy that his parents were arguing.

She looked down at the worried expression her son held and nodded. She was sure Dutch did feel responsible, and she wasn’t helping by fighting in front of their son, “Sure honey.” She held out her hand and Micah took it. However, when Dutch slipped his arm around her shoulders she gave him a look that told him this wasn’t over.

Then he bent down and whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry.”

For some reason that sincere statement sent a wash of emotion through her and it made her feel like she was being too hard on him. He was new at this father business, and he was trying. she couldn’t possibly expect him to get it right immediately. There were a lot of children out there that didn’t have such devoted fathers and she instantly felt guilty knowing he was already beating himself up. “Me too.” She said with a slight smile. “I worry.”

“I know. We’ll be more careful. I’ll set some ground rules for Micah when he’s with me. There’s worse things out at the ranch that could hurt him no matter how much I watch him.”

“Thank you Dutch.” She said genuinely.

All three of them left the emergency room holding onto each other. To anyone who didn’t know them, they would think that they were a family.

The next morning Liz went to watch hockey practice and sat in the bleachers with the rest of the parents. She wanted to make sure that Micah was going to be okay. As usual Micah was

amazing. He was the fastest skater on the ice and it was obvious he clearly enjoyed the game. There were other kids that seemed less enthused to be there, but many eager parents on pushing their kids into the sport.

After the game the single women flocked around Dutch, but she noticed that Jackson didn't wasn't standing alone himself. She shook her head and her brother and tried her best to stifle her jealousy over Dutch. One woman in particular Amy Martin was flirting outrageously with him. She had the unfortunate luck to sit behind the woman in the bleachers and listen to her rant about Dutch the whole time to her friend, who sat beside her. Liz wanted to reach down and stick gum in her hair that was on the floor in front of her but she resisted. It was juvenile but she couldn't help herself. The woman seemed to think that she and Dutch had a thing and as far as she knew from Jackson and what Dutch had said, was he didn't have anyone at the moment.

She sighed, so when would he have someone? She'd been refusing his hints for weeks and she knew it was only a matter of time before someone as virile as he was would start looking elsewhere. A sick feeling formed in her gut over it and it still didn't leave when Amy was hanging off his arm trying to invite him to a movie.

"Mom!" Micah separated from Dutch and pulled Tyler Hartley along with him.

She was grateful for her son's interruption, "hi."

"Did you see? I got two goals, and Tyler got the third."

"I did. You two are amazing!" they both gave her grins that threatened to split their faces, but her eyes flicked back up to Dutch who was involved in talking with Amy. She couldn't hear what was being said this time, but when the woman tilted her head back and released a laugh, she wanted to go and key her car. The yellow convertible was just a tribute to how shallow she was. It was a two seater and by no means a carpool vehicle.

Obviously the divorce paid well.

“Don’t let her bother you.” Jackson said from behind.

“I’m not. He can see whoever he wants.” She lied pathetically.

“She’s not his type.”

“That’s the type he dates Jackson.” She turned to face her brother.

“I said she’s not his type, not that’s the type he doesn’t like.” He waved a hand, “Besides, Micah is his number one priority right now. He wouldn’t put him aside for a woman like that.”

She shrugged, “I don’t care.”

“You need to get used to things like that.” He nodded toward Amy who was picking an imaginary piece of fluff off of Dutch’s chest, then smoothing his shirt.

“She’s bold.” Liz seethed, “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go and key her car.”

It took Jackson a moment to let that sink in and by then Liz was almost out the front door when he stopped her, “You aren’t.”

“I am.”

“Not that I’m disagreeing sis, but she’s wealthy and could probably afford a good lawyer, I’m not so wealthy.”

Her shoulders slumped.

He nearly had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing, “You could give her some healthy competition.”

“I’m not a harlot and I won’t act like one.” She turned and walked away, “I’ll meet you at home.”

That wasn’t what he meant and she knew it but her temper was showing. Jackson waited until he saw the Mercedes drive away to make sure she didn’t make due on her threat. Then he went back inside to find Dutch heading toward the door caring the boys equipment bags with the two of them following. “Where’s Liz?”

“She left.”

“left?”

“Boys, go get in the truck. First one there gets to pick where we go for treats.”

With a chorus of whoops they tore out of there.

“What’s wrong?” Dutch said sensing that Jackson wanted to talk to him.

“Liz seems to have an issue with women hanging off of you.” To Jackson’s amusement Dutch looked puzzled as if it didn’t even register.

“Amy Martin.” He added

He made a face of distaste, “she’s an outrageous flirt Jackson, that’s it.”

“Maybe you should let her know that you have something going on with my sister then.” Jackson knew he shouldn’t have said anything when he saw the other man’s eyes cloud over. Not only that, this wasn’t his business, but his sister hurting was.

“Your sister and I have nothing going on, don’t presume—“

“You asked her to marry you.” He interrupted.

“She told you that?”

“You said it at dinner Dutch, I knew you weren’t kidding.”

He got angry. Why did it seem like these two had intuition where he was concerned? First of all he wasn’t comfortable with Liz being able to read him right despite his outward appearance, now Jackson? *Aw hell*, he thought. “For your information she turned me down—twice. I asked her again. I know you don’t get it, so let me lay it out for you. Your sister doesn’t want me as a husband. She told me that. So that leaves me free and clear to screw whoever I want.”

“Don’t be a bastard Dutch. You know it wasn’t meant like that. You need to talk to her—“ he held up his hand when he was about to protest, “I mean talk to her. You demand things, tell her things, but never ask. If you talked to her and found out how she

feels, I'm sure you'd react differently."

"Liz has no problem telling me how she feels." He answered tersely.

"About everything, but you." Jackson clarified. "She's never told you how she feels about *you*." The defensiveness seemed to clear out of Dutch's expression then.

Jackson was right, Liz never said anything in that area, but he assumed she had affection for him because of what she'd allowed him to do to her. It was true that he was conceited where women were concerned. No one could blame him, most women he slept with had no problem telling him how appealing he was, but Liz was the only one that didn't spill all over him like the Amy Martins of the world. Somehow in all of this he craved her attention more than any other woman in his life. Something about it made her special to him because he knew she didn't give it lightly. However in the midst of it he never considered that her affections ran deeper than he supposed. Well, it was no secret that he wasn't a selfish person and to think about another's feelings was new to him. "About me?" He said with peaked interest.

"Yes."

"I suppose you know."

"I've said enough. The rest is up to you." He turned, "just remember how something like that looks to her. She seems tough but she hurts deep."

Did she? If she did, she hid it well. Is that why she left all those years ago—because he'd really hurt her? He knew he did, but not to what extent. If Jackson was right, every time a woman came near him a bit of her probably did feel that pinch and women came near him a lot. Oddly enough, men were around her too, but they never touched her like the women did to him so he never thought about it. Maybe she didn't flirt with them or give them that feeling that they were allowed to paw her, but he

had no problem touching her.

God, he loved touching her.

However if another man ever put their hands on her, he knew only a split second would pass before he beat the shit out of him. That theory just hadn't been tested because it hadn't happened, but thinking about it now, he knew he wouldn't hesitate. She was gorgeous and that thought rubbed him the wrong way. Until now it hadn't even occurred to him that she hadn't been approached because it's obvious that they share a child. Dutch was mean when angered with a well known reputation. Of course no one wanted to make an enemy out of him. He could be violent and he certainly would be over Liz. As far as he was concerned she belonged to him whether she realized it or not.

Come on, I promised the boys treats." Jackson said seeing that his words were sinking in.

Dutch just nodded and followed him out the door. He needed to talk to her like Jackson said.

Meanwhile Liz was wiping the tears from her eyes as she drove home. How she even considered getting re-involved with Micah's father was ridiculous. She couldn't handle that one woman, how could she handle a herd of them?

Once at home she went to the downstairs bathroom and washed her face. She was no better than the rest of them. She was stupid and love-sick.

The sound of the door opening made her know that Jackson was home. She didn't want to be seen like this, and quickly tried her best to freshen up before coming out of the bathroom. However it wasn't Jackson that was waiting outside the door.

Dutch eyed her carefully. She'd been crying. His heart constricted in his chest at the sight, "Honey, there's no need to get jealous."

"I'm not." She said defensively. "It's windy. I got dust in my

eyes.”

“Liar.” He said stepping up to her and cupping her face in his hands so he could look down at her, “You’re the only one I’ve been crazy for lately.”

Lately. Meaning there’d be others after just like there were others before. “I’m fine. It’s silly. I’ve just had a trying week.”

His thumbs smoothed over her cheeks, “uh-huh.”

“Where’s Micah?”

“Sleepover at Tess’s. I told him it would be fine, but we need to take some clothes out there. Care to go for a ride.”

“You should have asked me first.” She was trying to regain control of her vulnerability but was failing miserably.

“I wanted some time with you Liz. That’s not a crime.”

She stepped back then, “You are assuming I want to spend time with you. I don’t.”

“Uh-huh.” He said again, “Did you want to go get his pyjamas?”

“You just don’t listen.” She said in frustration as she turned to go up the stairs.

“Not when you feed me bullshit.”

She paused on the stairs for a moment before continuing without saying a word. Of course it was.

He smirked at her gesture feeling triumphant in reading her right.

Ten minutes later they were heading out to the Hartley’s lake house.

Liz was still seething from the episode back at the house. Seeing her vulnerable was not an option. He already had her heart but there was still some threads of dignity left in her. If he knew how she felt, he’d rule her completely and she couldn’t let him.

“You’re sulking.”

“I’m angry, there’s a difference.” She shot back at him.

‘Liz, I can’t help how women behave around me.’

“You weren’t fighting for freedom.” She knew there was no use trying to hide it, he obviously knew what was bothering her.

He chuckled, “No, maybe I wasn’t but you’re acting like I sleep with every woman that hangs off of me.”

“don’t you?”

“That’s low Liz.” He said giving her a contemptuous look, “How many lovers have you had since you left?”

She turned and looked at him, “None of your damn business.”

“It is. You tell me that you don’t want my women around Micah, but you have lovers and its fine?”

“I raised him. I can make those decisions.”

Dutch released a curse that would make a fisherman blush and pulled over to a roadside rest stop. He cut the engine and turned to face her, “Since when do you have double standards?”

“I don’t care who you sleep with.” She shot at him.

“You do, or you wouldn’t be so angry.”

She snapped her jaw shut and looked out the windshield, “Can we go?”

“No, last time I walked out of your life, you left mine for a very long time. Now we need to resolve this. How many lovers Liz?”

She narrowed her gaze on him. “Now who’s talking double standard? You’re being insistent because you want to know if there was anyone after you.”

“I do.”

“Does that taint me in a way?”

“No—that would be unfair.” He was being ridiculous and he knew it, but it was killing him to think that another man touched her.

“Because you’ve had no problem finding women to warm your bed.” His expression closed up with that statement.

"I gave you an opportunity to be the one there, but you refused me."

"I'm not your whore Dutch."

He winced at that word, "There's no such thing as that in my books Liz. If a woman is sexually active, that's not what I'd call her."

"But you don't want me to be—active."

"No, I honestly don't. Maybe I do want to be the only one in your life."

"You want me to move in with you, sleep with you, but you give nothing of yourself Dutch. I can't have a relationship like that."

He watched her for a moment then finally nodded, "No, I suppose you can't. You're a pretty classy gal Liz."

She flushed slightly. "Not really but I do have standards—and Dutch, that means I need more than what you are offering."

"I told you all those years ago, that I was incapable of that."

Her own expression softened, "Have you ever talked about what happened to you?"

He stiffened as if he was insulted, "No, because it's no one's business. I know you understand that something did happen to me, but I won't talk about it."

"It won't let you get close to me Dutch."

"Micah keeps us close."

"It's not enough for me."

"I can't love you Liz."

Was it possible to hear your heart shatter into a million pieces? "I know."

"If I could. It would be you. You're the closest woman to me."

She nodded in resignation, "We should go."

"Spend the night with me."

"Dutch—"

“You’re a grown woman, and we share something wonderful in that area. There’s nothing wrong with it. Even if you would just stay with me, no sex, I would really like your company. Maybe we can watch a movie? Have some beers.”

Actually that sounded really great. She eyed him suspiciously, “No sex?”

“No pressure.” He said holding his hands up in surrender, “I promise.”

“I think I’d like that.” His response was a grin that near curled her toes.

“Great.” He turned and started the truck pulling it back out on the highway.

The next morning the impact of where she was hit her like a truck load of bricks. Here she was in Dutch’s bed—naked. Groaning she rolled away.

“Liz?”

“You said no sex.” She flushed.

“I did. But I never said anything about making love.” Was his amused answer.

“You’re a sneaky son of a gun.” She shot at him over her shoulder.

“You weren’t protesting.”

“I have no willpower against you! I figured you knew that by now.” she blurted out while getting up and reaching for her clothes. “You manage to kill whatever resistance I have by just touching me.”

“I’m not the only one with that problem.” He got out of the other side and reached for his jeans. “And I was trying to prove how good we are together.”

“My God Dutch, that was never under debate!” she said standing there in her own jeans while donning her bra and staring at him. “I mean the first time I ever—well—” she paused

looking at him,”—we made Micah.”

“Hell Liz, we rocked the house off of its foundation last night. It was mind blowing. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. I don’t think I’ve ever made love on stairs before.” He grinned, “or the kitchen counter—and—“ he added widening his grin, “the bathtub, although that was quite a feat.”

All the time Liz was blushing more and more. Things were coming back to her all too clear.

He saw her scarlet cheeks and rounded the foot board of his bed to take her in his arms, “You shouldn’t be embarrassed.”

She buried her face in his bare chest, “Some of those things—well, I never thought I was capable.”

He chuckled, remembering that after two beers he flattened her out on the sofa. At first he just curled his hand around her thigh just above the knee while they watched a movie, and she didn’t protest. He did feel her stiffen slightly, but after the first beer she was leaning against him. By the second and at the end of the movie he pushed her back onto the cushions moved her leg aside and brought his hips between them.

“I can’t—“ she breathed not showing any resistance as his mouth took hers.

“You will.” He murmured against her mouth, “You’re so damn beautiful Liz.”

Her answer was a highly sexy feminine moan.

At least he managed to get her halfway to his room before they sank on the stairwell. Soon clothes were tossed over the banister and he encouraged her on top of him. She wasn’t drunk but the alcohol removed any of her inhibitions and he relished it. He came hard in her with a shout that probably vibrated the window panes, but she certainly wasn’t quiet.

With the amount of sweating they did during that episode, they made their way to the kitchen for a drink of water—naked and things progressed from there.

Next he coaxed her into the tub for a bath, but most of the water ended up on the floor. It was a night he'd never forget as long as he lived. Liz had to be the sexiest woman alive, and she responded with innocence as if it was her first time all over again.

They finally made it to bed at about two in the morning but he lay awake not only feeling completely satiated, something that hadn't happened in a long time, five years to be exact, but also as if something in him let go. It was like the noose around his heart loosened.

He turned his head and looked at her sleeping peaceful form next to him and thought that she had to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, inside and out. She was genuine, intelligent, and the mother of his son. *His son.*

He had a son.

With that last thought, he fell asleep.

Lets give this a try. Please." He said trying to focus on the present.

"I can't." she sniffed, "I just can't."

"I need you honey. I need you and Micah."

"You said yourself that you can't love me. I can't be content, I need to be blissful."

He pulled back and looked down at her, "I can only be honest with what I can give you."

"I'm sorry Dutch, It's not enough."

He nodded and released her, "All right honey, but I'm going to keep trying. Let's go get our son and we'll spend the day at the park." What she wanted was impossible. Dutch cared about her more than any other woman in his life, but that's as deep as it went. Then why was he so obsessed with having her all the time? If it were any other woman he'd have taken her home by now, but he seriously did want to spend the day with her. She made him feel good and he liked being around her.

She smiled, "really?"

“Sure. I’ll go pack a lunch.” With that he left. He knew it was pointless to discuss this with her, but he was determined to bring her around. Last night he hadn’t used any protection, not only did he not think of it, maybe something inside him wanted her pregnant so she would finally turn to him. Another child from her would make him very happy. Hell, just thinking about it excited him.

Later that evening Dutch dropped them off at home and carried a zonked Micah to bed. This time it was him who undressed his son while Liz hovered in the doorway.

Liz suppressed a laugh watching him undress their son. He acted as if Micah was as fragile as glass while he removed his clothes. She was no different when she first brought him home from the hospital, but at least she had her aunt to help her through those trying times.

“Babies are tougher than you think dear.” Her aunt said as she quickly changed diapers and then gracefully, yet swiftly restuffed Micah back in his sleepers while a nervous Liz watched. All the while her baby cooed happily. It didn’t take her long to get the hang of things and found out that her aunt was right.

Folding her arms under her breasts she leaned against the doorframe and watched. Maybe Dutch wasn’t far off about the marriage subject. Micah’s parents would be united and maybe, just maybe she could get through to Dutch about how she felt. Though she never said the words, she wondered if he had any idea how deeply she was in love with him. She knew that women probably fell in love with him as soon as he flashed that rake of a smile, but she was completely head over heels for him. Especially now watching the gentle way that large man tucked in their precious jewel.

Yet, could she handle all of his other women? No, she couldn’t. Even now remembering how Amy clung to him after hockey practice last Friday sent a sick feeling to the pit of her

stomach. Had he slept with her? Is that why that woman thought she had the right to touch him like that?

She knew that people had started to realize that Micah and Dutch shared the same last name, but no one had been brave enough to come and ask if they were together or if Micah belonged to Dutch, even though it was obvious by the way they acted toward one another. However, some women either didn't figure it out or didn't care, like Amy.

If they got married, would he still allow women to cling to him like that?

Dutch had finished with Micah and tucked the blankets around his little shoulders while staring down at him with enough pride to conquer the world. He was a beautiful child. He would have probably looked as sweet and innocent if his father hadn't destroyed his trust at such a young age. He made a silent vow that no one would ever harm or hurt Micah if his life depended on it. When he stood and faced Liz she was staring at the bookshelf in the far corner with a solemn look on her face. "What is it?" she adjusted her eyes up to his and shook her head. It was obvious that she was in deep thought about something and wasn't willing to share it. "Liz?"

"It's nothing Dutch." She said standing aside so he could leave Micah's room.

After the door was closed he turned to her, "Liz, from the look on your face, something was upsetting you."

"It's not your concern." She answered trying to give him a reassuring smile.

Dutch remembered what Jackson had told him Friday about the women that were always around him. Maybe it had something to do with that. Before, he never thought about not letting the opposite sex cling to him because he liked the attention, but the only one he wanted clinging to him now, was Liz. Suddenly it seemed if all of those other women in his life

were just cheap thrills compared to the woman in front of him. However for the life of him those thoughts couldn't form into words. Even thinking about it made him uncomfortable so he just bent and gave her a goodnight kiss before he left after a promise of seeing her tomorrow.

Chapter Five

The next morning, it was Jackson who brought Micah to the arena. Dutch was sure that Liz had only missed one of his scheduled practices when she was baking that day, and he was certain he was right about the night before. Maybe Jackson was on to something about the other women bothering Liz. Yet why didn't she say anything? It wasn't as if she wasn't vocally independent. If she did care wouldn't she act more jealous?

Dutch started to get irritated, and before the end of practice he was almost close to raging although he kept it hidden from the parents and the kids. So much so that when Amy clung to him this time and asked him out he accepted. If Liz wanted nothing to do with him, he was moving on. Amy was a pretty redhead and it was obvious that she was experienced from the way she dressed and acted. Her kid was a little spoiled and had actually shouldered Micah a few times during the game that got him a stern talking to, but he was angry at Liz and Amy was handy.

However Jackson knew him better than anyone and although he didn't say anything, cast him a wary glance or two especially when he had seen the elated look on Amy's face.

After all of the kids left Jackson only mentioned that he had Micah's bag in the truck since it was Dutch's turn to have him from Monday to Wednesday. Micah ran to his father's truck while Dutch followed Jackson to his own.

“Where’s Liz?”

“It’s not my business Dutch. She asked me to take Micah today and I did.”

“She’s being difficult.” He finally said as Jackson retrieved Micah’s bag from the bed of the truck.

“No, she’s being sensible.” He defended handing him the bag maybe a little to roughly. He didn’t know what was said between Amy and Dutch earlier but he was a man too and could only imagine that Dutch’s anger had gotten the better of him.

He glared at him, “I’ve asked her to move in with me, marry me, and all but picked her up and threw her over my shoulder—”

“Have you ever figured out that’s maybe not what she’s about. She’s not like your other women.”

“No, I understand that.” He released a rough breath, “Maybe that’s why this is so damn frustrating.”

“women like Amy would bark like a dog if you asked them to. My sister would tell you to go to hell.”

He actually grinned.

Jackson couldn’t help himself and grinned right along with him. He knew Dutch never had to chase a woman in his life and this was completely unfamiliar territory that he obviously had a problem with, “You can’t just meet Lizzette halfway Dutch. If your serious, you do need to sweep her off her feet and don’t bully her or you’ll push her away. Liz probably didn’t come because seeing other woman wrap their bodies all over you bothered her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He said with a nod before he slung the bag over a thick shoulder and headed toward his truck. He could see the head of blonde curls sitting in the passenger seat and had to admit how nice that looked. It was too bad that his mother wasn’t sitting next to him. It was then that the impact of his actions hit home. He’d accepted a date with another woman that wasn’t his son’s mother and it seemed so wrong. If he’d hurt

Liz all of those years ago like he suspected he did, what would this do to her? He'd have to break the date with Amy before it got out.

Unfortunately Liz had heard about it several hours later when she ran into Amy at the grocery store. The woman made no qualms about bragging over her and Dutch dating.

Liz was horrified. Now she felt cheap about last weekend. She knew she was in the same category as all those other women he dated. She'd taken that moment and held it dear to her heart like she did all those years ago, but it obviously meant nothing to him and he was able to go from one bed to another. He'd gotten what he wanted and moved on. Then again, maybe he was angry about her not accepting his proposal and this was a way to get back at her. Maybe somewhere deep inside that large bull-headed man, she'd hurt him. However, he easily ran to another woman, a readily available willing to please one.

She was crushed.

Staring at Amy with a pleasant smile she thought she might have earned an academy award as she tilted her head up, swept her hair back and wished Amy good luck. Amy actually looked disappointed and it gave her a sense of satisfaction. It was true that Dutch was a wealthy, handsome bachelor, and considered quite a trophy for someone like Amy, but she wouldn't dare fight for him if he easily flitted from one bed to another.

Liz left her cart and groceries in the middle of the aisle after Amy walked away and left the store. She hated him for how she felt about him and she hated him for the broken heart he caused her. Well after the fundraiser next weekend, she was done. Except for Micah, that's the only contact he'd have with her from now on. She could never trust him again.

The next day Jackson barely spoke to Dutch during practice and it actually bothered him. He knew that he was doing his best to stay out of his and Liz's business, but something was up. He

waited until everyone had left before he talked to him. Unfortunately he'd completely forgotten about Amy and speaking to her about calling off their date until she gave him a flirtatious wave before she left. He must have been stupid to accept a date from her. She was nothing next to Liz.

"What's going on Jackson?"

Jackson continued to pack up his gear and spoke without turning around, "Like I said before, it's not my business Dutch."

"Well you're pissed off, anyone could see that."

"Yeah, well I have reason to be." He said shouldering his bag and walking away.

What the hell as that about? He followed him, "What has Liz said?"

Jackson tossed his bag in the back of the truck, "Liz as usual hasn't said a thing Dutch." He walked around the truck and yanked open the driver's door more roughly than he should have. Then he seemed to have second thoughts and turned to Dutch, "My sister tells me nothing, but I know when she's hurting." He nodded toward the arena, "I don't know what you and Amy have going on, but I heard it from a few other parents that you're dating."

"That's not true. She asked me out, I said yes, to one date, but I—"

He held up his hand, "Just saying yes to another woman while you share a child with my sister and the both of you seemed to be involved to everyone around you is wrong. This was cold Dutch even for you."

"Hell Jackson, I was angry. I accepted out spite but fully intended to back out once I came to my senses! Your darn sister has me all off balance!"

"It doesn't seem that way." He pointed an accusing finger at him, "I told you before that Liz hurts deep and you do this!" he got in the truck, "I shouldn't have said a goddam thing because it

looks like I gave you the bloody ammunition to rip her heart out. I hope she doesn't forgive you." He slammed the door and roared out of there.

Dutch cursed for at least ten minutes after that and ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He'd screwed this up, but what the hell did that woman want from him? He already told her he couldn't love her and she'd turned down his proposal. Didn't that give him justification to move on?

Could he?

One thing was certain; he was never this insane over a woman in his life. He thought about her all the time. He even dreamt about her for crying out loud. If another woman had tried to get an inkling of a commitment out of him he was out the door and not once did he look back. But here he was, chasing her, asking him to marry him!

She was the only one he seemed to be transparent to. No one else could see that there was a reason he couldn't get involved. Even though he raged, she knew it was something else that drove him to it and reached out to him several times over it. No one had done that before. In frustration he mussed up his hair with his fingers. He couldn't lose her.

Meanwhile Liz was out at Dutch's and Micah was at Tess's for the day with his new best friend Tyler. Jackson had phoned and told her that he was invited out. Shortly after Tess phoned and said she'd be late with Micah because she was taking the boys fishing. She could hear Micah's whoops in the background and couldn't help but laugh. At least she still had her little man to keep her grounded.

It was just as well, she wasn't feeling in the best of moods after Amy's confession. However it was then she realized that Tess wouldn't be with her when Dutch returned home, and she couldn't face him knowing that he was with that other woman.

Quickly she started cleaning up her mess and stuffing the decorations in boxes. He would be home soon and most likely corner her and she would listen because she was a complete idiot around the man. She wasn't in the right frame of mind to stand up to him. She was too hurt.

She was coming down the porch steps when his truck roared up skidding to a stop in front of her.

"don't you dare Liz!" he said hopping out of the vehicle with an expression of rage, "Don't you dare take off. We need to talk."

"I'm not talking to you. It's obvious that you would rather bed every woman in town than talk."

He winced, "It's not what it looks like."

"Bullshit!" Liz never swore before in her life but she was hurt and angry.

He narrowed his gaze and approached her in several strides gripping her upper arm, "House."

"Let me go!"

"Get in the damn house." He said abruptly tugging her back up the stairs and through the door despite her struggles.

"Dutch—you're hurting." She said as he slammed the door and locked it before releasing her.

"we need to talk and you are not taking off."

"How long did you last?" she shouted back at him.

"Last?"

"You were with me last weekend Dutch—three days ago! Then you hopped over to Amy—"

"Dammit! I didn't sleep with her. Why is it that every time a woman pays attention to me you think I'm screwing them?"

"Because that's what you do." She shot back. "Why do you think they cling to you like the wet hair off a dog?"

He stood straight and put his hands on his hips while glaring down at her, "Because I'm well known, an athlete, rich, and I used to, but not now."

She crossed her arms under her breasts and glared back at him, "I won't be used."

"You never were." He answered letting his expression soften. It bothered him that she might think that he used her.

She just stared at him not believing one word he said.

He took a deep breath, "All right. That first time we were together it was my intent, but Liz, as soon as I kissed you my outlook instantly changed." He raised his brows as her expression still hadn't changed. "—I swear. In fact, I haven't had passion like that until we were together again a few days ago. I'm not going to sleep with another woman that I know can't give me that."

"Amy said that you were dating. Tell me it's not true then, and god help me Dutch, I'll believe you."

Dutch's chest tightened while he looked down at her and when he didn't answer, there it was. The devastation she felt on the inside was clearly displayed in her expression. Jackson told the truth about her hurting deeply because nothing could have looked so profound. Then she subtly nodded and turned away. He went to reach for her, "Liz—"

"Please don't touch me Jason." She said while unlocking the door and stepping through it.

The use of his real name on her lips just made it all the worse and the impact of what he'd done to her hit home as he watched her walk out the door of his house.

It was then he realized two things; one, he'd done something absolutely unforgivable towards one of the most amazing people he'd ever known, and two, if his actions and repercussion of them of hurting her were turned into an emotion, he'd just felt right to the bone.

Liz had her hand on the car door handle when she was grabbed from behind.

Chapter Six

Dutch tossed her over his shoulder, turned and went back in the house and up the stairs to his room without breaking stride. Liz squealed and squirmed on his shoulder while threatening him with bodily harm.

Once inside his room he dumped her unceremoniously on the bed and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"You're a bloody brute!" she glared at him.

"Take off your damn clothes Liz, or I'm tearing them off you." He said peeling off his shirt and going for the belt buckle of his jeans.

Her eyes widened with the dawning realization of where they were and by the darkening look in his eyes, what he wanted. "No."

He paused settling his pale eyes on her deep sapphire ones still loaded with hurt and anger, "I told you five years ago, that you belong to me and I'm going to show you why and why women like Amy mean nothing to me, then by the end of this, you're going to bloody well marry me."

"I won't."

'Like hell,' he said pulling off his jeans.

"Oh God Dutch, don't do this!" He wouldn't—he really wasn't getting undressed—was he? From what he did next, he certainly was!

"Take off your clothes." He repeated dropping his boxers.

Her mouth fell open at the sight before her. Could a man possibly look any more gorgeous! His body was such a wonder to look upon. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him anywhere, and he was so darn muscular. Her eyes soaked up finely sculpted male masterpiece, then dropped to his erection. He was completely hard and she did nothing to entice him.

“Do you see how I react to you Liz?”

Her eyes went back up to his followed by a pink blush.

“This doesn’t happen with other women. Just you. “

She looked at him with an expression of confusion.

“I meant—“ he added, “That I can get an erection just thinking about you.”

Her cheeks turned bright scarlet this time.

“Now take off your clothes.” He said walking toward her.

“Or what?” She’d be lying if she said she didn’t want him, she did, more than her next breath.

He saw the glint in her eyes and knew it wasn’t fear. “Why you little minx.” He growled pushing her flat on his bed and coming down on top of her.

“I swear Dutch you are driving me crazy.”

He bent his head and ran his mouth along her neck, “Yeah well I’m already there.” He pulled her shirt out of her jeans and moved his hand up over her belly to cup her breasts, “And when you go braless, it just kills me!”

“It’s hot.” She breathed through a gasp.

“Hell, you have no idea how much that turns me on.”

“I—we can’t—it’s broad daylight!” she arched toward him.

“Good! I can see every goddamn gorgeous inch of you, just like I did all those years ago—on the floor of my study!” He chuckled as he tore her blouse getting it off her. Then he made an easy obstacle out of her jeans and underwear.

Two hours later the phone rang and Dutch grumbled a few choice words before answering it. “Hmm? Yuh, right here.” He tapped Liz on the shoulder.

She lifted her head and blinked the sleep from her eyes before she realized Dutch was handing her the phone.

“It’s your brother.”

“Oh for heaven sake.” She whispered grabbing the phone

and covering the mouthpiece, "Don't you have any modesty."

Her answer was a sly grin and a sensual perusal of her naked upper half.

If she wasn't blushing before, she certainly was now. It was obvious what they were doing if she was so close when Dutch handed her the phone, not to mention that he sounded as if he just woke up. She could have crawled in a hole if there was one. "I should know better to even ask." She said narrowing her eyes at him. She put the phone to her ear, "Jackson?"

"Hi Liz, I knew I had to phone to let you know that Micah has a bit of a fever—before you interrupt, remember he's staying with Jacob Hartley who is a doctor. They said he's more than welcome to stay because it's not serious, but—"

"—Is something wrong with Micah?" Dutch said with concern.

"Just a moment Jackson." She turned her attention to Dutch, "Just a fever—Dutch?"

He threw the bed sheets back, got up and started to get dressed, "Were going to get him."

She sighed knowing that tone and look. There was no use arguing, "Jackson?"

"Yeah, I heard," he answered with a smile in his voice. "I'll call Tess and tell them you're on the way."

"Thanks." She hung up, "Jacob's a doctor Dutch."

"I don't care honey, get dressed."

"Get your clothes off, get dressed, geez you are the bossiest person I ever met!"

He spun around and looked at her to see the teasing in her eyes. Then he had to pause and take in the sight. God, she was a vision. She was sitting up holding his sheets above her breasts, her hair was tousled, and her lips slightly swollen. To sum it up, she looked completely ravished. He studied her for a moment and actually smiled, "I could just come back to bed."

Her eyes widened, “My God, I can’t believe your stamina.” She threw back the covers and reached for her clothes, “I’ll be cursing you tomorrow with what we did this evening.”

“It’d be well worth it.” He chuckled, “I’ll meet you downstairs in a few minutes. You’d better brush your hair.”

Tess answered the door and broke into a smile, “I expected you even before Jackson called. The boys are watching a movie. Jacob gave him something to bring down his fever, now he’s back to his normal four year old self.”

Dutch looked a little sheepish when Liz gave him ‘I told you so look.’

She stepped aside, “Do you want to come in for a bit, Jacob and I were going to play some cards and it’s not much fun with two people,” She lowered her voice, “Besides, I think he cheats even though he’s never fessed up.”

“We’d love to.” Said Liz stepping in the house after giving Dutch and amused look.

It turned out that playing cards with the Hartley’s was more fun than she could imagine. They laughed so hard that tears fell down Liz’s cheeks. Although she did decline a drink from the bottle of wine that Tess produced.

“You don’t like wine?” Jacob asked.

She gave Dutch a look with a meaning only he could understand and Dutch just grinned. “I love wine,” she explained with a slight color to her cheeks, “It’s just that I have to get up early and meet the rental company at Dutch’s for the chairs and tables.” It wasn’t a lie, but she certainly didn’t want him to have the opportunity to seduce her again. However, she certainly didn’t have any alcohol before the episode earlier and it was just as profound. Even though she’d never been with another man besides Dutch, he was right, they did have something special. The things he managed to make her feel were unsurpassable. It

was too bad that he couldn't love her. She ached for it. So much that it actually upset her stomach at times.

She loved him beyond borders, and if he only knew how she felt, he could have her so easily wrapped around his finger. Actually he already did, but she needed to put up a fight. Then she thought about Amy and her anger flared. They never finished talking about her. Well, they never even finished talking after Dutch threw himself on her.

She released a rush of air and glanced over at him as he was deep in conversation with Jacob about horses. Jacob and his two brothers raised thoroughbred racehorses and actually made a lot of money at it.

Jacob was the oldest of three brothers with Lance, her friend, being the second oldest who was a lawyer, and Colton, who had some degree in finance. All of them were quite intelligent and got along really well.

It was too bad that Dutch didn't have a sibling. He was so strikingly handsome that she was sure they would be too. She was so grateful to have a piece of him in Micah even if she couldn't have Dutch.

Suddenly his eyes turned to her and he gave her a grin. "We should go."

"All right."

"Did you want us to get Micah?" Jacob said looking back and forth between the two with a glint in his eyes. He figured out that Dutch was Micah's father before anyone else did when Liz came home and the man practically coveted the boy at the arena. It was nice to see actually because it seemed like Dutch could use a little love in his life, and from the way Liz looked at him there was plenty there even if the man didn't see it.

"No, I'll pick him up tomorrow before the party."

"I could bring him earlier Dutch," Said Tess, "I need to come and give Liz a hand."

“That sounds great.” He said getting up and holding out his hand for Liz. It was done absently as if it was natural to do so. Truthfully, he wasn’t a hand holder, but if it meant he could touch her, it was well worth it.

A moment later he felt hers slip into his and he helped her up. “Did we mention that we’re getting married?”

“Dutch!” Liz protested.

Tess and Jacob burst forth with congratulations ignoring Liz’s glare at the large man. Apparently he was able to charm everyone around him.

He grinned like his ego just tripled.

Once outside and in the truck she spoke, “I never said yes.”

“So?” He answered starting the truck with a smirk.

“God Dutch, you are so darn exasperating.”

“We’ll discuss this when I get you home and back in bed.” He said pulling away from the Hartley’s.

She gaped at him. He was so darn conceited, “I’m going home.”

“Nope.” Was all he said.

Well it was obvious that she wasn’t when he turned the opposite way on the highway and headed towards the ranch. Didn’t he listen to anything? It was pointless arguing with him. She’d go with him to the house then call Jackson to come and get her. She couldn’t keep letting him have his way with her.

“You’re not going to.” Dutch said turning down the road to his ranch.

“What?”

“Call Jackson,” he said knowing exactly what was going through her head.

“Jason, you can’t keep me as a prisoner.” She said with frustration. “I told you what I wanted.”

“And I told you—” he cast her a stern look, “I’m not pussyfooting around Liz, I want you with me. You’re just too

damn stubborn to give in.”

“I’m stubborn!” she said in surprise, “you won’t let me go home.”

“No, because you belong to me.”

“I’m not a commodity.”

“No, you’re my future wife.” He said as if it was common knowledge.

“And how—” she said sarcastically, “—are you going to get an unwilling bride to the alter.”

“Simple.” He gave her a sloppy smile as his eyes glanced off her settling back on the road.

“Simple?”

“I’m getting you pregnant again.” Her gasp made him chuckle, “So you haven’t even thought about what we’ve been doing these past weeks? I certainly didn’t use any protection and if you’re on the pill, I’ll find them and flush them.” He gave her another sly glance, “But somehow I don’t think you are, because you did everything to try and avoid my bed.”

She wasn’t but she certainly wasn’t telling him that. Gosh, she had to be the most stupid woman alive not to even think that could happen. “You don’t know that.”

“I know even an intelligent woman like yourself would want a family for our kids.” He continued not seeing her pale. “I think I know that much about you.”

Of course he was right. She couldn’t possibly have another child out of wedlock. It wasn’t fair to Micah, she saw that now as he was falling in love with his father, so she couldn’t possibly do this to another child. As for being intelligent, well, she wasn’t feeling too bright right about then. She fell her face in her hands. She was trapped!

He frowned at her, “It’s not so bad Liz. I want you with me.” She shook her head but didn’t look at him.

“We’re good together.”

Finally she lifted her head and stared at him, “We may be in bed Dutch, but I can’t do this.”

“Why the hell not?” he felt his anger rise. If he asked a woman like Amy she would have said yes on the spot, yet Liz continually turned him down. He pulled into his driveway then, cut the engine and turned to her, “What the hell is your problem with this union?”

“That—for one.” She indicated to his temper, “You are so darn volatile when you don’t get your way! Well, I’m not a darn puppet that you can pull the strings on and have obey you!”

“I know that.”

“Then quit barking orders at me. Maybe I want a decent proposal, a decent courtship, not a sweat producing act that practically puts me in a coma.” She should have known he’d grin at that. “I want it all.”

“I told you before, I can’t give you something I don’t think I’m capable of but I don’t want to let you go.”

“Dutch, you need to.”

“What if you’re pregnant?”

she fell her face in her hands again, “Gosh—I just don’t know.”

“Liz, just marry me. If not for my sanity, do it for Micah.”

“I can’t handle your women.” She finally said.

“I don’t have any women honey, just you.”

“That’ll change.”

He shook his head, “I haven’t thought of another woman since I had you last week.”

“one week is not a record.”

He clenched his jaw. If only she knew how much she consumed him she wouldn’t say that. Still he just couldn’t tell her. Instead he sighed heavily, leaned forward and started the motor, “I’ll take you home.”

There was twice before that he suddenly gave in and both

times it was because she struck a chord in him that he didn't want her to see. Once was five years ago when he walked away from her and the other was that first BBQ they shared out here a few weeks ago, "Wait a minute." She said causing him to look at her. Liz loved him, but something inside her told her that he needed her only he couldn't say it. He needed her with him tonight and she ran through her morals and her self esteem and decided that Dutch would have to come first tonight. If being a mother taught her anything, it was to trust that inner voice, "I'll stay with you Jason."

He cut the engine and without a word reached for her. There was something about hearing the sound of his real name from her lips that set him on fire. It was his father that nicknamed him Dutch when he was a toddler and it stuck throughout his life. It was because he said he looked like a Dutchman. That was before his father changed after his mother left.

God she felt so good!

Tangling his fingers in her hair he cupped the back of her head and slanted his mouth over hers. He actually loved her small size because she was so easy to manoeuvre under, over—hell everywhere around him. She must have had the hottest ass on the planet not to mention the rest of her body. He could barely contain himself and snatched her out of the truck getting her in the house quickly before he lost patience and took her on his front lawn.

Over the next three hours he showed her how much he needed her. At first he might have been a little rough, but if he hurt her she never complained, but instead encouraged him in every way to possess her fully. It was during that time that the last of the ice around his heart melted. No one had understood him until that moment in the truck, but she did. She knew he needed her even though he didn't say anything. What made the

impact so real is that she had set aside her own needs for him. There was no one else in his life that had ever done that and she had no idea of what his childhood was like to close him off to emotion toward the opposite sex, but she never pushed him on the subject after he told her he didn't want to talk about it, but he knew that she would listen without judgement if he were wanting to. A sensual moan came from her throat and sounded incredibly sexy. He had her pressed against this closed door with one of her legs up his hip and his large body pinning her soft one against the hard wood of the door while he roughly moved in her. It must have been hard for her to breath but she didn't seem to notice.

"Baby, I can't keep taking you like this, we should go to bed." He rasped heavily in her ear.

"Anywhere—" she breathed before he took her mouth abruptly.

And he did.

When they awoke the next morning they were laying on the carpet in the middle of the floor of his study covered by a blanket that was previously tossed on the sofa. It was the same floor that they had created Micah on five years ago. She was sound asleep, naked and wrapped in his arms. His chin rested on top of her head and her skin felt like heaven next to his. She didn't know that he never held a woman after they made love before. Usually he had sex again, or left, or she left.

He lowered his nose into her hair and inhaled deeply. She smelled divine.

She sighed in her sleep and he smiled while tightening his hold. She fit perfectly next to him, very very perfect.

He lifted his head and kissed her cheek saying her name softly.

"umm-hmm." Was his answer.

"It's almost eight o'clock and I need to take you home so you

can get changed, the hired help will be here in less than two hours.”

“umm-hmm.” She said rolling in his arms and burying her face in his chest.

“Liz—don’t tempt me.” He said huskily. He could feel her smile.

“Kill joy.” She murmured. He chuckled and she felt the vibration from his chest.

“I would love nothing better to ravish you all day, but we have guests coming here around two in the afternoon and I think we wrecked the house with what we did last night.”

She released a muffled giggle, “Yes I know, Tess and I have lots to do before then.” She sighed and stretched followed by a groan, “My lord, I think you’ve destroyed every muscle in my body.”

His hand slid down to her bare bottom and contracted on one of those perfectly formed cheeks, “I’m sure I could find a few more.”

She laughed, “You are completely insatiable!”

“It’s true, I have a healthy sexual appetite, but it seems to have quadrupled around you.”

“Fibber.” She teased, then groaned as she rolled away, “Where on earth are my clothes?”

“I think some of them are by the front door,” he chuckled again, “Except for your underwear.” He pointed at an overturned lamp that was by the sofa where her lacy panties were dangling from.

“Oh Gosh!” she said with embarrassment while getting to her feet rather clumsily and retrieving them, “The things you make me do.”

Dutch folded his hands behind his head and watched her don her underwear and grinned at the naked goddess in front of him. “I bet that ass of yours looks heavenly in a thong. Do you

have any?"

She stopped and stared at him seeming to finally realize that she was completely naked while daylight streamed in through the large window. She flushed, "none of your business."

He laughed as she marched to the door and opened it to search for the rest of her clothing, "It is now honey. I'll buy you some."

"No thanks." Came the answer from beyond the door followed by a rustle of cloth.

She came back in wearing only her blouse and panties while scanning the room, "I can't find my jeans."

"So?" he grinned soaking up her sexy image.

She narrowed her gaze on him in mock anger, "You would let me go home like this, wouldn't you?" she said splaying out her arms.

"Thong." He smiled sitting up.

"You don't even know my size." She teased.

He held his hands a distance apart, "I'll tell the saleslady, that your gorgeous hips are this wide," he narrowed the space, "And your sexy little waist is this size." His grin widened, "And if I want a matching bra—" he cupped his hands in front of his chest, "—they fit perfectly in my hands."

Her eyes widened, "Oh you would too." She turned and went back out the door, "Dutch, where on earth did you sling my jeans?"

He got to his feet and saw the crumpled denim under him, "Liz, I've found them."

She came back in the room and looked at the condition of her clothing. "Oh Dutch, you'll be the death of me."

He bent over and scooped them up, "Here you go doll." He grinned handing the rumpled clothing to her.

"Yeah thanks." She said blandly before she put them on. When she was done she ran her gaze over his naked form. It

didn't bother him in the least that he was nude, standing before her in broad daylight wearing nothing but a sexy smile. Why should he, he was gorgeous? "you are too darn modest."

He chuckled, bent and stole a kiss before he strutted out of the room, "I'll need ten minutes for a shower, and you're more than welcome to join me."

"Then we'd never get to my house." She called after him answered by another throaty chuckle. Yet, the scene of his naked backside nearly had her convinced.

What are you doing Liz?

This totally compromised everything she believed in. She never expected herself to have a relationship with a man who wasn't relationship material. He may have asked—no told her that he was marrying her, but he didn't give her any guarantee about a commitment of any kind. And what about Amy? Was he still going to see her? She groaned inwardly, *this was so messed up.*

Here she was doing what she tried to vow not to do and give all of herself to him. She had absolutely no control over her willpower around this man, he was that magnetic. Of course it didn't help that she kept falling more and more in love with him every single day she was around him. The tragedy was, that he didn't feel the same and it hurt her. It wasn't his fault that she felt the way she did. She was sure there were many broken hearted women in his history, but she thought maybe she'd gotten closer to them than they had and that somehow she was more special than they were, especially since they had Micah, but he never indicated anything to that fact.

She gave up her heart to him without any promises, and she knew it would cost her dearly.

Chapter Seven

Fortunately the food and the party was a huge hit among the guests. Unfortunately Amy had shown up without a date and clung to Dutch like wet grass to bare feet throughout the afternoon. Liz never said a word but inside she was seething. It made her wonder if he was not telling the truth about them. It didn't help that she was extremely busy with the guests playing the perfect hostess, but she thought he could at least have acknowledged her once or twice. Maybe it had something to do with her son who occupied the other half of Dutch. Bless his heart, she thought when Amy looked annoyed more than once for the interruption.

"You should say something to her Liz." Tess said coming up beside her at one of the banquet tables pretending to adjust one of the flowered center pieces.

"She can have him." She fumed.

Tess released a disbelieving laugh, "If I thought that about Jacob, I wouldn't have him today. Dutch is crazy about you. Aren't you two getting married?"

She gave her a defeated look, "Oh, I don't know. He just insists on things from me, and I sometimes lose the fight." She tipped her head toward Amy, "She seems to know what makes him happy."

"She's a plastic bubble." Said Tess frowning at the display. "Nothing like you. Her best attributes are on the outside, anyone can see that. What's on the inside leaves a lot to be desired."

"Thanks, you're a good friend." She said squeezing her hand affectionately.

She smiled at her, "And you are too."

"How did you catch Jacob if you don't mind me asking?"

Tess lit up, "I was always in love with him, he just didn't notice until I nearly died."

Her eyes widened, "What?"

Tess waved a hand, "I had a ruptured appendix and Jacob

saved my life. I think he finally noticed me then, or the impact of losing me. My father is the Hartley's vet and I practically grew up around the ranch."

Liz shook her head, "It's nice to know that Dutch isn't the only thick headed male out there."

"So how long have you been in love with Dutch?"

She shouldn't have been surprised that Tess figured it out. It would take a woman in love to notice another. "since Micah was conceived." She said with a little embarrassment.

Tess noticed and tried to ease it, "Emily was conceived out of wedlock too Liz. We can't help ourselves when we're in love."

"At least Jacob loves you. Dutch said he wasn't capable."

Tess shrugged like it meant nothing, "He's just resisting it." She turned and looked at her friend, "He looks at you constantly when you aren't paying attention."

"He doesn't!"

"Constantly." She reaffirmed with a pointed look.

Liz laughed, "he likes women."

Tess shook her head, "No, it's not that kind of look. Its deep Liz. I can't describe it, but I can tell you that the first time I met him, he frightened me. Maybe it was his size, or maybe his overall demeanour, but there was always something really intimidating in his eyes, but when he looks at you, it's not there."

"I never thought he was intimidating."

This time Tess laughed, "Look at him! He's the size of a bloody mountain, he's blunt, his favourite pastime besides you, Micah and hockey, is destroying the local drinking establishments."

Liz grinned knowing exactly what that mountain looked like naked, then she flushed.

Tess saw her cheeks pink up and didn't even want to ask her what she was thinking about because she could only guess.

"My brother's not much different, he just tones it down

because of me.”

“Well I don’t have a brother, unless you count the Hartleys. Colton is pretty rowdy himself and thank goodness that we have Lance or Colt would be doing jail time. My point is, I’m just not used to it, but obviously you are.”

“Mom, Dad and I used to travel to see Jackson play. The players seemed to need that to release pent up energy. When they died, he quit that career and went back to college so I wasn’t taken away from him. I bet he could have been as good as Dutch.”

At that moment Amy flirtatiously rubbed her hand on one of Dutch’s thick shoulders and Liz saw red.

“She has no couth Liz.” Said Tess seeing the gesture. “If that was Jacob she was doing that to, I’d be furious and she’d know it.”

“He’s not doing anything to prevent it.” She said tersely.

“He probably doesn’t want to embarrass her.”

“Well I have no problem.” She said starting in their direction but Tess grabbed her arm, “Not here Liz, don’t ruin your party and I know you’re angry, I’m mad myself, but think of Micah.”

She inhaled deeply and prayed for patience. “If he thinks I’m marrying him while he lets other women paw him, he’s out of his mind.” She said keeping her eyes on the couple. Amy clung to him like they were together and every now and then someone would shoot her an odd look. People knew now that Micah was Dutch’s and were probably wondering why he had a date while the mother of his son was close by without one. It wasn’t true, but that’s what it looked like. He could just go to hell. She was tired of being shoved aside for a woman like Amy.

Jackson observed the three from a distance until he couldn’t take it anymore. He approached Dutch and asked Amy to dance while giving him a disapproving glare. To his surprise the man

looked slightly helpless. It was then he realized that he didn't want to cause a scene at Liz's party. Obviously he hadn't had time to tell Amy that he was involved with Liz and he wondered if she'd even listen if he did. Ever since she latched on to him they'd been surrounded by his guests. Unfortunately his sister had been hurt by it again. Seeing her suffer hurt him and he couldn't even imagine what she was feeling.

"Oh, but I think Dutch owed me a dance." Amy said batting her eyes in his direction.

"Maybe later," he said not even smiling at her, "Where'd Liz go?"

Amy frowned but he ignored her.

"I saw her go into the house."

"Dutch—" Amy started.

He averted his eyes down to her, "Liz is my fiancé Amy." He added before walking away without so much as an apology.

Now that was the Dutch Jackson knew and he grinned at the man's back.

Amy turned toward Jackson, "what did he just say?"

"Amy, it's kind of obvious that they're involved. Micah is their son."

"but he said he'd go out with me."

"Obviously he's changed his mind." And obviously she knew about Micah but didn't care.

"He can't do that!" she said placing her hands on her hips and letting her voice rise.

Oh hell, this wasn't going to go well. And it didn't. He stood there while Amy ranted about Dutch two timing when he actually belonged to her.

Dutch heard her but didn't care as he made his way toward the house. He passed Tess on the way who told him that he'd better not go in there without armour on.

"That bad?"

“You have no idea.”

He swore under his breath and went in the house. He found her in the kitchen slicing cakes with a little too much force than necessary.

“Liz.”

“You shouldn’t come near me when I have a knife in my hand.” She said without turning around.

“Everyone out!” He barked to the three caterers that were still in the kitchen. They scrambled out of there like the kitchen was on fire.

Liz didn’t even flinch. She half expected that.

“I told Amy we were getting married.”

“Sure you did.”

“Ask Jackson.”

She spun around to face him with the knife still in her hand, “You know Dutch. It doesn’t matter! I’m done. You can’t give me anything.”

“I can give you another child.”

“Don’t you get it! It’s not enough.”

“What the hell do you want Liz?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, “You,” she said barely above a whisper, “I want you.”

He held his hands at his sides, “You have me.”

“Not physically. I want your heart.”

He started shaking his head. He knew what she was asking, but didn’t she know that she already had it? Every time he’d hurt her, it came back to him tenfold and the truth of why came clear to him when he saw her tears moments ago.

“Then tell me what happened to you that you can’t love someone.”

His eyes darkened, “I’ve told you before, it’s none of your damn business. It has nothing to do with you and I today, in this moment. My father died six years ago and I’d prefer if those

memories went with him.”

She tossed the knife on the counter, “Well, then we have nothing to discuss.”

“Like hell.” He took a step toward her.

“Back off or I’ll leave now, this very moment.”

“You’ll have to get through me little girl.” He stopped toe to toe in front of her.

“If that’s what it takes.”

His expression softened, “Liz, I’m new at this too.” He took a deep breath, “Don’t go.”

She just stared at him stunned. It wasn’t the words as much as it was the emotion in his voice something she’d never heard before, “say that again.”

“What?”

She bit back her frustration, “Those last few words.”

“Don’t go?”

“Yes, but like before.”

“For God sake Liz!”

She smiled up at him, “You really do care about me don’t you?”

He turned away and ran his fingers through his blonde locks, “What a stupid question.”

She walked around to the front of him, “Okay Dutch, I understand that some things are really hard for you, but just say it, just this once.”

He removed his hand from his hair and stared down at her with an unreadable expression, “you’re a pain in the ass.”

She smiled.

“I don’t chase women.”

“You’ve said that before.” Her smile grew.

“You’re driving me nuts.”

“I believe you’ve said that too.”

“You’re too damn smart for your own damn good.”

“That’s new.” She smirked.

“You’re as sexy as hell.” He continued resisting smile himself.

Her smirk widened to a grin.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“You like my ass.”

“I love your ass!” he paused staring down at her, “I love your smile, your walk, the way you bite your bottom lip to keep from crying like you are now. I love the fact that you gave me something I never thought possible—Micah. It makes me want more children with you. Only you.” He paused again and took a deep breath, “I love you enough to embarrass a woman in front of a crowd of five hundred not giving a shit if I made myself look like an unfeeling ass in the process.”

It took her a moment to breathe. She didn’t expect those words to come out of his mouth. Maybe ‘I care’ or ‘you mean a lot to me’ but not *those* words! Still, she was speechless. She could only just stare up at him.

“Honey, don’t make me say it again. I can’t.” he said helplessly.

“you don’t have to.” She finally said stepping up to him and wrapping her arms around him. “Once was enough.”

“Thank god.” He bent his head and kissed her hard.

After a moment he made a rough noise and pulled back, “Jesus Liz, I’d have you in here in front of everyone if you let me kiss you like that.” She grinned. “Are you happy now?”

“Oh yes!” she said immediately.

“So we can go back out there and act like a couple?”

“Dutch, I’d act like a frog if you want after that confession.”

He just shook his head while clenching his jaw, “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She took his hand in hers, “You can’t take it back.”

He stared down at her with a new light in his eyes, “I

wouldn't dream of it honey." The ravishing smile she gave him made his heart melt.

Jackson felt overwhelming relief when Dutch came out of the house holding Liz's hand. Obviously he managed to convince her that Amy meant nothing to him. How he did it, he couldn't imagine because his sister was beyond stubborn, but it had to be something phenomenal. He found out several hours later when Dutch made the announcement.

Amy had left abruptly after Dutch went to find Liz. Hopefully she'll leave them alone now. He was sure she wasn't an evil person, but maybe she was just lonely. After all, her little boy seemed a little indulged, but he was a good kid so she at least made a good mother.

Before the night was over, Dutch stood on a chair and made the announcement that he and Liz were engaged. There was a roar from the crowd with the exception of some of the single women. Then he embarrassed the hell out of her by bending her over his arm and giving her a devastating kiss.

Prior to that they pulled Micah aside and asked him how he felt about it. His major worry was where they would live. Liz laughed knowing he wanted to be here where all the animals were.

"Anywhere you want son." Dutch answered.

"Can I have a room like Jackson made me here?"

"I guess so, but we'll have to ask Jackson if he has time to build you another one." He winked at Liz as Micah beamed his approval.

Over the next few weeks Liz felt like she was floating on air. She couldn't be happier. Wedding preparations were well underway. Tess said she'd be her bridesmaid, and Jackson was going to be Dutch's best man. Micah was doing very well in

hockey which maybe had something to do with the extra practice his father gave him on his own rink. They spend almost every weekend inseparable. Like today.

It didn't matter as long as they were both happy, she thought. She and Tess were spending the afternoon filling out wedding invitations. Liz couldn't ask for a better friend because it was tedious.

"I'm only getting married once." Liz said dropping her pen and shaking her cramping hand.

Tess laughed, "Well, Jacob is related to just about everyone on the planet, so I know where you're coming from."

"You had a big wedding?"

She nodded, "Huge."

"Well maybe I should quit whining." She smiled.

"Liz!"

"Kitchen!" she answered when she heard Jackson's voice.

He strode in smiling, as usual, "Hi Tess." He said before he handed Liz an envelope.

"What's this?"

"It's from Mason, our cousin."

"Oh?" she said opening it.

"Is everything all right?" His sister's expression took on an odd look.

She shook her head, then paused, "I mean yes, everything's fine, but Mason and Janelle decided to leave me our Aunt's house." She said slowly in disbelief.

"Wow, really?"

"Here—" she gave the letter to her brother to read.

"A house?" Tess said with peaked interest.

Liz nodded, "It's old, and beautiful. I looked after my aunt when she was ill and in turn she gave Micah and me a place to live. I didn't want or expect anything in exchange, but Mason said that neither he nor Janelle want it, and they thought I

deserved something for all of what I did. Tess, I never thought of it as work.” She explained.

Tess smiled, and reached across the table to squeeze her hand, “Of course you didn’t.”

“A plane ticket too.” Jackson said pulling it out of the envelope.

“They want me down there this weekend to sign over the house.”

Jackson lifted his brows, “Well Liz, I guess you can sell it and keep the money for Micah, or keep it if you want.”

She shrugged, “I really don’t want it.”

He smiled and handed the letter and ticket back to her, “That’s why they left it to you. You’re not greedy.”

“Gosh, what about Micah? Dutch has branding this weekend and he can’t look after him.”

“I’ll look after my nephew. We’ll have loads of fun.” He said. “Go for a trip.”

“Alone?” Liz really didn’t want to go by herself.

“I’ll come with you if you need a friend?”

“You’d do that?” Liz said looking at Tess.

“I would. I’ll get Colt to watch the kids if you want to leave on Friday. Jacob doesn’t work this weekend so he can watch Taylor and Emma on Saturday and Sunday. We’ll make it a girls weekend.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Liz said feeling better.

Dutch was in a mood come Friday evening and by Saturday night he was fit to kill. He didn’t like Liz going anywhere without him even if it was with Tess who was probably the most trusting person he could have sent her off with. Not only that, it was hot and he’d been barking at his men all day while branding cattle.

Worst of all he missed her.

So when he wandered into his empty house that evening, he

was irritable, lonely, hot and tired. After he showered, he called Jackson and thankfully he said yes to a drink. He just had to ask the elderly neighbour to come and sit for him.

An hour later he pulled his truck up next to Jackson's Mercedes outside one of the local bars they often visited. His mood grew from irritable to intolerable when he saw there was at least a half a dozen people already sitting at his table. One of them Amy. All he wanted to do was sit and enjoy a drink with a friend and maybe talk about Liz, but as the night wore on they showed no signs of leaving. He was curt with the others when they asked him questions about his career and thankfully it was Jackson that put a stop to that by changing the subject several times.

Because of his dark mood he drank more than usual without realizing that his glass remained mostly full throughout the entire evening.

Jackson who never said a word about his drinking before told him that he thought he'd had enough.

Dutch gave him an irritated look and downed another glass of whiskey that suddenly appeared beside him.

The other man just shook his head.

Several hours later it was just Jackson, Dutch and not surprisingly Amy that were only at the table. She flirted outrageously but didn't touch him or hang off him like she did at the party and the arena. Maybe she finally got the hint, thought Jackson, though he still didn't trust her.

"Are you just about done Dutch?" Jackson said shooting a quick glance to Amy, "I should drive you home, unless you're taking a cab."

"I'm not done yet." He scowled.

"Hell you drank more than a catholic priest." Jackson said knowing the edge in his voice, "And if you wreck this bar again, I'm sure they'll press charges, and Liz will have my ass for not

looking after you.”

“I’m not some coddled child.” He shot back.

Jackson folded his arms across his chest and stared at his friend, “If you’re asking for a fight from me, I won’t oblige you. Liz will kill me if I pound on you. Especially in your condition. I could easily take you.”

Dutch grinned, “You think?”

He frowned, “I’m tempted to wait in the parking lot and run you over with my car if I have to put up with any more of this.”

“Then leave.” He said abruptly.

Jackson grew angry, then glanced at Amy again. Dutch was drunk and Amy was providing him with liquor all night which he didn’t even seem to notice. If he left he was certain she had her own agenda. “No, I’m taking you home.” As he suspected her face fell, “Alone.” He added giving her a pointed look. Her expression changed from pouty to angry. She made a sound, got up and left the table.

Jackson waited until she was out of earshot, “You’re a *fool* Dutch. That woman has been watching you like a predatory wildcat since you came in here. She’s been keeping your glass full all night. I don’t think she expected me to notice, but she’s been waiting until all of us are gone, and I’m not leaving you alone so you can do something stupid and break my sister’s heart.”

Dutch contemplated his words in his blurry mind for about two full minutes before he nodded. He was aiming for a fight. He missed Liz and although he didn’t hardly notice Amy at all that evening, Jackson wouldn’t lie to him.

“Come on man, I’ll give you a lift home, I’m perfectly sober because I know your son will be bouncing on my bed at seven in the morning.”

That made him grin, “Best kid in the world.”

“Don’t I know it.” He helped Dutch from his chair and led

him out of the bar to his car, not even caring if Amy returned and found the table empty.

Chapter Eight

Liz's flight came in at eight o'clock in the morning. Jacob was waiting for Tess, and although Liz was happy to see Micah and Jackson, she wished it was Dutch picking her up.

After they said goodbye to the Hartley's she asked Jackson where Dutch was.

"He got a little drunk last night. I drove him home."

She breathed a sigh of relief, "No jail?"

He smiled and shook his head, "He missed you."

Her smile widened.

"You won't be thinking that when you see that he is about as happy as a starved grizzly."

She laughed, "Like I said before I can handle him."

"Mom I'm hungry."

"Of course you are." She said like it's not surprise.

"Can we go see dad?"

"After we have breakfast, I'll take you out there."

"He's already had breakfast." Jackson chuckled, "pancakes."

"Did you?"

He nodded, "but I'm hungry again."

She sighed, "You are more like your father every day. He's got an appetite that would make a sumo wrestler look like he's on a diet."

Micah grinned taking any comparison to his father as a compliment even if he didn't know what a sumo wrestler was.

After Micah ate and she unpacked she drove out to Dutch's. She missed him horribly. If she had reservations about marrying him they were all gone because being away from him left a hole

in her gut and she was aching to see him again. She figured if she waited until noon he'd be waking up. Or, she grinned to herself, she could think of other ways to wake him up. She cast a glance at Micah, well maybe not today. Chances were that Micah would be all over him. Lately he'd been spending just about every day with his father so she could make the wedding plans.

Oddly enough, the front door was locked.

"Don't you have a key?" Micah said from beside her.

"No, he never locks his door." She reached up and used the knocker.

She'd heard the term blood freezing in your veins, but it never made sense to her until a half naked Amy answered the door while brushing her mussed up hair off her face. "What time is it?"

Liz's eyes went down the other woman's body and saw that she was only wearing a shirt, Dutch's shirt which fell to mid thigh and no pants.

"Mom?" Micah said looking up at her. He was holding her hand and she squeezed it tightly seeing Amy.

"Get in the car Micah." She said softly.

"But dad—"

"Obviously he's busy." She said without taking her eyes off the other woman.

He made a disappointed sound but did as she asked.

Amy's eyes darted to Micah and she suddenly looked guilty, "Liz I—"

"Save it." She took off her engagement ring and handed it to Amy, "Tell him that I hope you were worth it." She said turning around and leaving.

Dutch heard the squealing of tires on his driveway as he was getting out of bed. He looked out the window and swore he saw Jackson's Mercedes tear down the road. Odd. He glanced at the clock, *what time was Liz's plane due?* He was sure it was this

morning. Ah hell, he'd slept through a hangover. He wanted to go and pick her up. Obviously Jackson did. He'd have some apologizing to do.

After he had a shower he got dressed and made his way downstairs to search for breakfast but the smell of frying bacon hit his nostrils. Only it smelled like it was burning. His heart felt light in his chest thinking that maybe Jackson dropped Liz and Micah off this morning.

He stopped cold when he saw Amy setting the table. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She gave him her best smile, "I came home with you last night."

"The hell you did!" he barked causing her to flinch. Then his mind racked through the events the night before. He remembered her being with them, but so was Jackson.

"Don't you remember?" she said eyeing him carefully.

"No." he said bluntly, "Was that Liz?" his shot his thumb over his shoulder.

She looked guilty and reached into the pocket of her slacks to withdraw the engagement ring. "She gave me this." She'd purposely messed up her hair and grabbed one of Dutch's shirts from the laundry when she saw Liz drive up. She'd just arrived not ten minutes before the other woman did with intentions on trying to win him one last time. Unfortunately she didn't expect her son to be with her when she answered the door half naked and she felt guilty about that.

He released a curse that made her blanch, "Was Micah with her?"

Amy didn't say anything because of his reaction seconds ago to the engagement ring, but she didn't need to, he already knew.

"You bitch." He said vehemently causing her to gasp. "Get out of my house."

"But—"

“There’s nothing between us. If you think I’m not used to groupies like you, you’re dead wrong. If I find out that you lied to me in any way and compromised my relationship with my son and my future wife, I’ll do everything within my power to make you pay.”

Tears sprang to her eyes.

“Now the truth!”

She never said anything but shook her head.

“Amy, if there is any dirt on you I’ll find it. Do you think this is new to me?” he added in the same icy tone, “I eat women like you for breakfast and I’ve had my fair share to recognize one. Now talk!”

She burst into tears, but was terrified enough to blurt out the truth.

Meanwhile Liz was tossing Micah’s clothes in a suitcase.

“Mom!” he sobbed.

“Micah, I told you we have to go, this is important.”

“But dad—”

She stopped and sat on the bed. Her insides were twisted in a knot so painful that it was hard to breathe. “I love you Micah, but your father doesn’t want me.”

“He does!” he wailed. “He got you a ring!”

How on earth did she explain this to a four year old?

“Honey sometimes people change their minds.”

“Not Dad!” he wailed, “I don’t want to leave!”

Oh God, is it possible her heart could break twice in one day? Her son’s shattered expression made her feel horrible.

Jackson came in then hearing Micah’s voice, “What’s going on?”

“Mom’s moving us back to aunty’s!” he bellowed.

Jackson darted his eyes to Liz, “What happened?”

She shook her head and flicked a glance to Micah, “I just

need to get away.”

“Micah, can you go watch tv, I need to speak to your mom.”

Micah wiped a tear from under one eye and nodded. He was going to go phone his dad.

Jackson sat on the bed beside Liz, “Tell me.”

She fell her face in her hands and sobbed, “I’m so stupid.

“No one can accuse you of that Liz.” He said putting his arms around her.

“Micah saw Amy half naked at Jackson’s.”

“What?”

She sat up, and looked at the ceiling while tears washed her cheeks, “The door was—locked, and she answered it—oh god!”

“that’s impossible. I drove him home.”

She looked at him, “well then she showed up later.”

“Jesus, what a bitch. Jackson was loaded, he would have any idea what happened.”

“I don’t need his testimony. She looked—“ she released a sob and fell her face in her hands again, “I hate him.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Micah.” Dutch didn’t have caller ID but he certainly recognized the heavy breathing of his son when he answered the phone.

“Dad.” He sniffed, “Mom’s moving us away.”

“I’m on my way son. Don’t you worry. I’ll talk to your mom.”

“She’s crying dad. Why was Leo’s mom there?”

Dutch had to cover the mouthpiece so he could curse. Micah did see her. How could he explain that to a four year old why it looked like another woman had spent the night in his mother’s house? Well, it would be his mother’s house, “She’s just someone who obviously needed a place to sleep.”

“Mom’s crying.” He repeated with another sniff.

“I’ll be there in a half hour okay? I’m grabbing my keys right now.”

“Okay dad.”

“Everything will be fine Micah.” He said and hung up the phone. He didn’t even touch the steps on the front porch as he ran out the front door. He lived forty five minutes out of town and he was certain that Liz would be part way to the city by the time he reached her house.

As soon as the engine roared to life he ripped out of there with his foot and the accelerator meeting the floor.

Unfortunately he broke the speed limit getting there, got belligerent with the officer that pulled him over and ended up getting arrested for assault.

“Dammit Bill. Let me go!” He shouted from the cell.

“Dutch, you assaulted an officer.” He held out his hands helpless, “Unfortunately he’s new and is pressing charges. I tried to talk him out of it because of who you are and what you do for our kids, but giving him a black eye probably wasn’t a good idea.”

“Let me at least call Liz.” He asked.

“It’s not up to me.”

Dutch cursed and shook the bars, “She’s leaving town.”

His brows went up, “Why, you offend her too.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

Bill narrowed his eyes, “I’m glad you’re in there for once Dutch. It seems like you need a lesson.” He said slamming the door to the cell room.

“Fuck.” Dutch said pacing back and forth in the cell while running his fingers through his hair. His gut was in knots because his son and future wife were leaving. Once they left, he knew for a fact that he couldn’t get her back short of a miracle. Over and over again he’d been able to convince her that she was the only one for him when he’d hurt her before, but this was

catastrophic. Even Liz wouldn't forgive him this time. He knew that's why she was leaving.

An hour and a half later Jackson found him sitting on the bunk with his head in his hands and his fingers entangled in his hair.

At the sound of the door opening Dutch looked up to see Jackson let in by Bill. He stood up and grabbed the bars.

"Thanks Bill." Jackson said stepping by him.

"Five minutes before the new deputy finds out."

Jackson nodded as Bill shut the door. He turned his attention to Dutch. "You really screwed up this time."

"I didn't sleep with her Jackson."

He shrugged keeping his expression carefully guarded. "Does it matter?" Dutch looked like hell. "Fact of the matter is, you shouldn't have drunk so much."

He was right about that. "It does matter. I wouldn't have touched that woman if my life depended on it." He said not liking his friend's expression, "Where's Liz?"

"She had Tess drive her and Micah to the airport in the city."

He leaned forward and rested his head on the bars with a curse, "I tried to get there."

"It wouldn't have mattered Dutch. She was distraught. She wouldn't listen to me."

"You?" he said with curiosity lifting his head.

"I told her that you went home alone and were virtuously unconscious when you tumbled into bed. Whatever look like happened didn't."

"You said that?" he said with disbelief.

He gave a grim smile, "As much as an ass you've been around her, I knew you didn't cheat on her."

He released a breath of relief, "I'm in love with her." he confessed, "crazy nuts, in love with your sister."

“That’s a little obvious Dutch.” He said with a smile for the first time. “However, I don’t think that you’re healthy for her.”

“No, I’m probably not.” He agreed with a heavy sigh.

“You made her cry. My sister doesn’t cry.” He said dropping his smile.

Dutch nodded feeling his insides twist in a tighter knot.

“Micah cried.”

“Christ, you’re breaking my heart.” He said in a voice thick with emotion.

“Yeah well, I’m just saying that you had the best damn family a man could ask for—“

“She probably has some man back in phoenix.” He cut in vehemently. Jackson was killing him.

Jackson shook his head, “Micah was pretty time consuming plus she was looking after our ailing aunt.”

“Maybe she is better off.” He said in resignation, “I don’t have a bloody clue on how to handle a family. I’m screwed up enough for the both of us.”

Jackson gave a short laugh. “Is that so? My sister doesn’t seem to care. Do you know that Liz hasn’t had another relationship—ever.”

That brought his eyes abruptly to his, “No one can go four years without sex Jackson.” He said growing more irritable with the conversation. The thought that Liz had someone else in her past rubbed him the wrong way.

“For you and me maybe because we’re men, but not Liz.”

Dutch released a frustrated breath, “How the hell do you know. You said so yourself that you didn’t know about us until she confessed?”

“that’s because we don’t share our personal lives Dutch, and she wouldn’t have said anything if she wasn’t pregnant.”

“So she could have a man?”

“No.”

“You’re pissing me off.” Dutch seethed, “Look at her. There’s no way on God’s green earth that another man hasn’t touched her.”

“My sister would have to be in love with a man to allow him to get intimate with her.” Jackson offered while studying Dutch’s expression carefully.

Dutch shook his head, “Jackson, you do realize that I’m Micah’s father so obviously we’ve been—“

The dawning realization on Dutch’s face was so spectacular that Jackson wished he had a camera so he could take a picture, frame it, and mount it on the wall, “I honestly thought you were more intelligent Dutch. Why the hell do you think I stayed out of it all of these years? Do you honestly think I’d be best friends with the man who defiled my sister and left her pregnant if she didn’t have some deep feelings for you? Not a chance. I would have put you in the hospital.” He walked over and rapped on the door. Bill opened it and stepped in with the key to the cell.

“You’d better thank your future brother in law who has a way with words to the new deputy.” Bill said with a grin, “The charges have been dropped.” He opened the cell, “Congratulations on your upcoming wedding. That gal is hot.”

Dutch just looked at Jackson with disbelief, “Thanks.”

He looked at his watch, “Now, her plane leaves in two hours, and the drive to the city is just under that—so you can stand there staring stupidly at me or—“ he didn’t have to say another word Dutch was out of the cell in such a hurry that the breeze he created blew Bill’s bangs aside. Jackson looked at him and grinned, “It’s about time.”

At the airport Liz was feeling like the worst mother on the planet. Micah was still sniffing.

“But aren’t mums and dads supposed to love each other.”

“They are.” She said softly while looking at the flight

schedule on the overhead board. *Delayed—it figures.*

“but mom—” he hiccupped.

She looked down at his devastated expression and her heart constricted in her chest. Instantly she bent down and kissed him, “I’m so sorry baby. I really am. I do love your father. I love him so much that I’ll miss him more than Jackson.”

“You do?”

“I promise that when we get set up, I’ll let you go and see him—”

“But it’s not the same!” he cried while turning away. Then his face lit up as he focused on something through the crowd, “Dad!” he bolted through the cluster of people.

Liz panicked. The airport was packed and he quickly disappeared in it before she could stop him. How could he possibly think that Dutch was here? Then the crowd parted momentarily and the sight of a tall blonde man picking up her son made her pause—Dutch?

It couldn’t be.

However, a few more seconds later he stood erect and as usual, he towered above the crowd with her son perched on his shoulders. She stood in stunned silence as he approached all the while his eyes were locked on hers.

“what are you doing here?” she said in disbelief.

“You don’t think it’s that easy to get away from me do you?”

She brushed her hair back over her shoulder and pursed her lips to try and stop the tears from falling. He was devastating to her senses, and downright deadly to her heart, “I really didn’t have a choice.”

He nodded and took a deep breath while staring down at her. When he finally said something to her, he knew it had to convince her beyond a doubt that his heart belonged to her. There was only one way. Something that no one knew about. Something he’d never brag about to anyone. “I haven’t been with

a woman since that day with you when Micah was made.” He said while keeping his eyes steady on hers, “I swear to God.”

If she wasn’t shocked before, she certainly was now, “W—what did you just say?”

“Exactly what you hear Liz. I’m a fool in many ways, but you leaving me, has got to be the most stupid thing—“

“No no, wind back, I want to hear that again.” She said making a turning motion with her hand. He grinned, and it was devastating to her.

“You wrecked me.”

“But I saw you—tabloids—“ she covered her forehead with her hand as if it would help her absorb what he was saying.

“That’s all they are, a show. Do you think that moment wasn’t special for me either, and the second time.” He cocked a brow. “And the third—“

She interrupted him so Micah wouldn’t get suspicious of what his father was counting, “That was five years ago—good lord Dutch. A man can’t—“

“Yes and I felt every day of it to the teeth. I missed you.”

“Five years?”

“Five *long* goddam years.” He confirmed softly.

She shook her head in shock.

“Honey, why do you think I couldn’t get enough of you?”

“I don’t know, you’re—“ she just waved a hand up his body, “—well look at you!” causing him to chuckle.

“Enough of what?” Micah said causing her to blush crimson.

“Your mom’s kisses.” He answered with an amused grin, not taking his eyes off of Liz.

“Me either. They make my cuts feel better.”

Dutch laughed.

“See mom,” Came Micah’s eager voice, “He loves you too. Right dad?”

Her eyes darted from her son back to Dutch who nodded.

“do you?”

“So much it hurts.”

“No more whiskey.”

“That won’t be a problem.” He made a face.

“No more women.”

“I only have one.” He said reaching for her, “There’s only been one. I do love you baby.”

She started crying.

“Mom?”

Dutch gathered her in his arms, “It’s okay Micah, it means she’s happy.” He bent his head, “right?”

She nodded, too choked up to talk.

“Can we go home now?” Micah said with an expression of relief, “To Dad’s.”

“Can we?” Dutch repeated.

She nodded again.

That night after Dutch tucked Micah in, and Liz phoned Jackson to tell him that she was at the Ranch. Dutch took her hand and led her to his study.

“Where are we going?”

“I need to talk to you. There’s one thing left to get out of the way. Then you’ll understand a few more things about me.”

He sat her on the couch flicking his eyes to the cushion with a knowing glint in his eyes before he sat beside her.

She gave him a shy smile knowing exactly what he was thinking.

He took her hands, “My father was bipolar.”

“Is that where they have highs and lows? I saw a documentary on that.”

“It was worse than that Liz. He drank too. Then he’d stay awake for days at a time and keep me up with him. It was horrible for a kid Micah’s age to go through. When he was

depressed it was easier to take because he'd just hide. It was the manic episodes that were a problem. I would have to make sure he didn't try and fly off the roof of the house. I was seven."

She squeezed his hands but didn't want to interrupt despite feeling for him as a child.

"My mother left when I was six. She couldn't take it. I heard years later in my teens that she had died."

"I'm sorry Dutch."

He nodded but kept talking, "Despite what my father did, I did care about him Liz. He was my father and he drove me into hockey my third greatest love next to you and Micah. I just didn't want to get close to anyone again." He smiled, "Then you came along."

"Sorry." She smiled.

"Sure you are." He said returning her smile, "I think I turned out all right don't you?"

She laughed, "Despite your belligerence. I think so. You need some love in your life Jason and I'm willing to give it to you."

"I think you already have darlin'."

She gave him a puzzled expression because even though he admitted her feelings for him she never did.

"In the tub, on my counter—the stairs." He continued with a sly smile.

She slapped his thick chest with her hand, "My God, you can't even go five minutes without bringing that up."

"My point is—" he chuckled, "That you'd never give yourself to me unless you loved me. However for the life of me I can't figure out why because I wasn't too nice to you."

"You were honest with me Dutch. You never lied to me, and you love Micah."

"I really love Micah." He admitted thickly, "More than I thought possible. Maybe that's what opened me up to you." He

inhaled deeply, “Or maybe it just made me realize I always loved you. Regardless, he’s perfect, and so are you.”

She flushed slightly, “I’m so glad you noticed.”

“You drink beer, you laugh in the face of my bad moods—a little thing like you—“ he smirked before continuing, “you are down to earth, damn sexy to the teeth and I’m done for. I was when I first caught you falling off that ladder.”

She smiled feeling her eyes water.

“There you go biting your lip again. If you knew how that affected me you wouldn’t do it.” His eyes darkened.

“Maybe I do.”

“Don’t be a brat. You know I’m not one for words so let me finish.”

She laughed and nodded.

“Now, the wedding is on.”

“It is.” She agreed.

“Are you pregnant?”

She stilled and stared at him. It was the last thing she’d expect for him to say.

“Liz, “ he lifted one of her hands and kissed her knuckles, “Listen. I’m asking because I want another child. I just thought we should maybe do something right this time and be married first.”

“Well then you’d better hurry up.” She finally said softly.

If this is how it would have felt when she told him she was pregnant the first time with Micah, he definitely missed out on too much.

“Dutch, I can’t breathe.” She muffled into his chest because he grabbed her in a tight embrace after he released a whoop of happiness.

EPILOGUE

For the next four consecutive years Liz gave Dutch sons. He kept his promise and stopped drinking hard liquor and he only had eyes for his wife.

The hockey team flourished and Jackson had to take over the Tyke league because Dutch followed Micah and last year created an Atom level for nine to eleven year olds. It went triple A in the first year.

“He’s looking good for a draft in a few years Liz.” Jackson said as he came to stand beside his sister to watch Micah practice with the team.

She smiled at him, “Dutch said so.” She agreed. “But not for another eight or nine years.” She added with relief.

“He’s only nine and the girls are already chasing him.”

“Thank god I don’t have to worry about that for a few more years. He loves hockey.” She said adjusting the youngest Rush boy on her hip who’d just turned one a few weeks ago.

Jackson grinned, “Probably, because it’ll get him girls.”

She dropped her smile, “you may be big Jackson but I can still pop you.”

“Yeah with five boys I guess.” He chuckled putting his arm around his sister. “I’m glad you’re happy sis.”

Dutch blew his whistle calling an end to the game then skated over to his wife with precision speed skidding to a halt with a scrape of his blades on ice stopping directly in front of her, “Hi doll.”

She smiled and leaned over the boards to get a devastating kiss.

“Good lord you guys, you’ve been married for five years.” Jackson said.

“And she tastes better every minute.” He said not taking his eyes off of her.

She smiled at him.

“Looks better with each passing day.” He continued.

“Romeo.” She teased.

“And thank God I married her when I did.”