

## Til Death Do Us Part

An eerie silence surrounded me. The hot muggy air caused sweat to trickle down my back. It was still early and no one was out and about yet. Gravel crunched under my boots and the musty smell of hay tickled my nose. I made my way down the path from the fairground parking lot to the horse barn. The ring on my left hand glittered in the rising sun. Michael's words continue to hum in my ears. "Maggie, will you marry me?" I still can't believe it. We've been married for two days now. He had come in and snatched my heart. My head spun. I wrapped my arms around myself. A smile tugged at my lips. Michael my handsome bull rider.

"Aaron?" Sheila's high pitch voice sent chills up my spine.

"What's wrong?"

Michael's mother, Sheila, grabbed my arms. Her eyes wide. "Have you seen Aaron?"

"No. What's going on?"

"He wasn't in the trailer when I woke up this morning. I've looked through the cattle barn. He loves to watch the calves, but he wasn't there...Maggie, he's not here."

"We'll find him." I pulled Sheila into a tight hug. "I know the horse barn is locked. But Michael volunteered to stand guard early this morning. Let's see if he let Aaron in."

All the cowboys were taking turns keeping an eye on the horse barn ever since equipment had gone missing. Cowboys and their equipment were not to be messed with.

The echo of two gunshots sliced through the air. My head jerked toward the horse barn. My heart skipped as I raced to the barn. Toward my husband. Toward danger.

The door stood unlatched. My hand shook as I pulled the door open. The smell of gunpowder lingered in the air. Horses whinnied and metal clanked as they pulled on their halters. My boots clicked on the concrete floor as I made my way from stall to stall.

A scream pierced the air. I slammed my hands to my ears, but it didn't help. The scream was mine. My breath quickened. Dizziness swarmed over me. My knees hit the hard floor. I grabbed at my heart as sobs escaped my lips.

Michael lay in a heap in the corner of the stall. Motionless. Red oozed from somewhere near his chest. His handgun lay in the straw bedding a couple feet from his body.

Time went into slow motion as my mind attempted to grasp what had happened.

A man's boots caught my attention. I pulled my eyes from Michael and shifted my gaze to the boots. I scanned up the man's jean clad legs, to his black shirt, then to the man's neck. A hole had ripped through his throat. Blood pooled under his head. I forced myself to move my focus to his eyes. His hollow stare at the ceiling sent shivers up my back. Death screamed back at me. Nothing would save this man. Death had already taken its victim. Had it taken Michael too?

My heart pounded as I looked back at Michael. Was he alive? I rushed over and knelt next to him. My fingers pressed into the artery of his neck. He had a pulse. *Oh thank you, Lord.* I fumbled for my cell phone and dialed 911.

My eyes narrowed as I spotted a little hand protruding out from under Michael's body.

Oh no. Aaron.

"Aaron." My voice echoed through the barn.

I bent down and with my hands under Michael's arms, I lifted. My shoulders quivered. I eased him from his position on top of Aaron's little body. Both lay lifeless.

Tears burned my eyes. When would the ambulance get here?

"Nooooo." Sheila's plea broke through my shock.

This couldn't be happening.

###

Two days ago I stood at the rodeo arena. My knee bent and boot tucked in one of the arena gates. I leaned on my folded arms over the top rung and gazed into the morning light. The sun had just begun to rise over the horizon. The purple, pink, and yellow hues mesmerized me. A smile crept up on my lips as my thoughts drifted to Michael. I had known him for a few years, but until three weeks ago, he had been just a friend and one of the crazy bull riders on the rodeo circuit. I chuckled and shook my head. What he does might be crazy, but he is amazing at his job. Fear and respect mingled together.

I inhaled. What a few weeks. I had spent every possible minute with him and there is no doubt in my mind he's the man for me. But something sad laid behind those brown eyes of his. I wish he'd talk to me. One thing I couldn't handle was someone concealing the truth. My forehead pinched together. I had been betrayed once and it had torn me apart. I would not do that again. Get a grip, Maggie. Give him time. I closed my eyes. *Lord, don't let me get hurt again. I don't think I can take it.*

The clomp of boots across the dirt brought me out of my reverie. Michael tucked his booted toe in the rung of the gate and slid his arm around my waist.

"Hey there, gorgeous." He tipped his cowboy hat back further on his head.

I leaned into his shoulder. "Hi back at ya."

"Maggie, I've been thinking."

*Oh no, that's never good.* I tensed.

He chuckled. "No, Maggie, I'm not breaking up with you."

It was as if he could read my mind. My heart flipped. I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. "Okay. That's good."

Michael turned me to face him and cupped my chin. He leaned in and feathered a kiss across my lips. My eyes closed and he took the kiss deeper. An electric pulse shot through my body. How could he do this to me with just a kiss?

Breathless, he pulled away. Apparently I wasn't the only one feeling the world turn upside down.

His forehead on mine, his brown eyes to my blue, I searched into his soul. The love seeped out. Except for that one sad spot deep within him.

"Come on, Maggie, let's go for a walk." He grabbed my hand and laced his fingers with mine.

He led me away from the arena toward the nearby park. The birds chirped and the occasional whinny of the horses broke the silence of the early morning. My fingers touched my lips. I could kiss this man all day long.

"Maggie..." Michael bit his lower lip. "I know we've only been dating for a few weeks, but we've been friends for years now." His grip tightened on my hand. "I know you don't like secrets, and I understand why."

I looked down at the ground. What could I say? The man I thought I loved had deceived me.

Michael continued. "So, there's something I need to tell you."

No. Please no. Don't break my heart. I couldn't speak.

"There are only a few people who know this." He tipped his hat back and scratched his head.

His brown eyes drooped. I peered up at him and my heart sank.

“A little over three years ago, I dated a woman named Rachel. She had a four-year-old son. We were happy together. I thought she might be the one. But she struggled with my job as a bull rider.” He stopped. His gaze far away.

I squeezed his hand. “Go on.”

He shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts.

“One night we got into an argument. She wanted me to quit.” He sighed. “I couldn’t do that.”

I smiled at him. No. He couldn’t quit. Bull riding is not only what he does, it’s a part of who he is.

“Anyway, she stormed out of her house in tears. She said she needed to go for a walk to think about whether or not she could stay with me.”

He turned his face and pulled away. My chest tightened.

He took a deep breath. “She was hit by a car and killed that night.” His eyes closed. “Her son had lost his mother cause of our fight. The guilt still rips me apart inside.”

“Michael, her death isn’t your fault.”

“Well, it sure feels like it.”

I ran my hand down his arm to his hand and laced my fingers with his. “I’m sorry, Michael. May I ask, what happened to her son?”

“Rachel didn’t have any family. I think maybe that’s why she couldn’t deal with the risks I take. Anyway, I was with her son that night. Since it was my fault...”

“Michael.”

He held up his hand. “I vowed to make sure he had someone to love and take care of him. I knew my parents had always wanted another child. So, I went to them and told them what

happened. They of course were more than willing to raise her son. Maggie...Aaron is Rachel's son. ”

The air left my lungs.

“Breathe, honey. Breathe.”

Michael's words ricochet in my mind. *Aaron is his dead girlfriend's son.* How can I compete with a ghost? It was obvious he still cared about Rachel. But the constant reminder with her son in Michael's life? No wonder they had such a bond. How could I have missed there was something more between them?

“I'm not sure what to say...Rachel's son? Wow.”

“Maggie, I needed you to know. If this...” He pointed back and forth between us. “Is going anywhere permanent, you had to know. No secrets, remember?”

I nodded. He had opened up about his guilt. But could I get past Rachel being a part of his life forever?

“I had to tell you. Because if I didn't tell you *that*, I couldn't ask you this...” He wiped the sweat from his brow and turned to face me.

“Maggie, I know we have only dated a *very* short time. But we've been friends for a couple of years. I feel like my world has finally come into place with you in my life. I don't ever want to be without you.”

Michael dropped to one knee. He pulled out a small box and opened it. A one carat diamond solitaire winked back at me. “Maggie Elizabeth Parker, will you marry me?”

My hand flew to my mouth. This couldn't be happening. “Michael? What about Rachel? You still love her. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Aw, Maggie. Looking back, we never had a future together. Yes, my heart hurts and I feel guilt over what happened, but I never loved her the way I love you. I would give up anything for you, even the rodeo circuit. I love you, Maggie.”

I blinked back tears. He’d give up anything for me? I swallowed. He loved me. Only me. I didn’t have to compete with a memory. Was I crazy to say yes? I sucked in a breath. “Yes. Yes Michael, I’ll marry you.”

His eyebrows raised and a sigh escaped his lips. He stood, wrapped his arms around me and kissed me breathless.

“Today.”

“What?”

“Marry me today.”

What was I thinking? This was nuts. “Okay.”

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“The courthouse.”

I giggled as he swung me around. Like two little kids with a bowl of candy, we took off to seal our love for each other.

The reveal of his secret, our wedding, and our new life together. My dreams had come true.

###

The antiseptic smell of the hospital assaulted my nose. My boots clicked up and down the hall. Sheila had stayed with Aaron. He had suffered a concussion, but didn’t have any other injuries. The officers told us that Michael had protected Aaron from the gunman. Of course he

had. Would Aaron feel the same guilt if Michael died? No, I'm not going here. Michael wouldn't die. He had to survive.

*Lord, please don't take him from me.* Tears stung my eyes. I had said "Til death do us part" in my vows, but this was too soon. Two days wasn't enough time. I wanted a lifetime together.

My legs couldn't hold me anymore. I slid down the wall and sobbed into my hands.

Why was Aaron in the horse barn? What did the man with the gun want? Why did Michael have to be shot? So many questions. But I didn't care anymore. I just wanted Michael back.

Forty-eight hours later I sat by his bedside. His face pale and sunken in. Monitors hummed breaking the silence in the room. I held his hand and laid my head next to him on the bed. He was still with me. I'd take every moment I could get.

A whispered voice met my ears. Michael.

"Heaven is beautiful." The breathy words hung in the room.

"Michael, please stay with me." My tears dropped on our hands.

"I'm here, honey." He tried to lick his dry lips.

"Please don't go. I need you."

He weakly squeezed my hand and whispered. "I'm not going anywhere. Someday my place will be in heaven, but right now, it's with you."

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (KJV) To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.