



Married to the Mountain Man

Author: *Tessa McRae*

Category: Romance

Description: Lisa Graham was the girl next door—the one I never touched, never kissed, never let myself want.

Until she walked into my home and asked me to marry her.

It's fake. Just to help her keep custody of her nephew. But the second that ring slips on her finger, something real locks into place.

I've spent years keeping the peace in Grizzly Ridge. But I'd set this whole town on fire before I let someone take her or that baby.

She thinks this is temporary. That she can walk away.

She doesn't know what I've been holding back.

I've loved her my whole damn life.

And now that I've got her, she's never getting away.

Married to the Mountain Man is a steamy, small-town mountain romance featuring a protective sheriff hero, a fake marriage with very real feelings, childhood friends-to-lovers tension, and an unshakable bond built on fierce loyalty and lifelong love. Escape to Grizzly Ridge for a swoony, slow-burn love story—with a guaranteed HEA and all the protective, possessive feels.

Total Pages (Source): 37

1

SAWYER

The call comes in at 3:47 AM, and I'm already awake.

Been staring at the ceiling for the past hour, listening to the wind howl through the pines outside my cabin. Sleep's been a fickle bastard lately, coming in fragments that leave me more exhausted than rested. The job does that to a man. Forty-seven years old, twenty-three of them wearing this badge, and I still can't shut my brain off when my head hits the pillow.

"Sheriff McKenna." My voice comes out rough, gravelly from disuse.

"Sawyer, it's Dispatch. Got a domestic disturbance out on Maple Street. The Henderson place."

I'm already swinging my legs out of bed, reaching for the jeans I left folded on the chair. "Anyone hurt?"

"Neighbor called it in. Says there's shouting, something about throwing things. You want me to send Deputy Collins?"

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intend. Collins is a good kid, eager and earnest, but domestics are tricky territory. Too many variables. Too many ways for things to go sideways fast. "I'll handle it."

Ten minutes later, I'm pulling up to the small ranch house on Maple Street, the gravel crunching under my tires. The porch light is on, casting long shadows across the front yard, and I can hear muffled voices through the thin walls. Male and female. Angry.

I've been to this house before. Tom Henderson, forty-two, works at the lumber mill when he's sober. Has a temper that gets worse when he's drinking, which is most nights lately since the mill cut his hours. His wife Sarah is a sweet woman, the kind who makes excuses for bruises and wears long sleeves in July.

The shouting stops when I knock.

"Sheriff's department. Open up."

Footsteps. The sound of a chain sliding. Tom opens the door wearing a stained undershirt and the bleary-eyed look of a man who's been drinking since dinner. His knuckles are scraped, and there's a fresh cut on his lip.

"Evening, Tom." I keep my voice calm, even. "Got a call about some noise. Everything alright in here?"

"Just a little disagreement, Sheriff. Nothing to worry about." His words slur together at the edges. "You know how women get."

Behind him, I catch a glimpse of Sarah hovering in the hallway. She's wearing a bathrobe pulled tight around her waist, and even in the dim light, I can see the red mark blooming across her left cheek.

Something cold and familiar settles in my chest. The same feeling I get every time I see a man use his size, his strength, to hurt someone smaller. Someone who trusted him.

"Sarah." I look past Tom, meeting her eyes. "You okay?"

She nods quickly, too quickly. "I'm fine, Sheriff McKenna. Really. We were just..."

"Having a discussion," Tom finishes, stepping closer to the door frame. Blocking my view of his wife. "Nothing that concerns the law."

"Well, Tom, here's the thing." I rest my hand on my belt, close enough to my service weapon that he notices. "When neighbors start calling about noise at four in the morning, it becomes my concern. Mind if I come in? Just want to make sure everyone's safe."

His jaw tightens. For a second, I think he might try to close the door, might push this further than it needs to go. But he steps aside, and I cross the threshold into their living room.

The place is a mess. Broken glass from what looks like a beer bottle scattered across the hardwood. A lamp knocked over, its shade dented. Pictures frames lying face down on the side table.

"Looks like quite a discussion," I observe, pulling out my notebook. "Sarah, you want to tell me what happened here?"

"I told you, it was nothing," Tom interjects, but I hold up a hand.

"I'm talking to your wife." My voice carries the authority I've spent decades cultivating. The kind that makes grown men think twice about their next move. "Sarah?"

She looks between Tom and me, her fingers worrying the belt of her robe. "I... I dropped a glass. Clumsy. And then Tom got upset because..."

"Because she was nagging me about my drinking again." Tom's voice carries an edge of violence that makes my muscles tense. "Can't a man have a beer in his own house without his wife riding him about it?"

"That mark on Sarah's face." I turn to face him fully, letting him see exactly how serious I am. "That from her being clumsy too?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Tom's hands clench into fists at his sides. "You calling me a liar, Sheriff?"

"I'm asking you a question. Simple one. Did you hit your wife?"

The silence stretches between us, thick with tension. Sarah's breathing is shallow, rapid. Tom's face flushes red, whether from anger or alcohol, I can't tell.

"She ran into the door," he finally says. "When she was cleaning up the glass. Wasn't watching where she was going."

It's a lie. We all know it's a lie. But proving it, getting Sarah to admit what really happened, that's the hard part. The part that keeps me awake at night, knowing there are women in this town who go to bed afraid of the men who should protect them.

"Tom, you know what I think?" I close my notebook, slide it back into my pocket. "I think you've had enough to drink tonight. I think maybe you should sleep it off somewhere else. Give everyone a chance to cool down."

"This is my house." His voice rises, and Sarah flinches. "You can't make me leave my own house."

"Actually, I can." I step closer, using every inch of my six-foot-three frame. "I can arrest you for disturbing the peace. For destruction of property. For assault, if Sarah decides to press charges." I pause, letting that sink in. "Or you can take a walk. Sleep on your brother's couch. Come back tomorrow when you're sober and ready to have a real conversation with your wife."

Tom looks like he wants to fight. His fists are still clenched, his jaw working like he's chewing on words he wants to spit at me. But he's not stupid enough to take a swing at a sheriff. Not tonight, anyway.

"Fine." He pushes past me, grabbing a jacket from the coat hook by the door. "But this is bullshit, McKenna. Complete bullshit."

"Tom." I catch his arm as he tries to leave. "If I have to come back here tonight, if I get another call about raised voices or broken glass, you're going to jail. We clear?"

He jerks his arm away but nods. The front door slams behind him hard enough to rattle the windows.

Sarah and I stand in the sudden quiet, listening to his truck start up and pull away with a squeal of tires.

"Thank you," she whispers, finally meeting my eyes. "I know it doesn't... I know this doesn't solve anything, but..."

"Sarah." I keep my voice gentle. "You don't have to live like this. There are options. Shelters. Legal protections."

She shakes her head. "He's not always like this. When he's not drinking, he's..."

"A different man. I know. I've heard it before." And I have. Too many times. "But the drinking's not stopping, is it? It's getting worse."

She doesn't answer, just starts picking up pieces of broken glass with trembling fingers.

"Leave that." I kneel down beside her, taking the sharp fragments from her hands.

"I'll clean it up. You go put some ice on that cheek."

For a moment, I think she might break down. Might finally admit what we both know is happening in this house. But she just nods and disappears into the kitchen.

By the time I finish cleaning up the glass and right the overturned furniture, she's back with a bag of frozen peas pressed against her face.

"You got somewhere you can go tonight?" I ask. "Sister, friend, someone who wouldn't mind you staying over?"

"I'll be fine here. Tom won't come back tonight when he's this drunk. He'll pass out at Billy's place and sleep until noon."

"And tomorrow?"

She doesn't answer.

I pull a business card from my wallet, write my personal cell number on the back. "If things get bad again, if you need help, you call me. Day or night. Promise me."

She takes the card with shaking fingers. "I promise."

The drive back to my cabin takes twenty minutes, but I spend another hour in my truck in the driveway, engine running, heat blasting against the early morning cold. Thinking about Sarah Henderson's bruised face. About all the Sarah Hendersons I've encountered over the years. About the ones I couldn't help, couldn't save.

About how many times I'll get called back to that house before something permanent happens.

When I finally make it inside, dawn is starting to creep over the mountains, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold. I pour myself a cup of coffee, stronger than motor oil, and settle into the chair by my front window.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

That's when I see her.

Lisa Graham, walking up my front path like she belongs here. Like she's done it a thousand times before.

She's wearing a blue dress that brings out her eyes, her dark hair pulled back in a way that accentuates her cheekbones. Professional. Determined. Beautiful in a way that hits me like a punch to the gut, just like it did when we were kids.

Just like it has every day for years.

I haven't seen her in three months. Not since her sister Emma's funeral, when she stood graveside holding that baby boy, tears streaming down her face while she promised him everything would be okay. When she looked at me across the cemetery and nodded once, acknowledging the silent support I'd offered but couldn't voice.

She knocks on my door at exactly six AM, and when I open it, her green eyes are red-rimmed from crying. But her chin is set in that stubborn line I remember from childhood, the one that meant Lisa Graham was about to do something brave and probably stupid.

"Sawyer." Her voice is steady despite the tears. "I need to talk to you. About Tommy. About... about something I need to ask you."

Tommy. Her nephew. The baby she's been raising since Emma died in that car accident six months ago. The kid she loves like her own son.

"Come in." I step aside, letting her into my space for the first time in years. She smells like vanilla and something floral, the same perfume she wore to senior prom when she went with Bobby Martinez instead of me.

Not that I'd asked her. Not that I'd ever been brave enough to risk the friendship we'd had since we were eight years old.

She sits on the edge of my couch, hands folded in her lap, looking anywhere but at me. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it."

I wait. Patient. The way I've learned to be with victims, with witnesses, with people who need time to find their courage.

"Emma's ex-husband is trying to get custody of Tommy." The words come out in a rush. "Derek. He left Emma when she got pregnant, wanted nothing to do with the baby. But now that she's gone, now that there's life insurance money and Tommy's trust fund..."

Understanding hits me like ice water. Derek Morrison. I remember him from high school, a piece of shit who thought his daddy's money made him untouchable. The kind of guy who'd abandon a pregnant woman and then circle back when there was profit to be made.

"What do you need?" The question comes out rougher than I intend.

Lisa finally looks at me, and the desperation in her eyes makes something primal and protective roar to life in my chest.

"I need you to marry me."

LISA

The words hang in the air between us like smoke from a wildfire, dangerous and impossible to take back.

"I need you to marry me."

Sawyer's face goes completely still. Not surprised, exactly, but like he's processing information, filing it away in that methodical way he's had since we were kids. The way he used to look when Mrs. Peterson would call on him in math class and he'd take that extra beat to make sure his answer was exactly right.

His blue eyes search my face, looking for the joke, the punchline, the reasonable explanation for why his childhood best friend just asked him to marry her at six in the morning while sitting on his couch in a wrinkled dress.

"Lisa." His voice is careful, controlled. The sheriff voice. "What's going on?"

I've practiced this conversation a hundred times in my head during the sleepless hours between midnight and dawn. I've rehearsed the words, planned the explanations, prepared for every possible reaction. But sitting here, looking at SawyerMcKenna in his kitchen with his dark hair messy from sleep and yesterday's stubble shadowing his jaw, all my careful planning crumbles.

He looks older than I remember. Not just the silver threading through his temples or the lines around his eyes, but something deeper. A weariness that settles into a man after years of picking up the pieces of other people's broken lives.

"Derek filed a custody petition yesterday." The words taste bitter. "His lawyer called me at five PM to inform me that they're seeking full custody of Tommy, effective immediately."

Sawyer's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "On what grounds?"

"That I'm an unfit guardian. Single, unemployed, no stable housing." I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "The fact that I've been taking care of Tommy since Emma died, that he knows my voice, my touch, that I'm the only mother he's ever known, apparently that doesn't matter."

"You're not unemployed. You're a freelance graphic designer."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

The fact that he remembers my work, that he's kept track of my life even though we barely speak anymore, does something warm and dangerous to my chest. I push the feeling down. I can't afford to get distracted by the way Sawyer McKenna has always been able to see me, really see me, when most people look right through.

"Freelance doesn't look stable on paper. Not compared to Derek's corporate lawyer salary and his new wife's trust fund." I stand up, needing to move, to pace, to do something with the nervous energy crawling under my skin. "They've been married six months. Six months, Sawyer. He couldn't even wait a year after Emma died before he was shopping for a replacement family."

"And you think marrying me solves this problem how?"

There it is. The practical question. The logical follow-up that cuts straight to the heart of my desperate, half-formed plan.

"Married couples are given preference in custody cases. I need the outlook of a stable two-parent home, financial security, and community ties." I turn to face him, wrapping my arms around myself. "You've been sheriff here for over twenty years. You own your home outright. You're respected, trusted. On paper, we'd look like the perfect family."

"On paper." His voice is flat.

"Derek's lawyer is good, but he's not expecting me to fight back. He's expecting me to roll over, to accept that a rich man with connections gets whatever he wants just because he can afford better representation." Heat rises in my voice, the anger I've

been holding back for months finally finding an outlet. "He's expecting the scared, broke girl who can't afford a custody battle."

"But you're not that girl."

"No." I meet his eyes, letting him see the steel Emma always said lived in my spine. "I'm not."

Sawyer stands slowly, all six feet three inches of mountain-bred muscle and quiet authority. He moves to the kitchen window, looking out at the pine trees that surround his property like sentries. The early morning light catches the silver in his hair, and I'm hit with the sudden realization that we're not kids anymore. That somewhere between Emma's funeral and this moment, we became adults with adult problems and adult solutions that our eight-year-old selves could never have imagined.

"Tell me about the hearing," he says finally.

"Two weeks from today. Emergency custody review. Derek's lawyer is claiming I'm emotionally unstable, financially irresponsible, and living in unsuitable conditions." I can't keep the bitterness out of my voice. "The fact that I'm grieving my sister apparently makes me unfit to raise her son."

"You're living in Emma's apartment."

"Was living in Emma's apartment. The lease is up next month, and I can't afford to renew it on my own. Derek's team knows that. They're timing this perfectly, waiting until I'm most vulnerable."

Sawyer turns back to me, and something in his expression has shifted. The careful neutrality is gone, replaced by something darker. More dangerous.

"What else aren't you telling me?"

I knew he'd ask. He's always been able to do that, cut through my defenses with surgical precision. It's infuriating and comforting in equal measure.

"Derek came to see me last week." The admission comes out barely above a whisper. "Offered me fifty thousand dollars to sign over my parental rights voluntarily. Said it would be easier for everyone if Tommy just forgot about Emma's side of the family entirely."

"Jesus Christ, Lisa."

"I told him to go to hell." I straighten my shoulders, remembering the look on Derek's face when I shut the door in his face. "That's when he filed the petition. When he realized I wasn't going to make this easy for him."

Sawyer is quiet for a long moment, processing. I can practically see the wheels turning, the way his mind categorizes information and sorts through possibilities. It's the same expression he used to get when we'd play chess on his grandmother's front porch during summer visits, thinking three moves ahead while I was still figuring out how to get my pieces out of immediate danger.

"A fake marriage." His voice is carefully neutral. "For how long?"

"Just until the custody case is settled. Six months, maybe less. Long enough to prove to the court that Tommy has a stable home with two committed guardians." I'm talking faster now, the words tumbling over each other in my eagerness to make him understand. "It would be completely platonic, obviously. Separate rooms, separate lives. Just a legal arrangement to protect Tommy."

"Obviously." There's something in his tone I can't quite read.

"Sawyer, I know this is crazy. I know I'm asking you to put your reputation, your career, everything on the line for a fake marriage to help me keep a baby that isn't even biologically mine. But I don't have anyone else to ask."

That's the truth I've been avoiding all night. The painful reality that my circle of support is exactly one person deep, and that person is standing in front of me looking like he's trying to solve the world's most complicated equation.

"Emma made me Tommy's guardian in her will for a reason," I continue, desperation creeping into my voice. "She knew Derek would come back eventually. She knew he'd try to use Tommy as a meal ticket. She trusted me to protect her son from that."

"And you trust me to help you do it."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yes. I trust you."

The words hang between us, heavy with the weight of our shared history. Years of shared secrets and inside jokes and the kind of bone-deep friendship that survives high school drama and college separation and the messy complications of adult life.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Almost forty years of me taking Sawyer McKenna's steadiness for granted, assuming he'd always be there when I needed him.

"The court hearing is in two weeks," I say when the silence stretches too long. "If we're going to do this, we'd need to get married soon. This week, probably."

"This week." He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up even more. "Lisa, do you have any idea what you're asking me to do?"

"I'm asking you to help me save my nephew from a man who abandoned him before he was born and only wants him back now because there's money involved." My voice cracks slightly on the last word. "I'm asking you to help me keep the promise I made to my sister."

"That's not what you're asking, and we both know it."

His words hit like a slap. Because he's right. What I'm asking is bigger than a favor between old friends. What I'm asking requires him to lie to a court, to pretend feelings he doesn't have, to risk his career and reputation for a woman who hasn't been a real part of his life in years.

What I'm asking is selfish and desperate and completely unfair.

"You're right." I sink back down onto his couch, suddenly exhausted. "You're absolutely right. This is insane, and I'm being selfish, and I should never have come here."

I start to stand, to gather what's left of my dignity and walk out of Sawyer's life for good, but his voice stops me.

"Sit down, Lisa."

It's not a request. It's the voice he uses when he's making an arrest, when he needs someone to comply without argument. I sit.

"When's the last time you slept? Really slept, not just closed your eyes and worried about Tommy for six hours."

The question catches me off guard. "I don't know. Tuesday, maybe?"

"It's Friday."

"Is it?" I try to remember what day it is, but the past week has been a blur of phone calls with lawyers and sleepless nightspacing Emma's apartment while Tommy cried. "I've been a little distracted."

"When's the last time you ate something that wasn't coffee and whatever you could grab from a vending machine?"

"Sawyer, what does this have to do with anything?"

He moves to the kitchen, pulls out eggs, bacon, and bread from his refrigerator. Starts cooking without asking if I want anything, the same way he used to make us sandwiches during those long summer afternoons when we were kids and forgot to eat until our stomachs started growling.

"It has to do with the fact that you're asking me to make a life-changing decision while you're running on three hours of sleep and pure adrenaline." He cracks eggs

into a pan. "It has to do with the fact that if we're going to do this, we're going to do it right."

My heart stops. "If we're going to do this?"

He doesn't answer immediately, focused on cooking breakfast like it's the most important task in the world. But when he finally looks at me, there's something in his eyes I've never seen before. Something that makes my breath catch and my pulse quicken.

"Derek Morrison has been a piece of shit since high school," he says finally. "The idea of him getting his hands on Tommy, of that baby growing up thinking his father is a man who only wanted him for money..." His jaw tightens. "That's not happening. Not while I can do something to stop it."

"So you'll do it? You'll marry me?"

"I'll marry you." The words are simple, matter-of-fact, like he's agreeing to help me move furniture instead of committing to a fake marriage that could destroy both our lives. "But we do this my way. No more running yourself into the ground. No more surviving on just coffee. If you're going to be my wife, even a fake one, you're going to take care of yourself."

Relief surges through me, so strong I have to grip the edge of the couch to keep from collapsing. "Thank you. Sawyer, thank you so much. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for this."

"We'll figure it out." He plates the eggs and bacon, sets the food in front of me along with a cup of coffee that's strong enough to wake the dead. "Eat. Then we'll drive into town and see about getting a marriage license."

I take a bite of eggs, and they're perfect. Fluffy and seasoned just right, the way Sawyer's grandmother used to make them during those summer visits when we were kids. The taste brings back a flood of memories: lazy mornings on the McKenna family porch, the sound of Sawyer's brothers arguing in the kitchen, the feeling of being part of something bigger than myself.

"This feels like a dream," I admit around another bite. "Like I'm going to wake up any minute and realize I imagined this whole conversation."

"It's not a dream." Sawyer sits across from me with his own plate, watching me eat with the same intensity he brings to everything else. "But Lisa, once we do this, once we sign those papers and stand in front of a judge, there's no going back. We'll be married in the eyes of the law, and everyone in this town is going to have opinions about it."

"I know."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Do you? Because Grizzly Ridge isn't exactly known for keeping secrets. People are going to ask questions. They're going to want to know why Sawyer McKenna suddenly married his childhood friend after being determinedly single his whole life."

Heat rises in my cheeks. I hadn't thought about that part, about the scrutiny we'll face from a town that's watched both of us grow up. About the questions, gossip, and speculation that will follow us everywhere we go.

"What do we tell them?"

"The truth." His answer surprises me. "That we've known each other forever, that we care about each other, that it felt like the right time to make it official."

"But that's not the truth."

Something flickers across his face, too quick for me to interpret. "Isn't it?"

Before I can ask what he means, his phone buzzes. He glances at the screen and frowns.

"I need to get to the station. There's been an accident on Highway 12." He stands, already reaching for his keys and badge. "Can you be ready to go in an hour? The county clerk opens at eight."

"Yes. But Sawyer, what about Tommy? I need to pick him up from Mrs. Chen's house. She's been watching him overnight, but I can't keep imposing on her."

"Bring him with you. It's time people in this town meet their future stepson anyway."

Future stepson. The words send a strange little thrill through me, even though I know this is all pretend. Even though I know that in six months, we'll quietly divorce and go back to our separate lives.

Even though I know that Sawyer McKenna is doing this out of friendship and duty, not because he has any real desire to be my husband.

"I'll see you in an hour," I promise, already gathering my purse and keys.

He nods, all business now, the sheriff taking over from the man who just agreed to turn his entire life upside down for me.

His voice stops me one more time, as I reach the door.

"Lisa?"

I turn back.

"For what it's worth, I think Emma would be proud of you. For fighting for Tommy. For doing whatever it takes to protect him."

The words hit me square in the chest, and suddenly I'm blinking back tears I didn't know were coming.

"Thank you," I whisper.

And then I'm walking back to my car, the morning sun warming my face and something that feels dangerously close to hope blooming in my chest.

In one hour, I'm going to begin the process of marrying Sawyer McKenna.

God help us both.

3

SAWYER

The accident on Highway 12 turns out to be a fender bender between two tourists who can't figure out how to exchange insurance information without screaming at each other. Takes me twenty minutes to sort out what should have been a five-minute conversation, and by the time I'm done playing referee, it's already eight-thirty.

I'm supposed to meet Lisa at the county clerk's office in fifteen minutes to get our marriage license.

Our marriage license.

The thought still doesn't feel real, even though I've been turning it over in my head for the past hour. Lisa Graham is going to be my wife. Fake wife, temporary wife, but still. The girl I've been in love with since I was old enough to understand what love meant is going to wear my ring and take my name and sleep under my roof.

Even if it's all pretend.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

I pull into the courthouse parking lot just as Lisa's sedan comes around the corner. She's driving carefully, precisely, the way she always has. The way that used to drive me crazy when we were teenagers and I wanted to get wherever we were going as fast as possible.

She parks next to my truck, and I can see Tommy's car seat in the back. The baby is awake, making those soft sounds that babies make when they're content. Lisa gets out first, smoothing down her dress, and then opens the back door to unbuckle Tommy.

She's changed clothes since this morning. The wrinkled blue dress is gone, replaced by something green that brings out her eyes and makes her look like she's actually going to something important instead of running on autopilot. Her hair is pulled back in a neat bun, and she's wearing lipstick.

She's beautiful. She's always been beautiful, but right now, holding that baby against her hip while she locks her car, she's devastating.

I'm out of my truck and walking toward them before I consciously decide to move.

"Sorry I'm late," I say, reaching them just as Lisa settles Tommy more securely against her side. "Tourist situation."

"It's fine. We just got here too." She looks up at me, and there's nervousness in her green eyes that wasn't there this morning. "Sawyer, are you sure about this? Because we can still back out. I can figure out something else, find another way to..."

"Lisa." I reach out, touch her arm gently. "We're doing this."

She nods, takes a deep breath. "Okay. Yes. We're doing this."

Tommy chooses that moment to look at me with those serious dark eyes that remind me of Emma. He's got Lisa's stubborn chin, though, and something about the way he studies my face makes me think he's already trying to figure out if I'm trustworthy.

"Hey there, buddy." I keep my voice low, the way I've learned to do around babies. "You remember me?"

I've seen Tommy exactly three times since Emma passed. Once when Lisa brought him to the diner, and I happened to be there getting coffee. Once when I ran into them at the grocery store. And once when I helped Lisa change a flat tire outside the pharmacy, Tommy slept through the whole thing in his car seat.

But something about today feels different. More significant. Like I'm meeting him for real this time, as the man who's about to become his stepfather.

Even if it's temporary.

Tommy reaches out with one chubby hand, grabbing for my badge. I lean closer, let him touch the shiny metal, and he makes a pleased sound that goes straight to my chest.

"He likes you," Lisa says softly.

"Good thing, since we're about to become family."

The words come out before I can stop them, and Lisa's eyes widen slightly. But before either of us can analyze what I just said, the courthouse doors open and Hilda Barnes comes walking out.

Hilda Barnes, who owns the general store and knows every piece of gossip in Grizzly Ridge within thirty minutes of it happening. Hilda Barnes, who helped raise half the kids in this town and considers herself everyone's unofficial grandmother.

Hilda Barnes, who is staring at me, Lisa, and Tommy like she's just witnessed the second coming.

"Well, I'll be damned," she says, stopping right in front of us. "Sawyer McKenna, what exactly are you doing at the courthouse on a Friday morning with Lisa Graham and that sweet baby?"

Lisa looks at me, panic flickering across her face. We talked about this. About how people would ask questions, about what we'd tell them. But talking about it and actually facing down Hilda Barnes's shrewd eyes are two very different things.

"Morning, Hilda." I keep my voice calm, even. "Lisa and I are getting a marriage license."

Hilda's eyebrows shoot up toward her silver hairline. "A marriage license? You two? Well, it's about damn time."

"About time?" Lisa's voice comes out slightly strangled.

"Honey, everyone in this town has been waiting for Sawyer to get his head out of his ass and ask you out properly since you came back from college. Though I have to say, you sure didn't waste any time once you finally figured it out." Hilda's eyes drop to Tommy, then back to our faces. "When's the wedding?"

Lisa tenses beside me. We haven't actually talked about when we're getting married, just that we need to do it soon. But looking at Hilda's expectant face, I realize we're about to set the town rumor mill in motion, whether we're ready or not.

"Soon," I say. "Very soon. We don't want to wait."

"Good for you. Life's too short to waste time on long engagements." Hilda reaches out to touch Tommy's hand, and he grins at her with the devastating charm that all babies seem to possess. "And this little angel gets a daddy. Emma would be so happy, God rest her soul."

The words hit Lisa hard. I can see it in the way her shoulders tighten, the way her grip on Tommy shifts slightly. But she manages a smile, nodding at Hilda as if she agrees.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"We should get inside," I say, putting my hand on the small of Lisa's back. "We don't want to be late."

"Of course, of course. Don't let me keep you." Hilda beams at us like she's personally responsible for this development. "I'll tell Bill to put a bottle of champagne on ice at the store. This calls for celebrating."

She bustles off toward her car, already pulling out her phone. Probably calling her sister Margaret, who will call her daughter Sarah, who will call three of her friends before we even make it inside the courthouse.

"Well," Lisa says, watching Hilda drive away. "I guess the whole town will know by noon."

"Probably by ten." I guide her toward the courthouse doors. "You ready for this?"

"No. But let's do it anyway."

The county clerk is a woman named Janet who's been working here since before I became sheriff. She's efficient, professional, and if she's surprised to see me getting a marriage license with Lisa, she doesn't show it.

"Congratulations," she says, sliding the forms across the counter. "You'll need to fill these out completely, both of you. Photo ID, proof of age, and the filing fee."

The paperwork is straightforward but somehow feels momentous. Writing my name next to Lisa's, seeing it officially documented that we intend to marry, makes

something shift in my chest. Something that feels dangerously close to real.

Lisa fills out her section quickly, efficiently, but I notice her hand trembling slightly as she writes. Tommy is sitting on her lap, playing with a small toy she pulled from her purse, completely oblivious to the life-changing documents being completed around him.

When we're done, Janet reviews everything, stamps the license, and hands it back to us.

"You have ninety days to use this," she says. "You'll need to have a licensed officiant conduct the wedding, and at least one witness. After the ceremony, the officiant needs to file the completed license with us."

"Thank you." I fold the license carefully, put it in my wallet next to my badge. "We appreciate your help."

Outside the courthouse, Lisa stops on the steps, shifting Tommy to her other hip.

"I can't believe we just did that." She's staring at the courthouse doors like they might disappear if she looks away. "We have a marriage license. An actual, legal marriage license."

"Having second thoughts?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." She turns to look at me, and the uncertainty in her eyes makes my chest tighten. "Sawyer, what if this doesn't work? What if Derek's lawyer finds out we're not really... what if they can prove it's fake?"

"They won't." I keep my voice confident, certain. "Because we're not going to act like it's fake. We're going to act like a couple who's been friends since childhood and

decided to get married. Because that's exactly what we are."

She searches my face like she's looking for something. "Is it really that simple?"

"It is if we make it."

Tommy chooses that moment to reach for me again, making those soft baby sounds that seem to mean he wants my attention. I take him from Lisa without thinking, settling him against my chest the way I've seen Luke do with his daughter Lily.

The baby feels solid, warm, real in my arms. He smells like baby soap and something sweet, and when he looks up at me with those serious dark eyes, something protective and fierce roars to life in my chest.

This is Emma's son. Lisa's nephew. The baby we're doing all of this to protect.

My stepson, at least on paper.

"He really does like you," Lisa says again, but there's something different in her voice this time. Softer. More wondering.

"I like him too." And I do. More than I expected. More than is probably smart for a fake marriage that's only supposed to last six months. "He's a good kid."

"He is. He's the best kid." Lisa's voice is thick with emotion. "Emma used to say he was an old soul. That he understood things babies shouldn't understand."

"Tell me about her." The request comes out before I can stop it. "About Emma. I knew her, but not the way you did."

Lisa is quiet for a moment, watching Tommy grab for my shirt pocket with

determined baby fingers.

"She was fearless," she says finally. "Growing up, she was always the one pushing boundaries, taking risks, jumping off the highest rock into the swimming hole. I was the careful one, the one who checked for rocks underwater first."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Sounds familiar."

"She wanted to travel the world, be a foreign correspondent, write stories that mattered. She had this whole plan mapped out." Lisa's voice gets quieter. "And then she met Derek, and suddenly all those dreams got smaller. He convinced her that those ambitions were selfish, that she should focus on more realistic goals."

"Like what?"

"Like being a lawyer's wife. Like hosting dinner parties and joining the right charities and producing the next generation of Morrisons." The bitterness in Lisa's voice is sharp enough to cut. "She tried to make it work. Really tried. But Derek wanted a trophy, not a partner."

"So when she got pregnant..." I start, connecting the dots.

"Yep he left her alone, jobless and pregnant. So, she came back to Grizzly Ridge when she was six months pregnant, moved into that little apartment above the bakery. She was going to start over, raise Tommy here where he could have space to run and clean air to breathe." Lisa's voice breaks slightly. "She was going to be happy."

The pain in her voice breaks my heart. I want to reach out, pull her close, and promise her that Tommy will have all the things Emma wanted for him. But my arms are already occupied holding Tommy, and we're standing on the courthouse steps where anyone could see us.

Where anyone could witness the moment I stop pretending this is just about helping a

friend and start admitting what it's really about.

"She would be proud of you," I say instead. "For fighting for him. For doing whatever it takes to keep him safe."

"I hope so." Lisa wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I really hope so."

Tommy makes a sound that might be hunger or might just be baby commentary on our conversation. Lisa checks her watch and frowns.

"It's almost ten. I should feed him, and then I need to call my lawyer. Let her know about..." She gestures between us. "About this development."

"What did you tell her before? About your situation?"

"That I was exploring all options to strengthen my custody case." Lisa's mouth quirks up in what might charitably be called a smile. "I think marriage to the town sheriff qualifies as strengthening my case."

"Probably so." I hand Tommy back to her, immediately missing the solid weight of him. "Lisa, we need to talk about logistics. Where we're living, how we're handling this day to day."

"I know. I've been thinking about that." She settles Tommy more securely against her hip. "Emma's lease is up in three weeks. I could find somewhere else, a small place where..."

"No."

The word comes out sharper, more final than I intended. Lisa blinks, startled.

"No?"

"You're not finding somewhere else. You and Tommy are moving in with me." I can see the protest forming on her lips as I hold up a hand. "Think about it, Lisa. We're supposed to be newlyweds. What kind of message does it send if my wife is living in a separate apartment across town?"

"But your cabin is..."

"Is plenty big enough for three people. Four bedrooms, two bathrooms, full kitchen. There's even a room that would make a perfect nursery." I've been thinking about this since she left my house this morning, working through the practicalities. "It makes sense."

"Separate bedrooms." The words come out fast, almost panicked. "We agreed separate bedrooms."

"Separate bedrooms," I confirm. "But Lisa, if we're going to sell this to a family court judge, we need to look like a real family. That means living together, acting like a couple, being seen around town as husband and wife."

She's quiet for a long moment, thinking. I can practically see her weighing options, calculating risks.

"When?" she asks finally.

"This weekend. We'll get married tomorrow, you move in Sunday. By Monday morning, everyone in Grizzly Ridge will know that Sheriff McKenna has a wife and stepson."

"Tomorrow?" Her voice goes up an octave. "Sawyer, I can't get married tomorrow. I

don't have a dress, or flowers, or..."

"You don't need any of that." I step closer, close enough to see the gold flecks in her green eyes. "All you need is the license, an officiant, and a witness. Everything else is just decoration."

"But it's my wedding day." The words come out soft, almost wistful. "Even if it's fake, it's still my wedding day."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Something twists in my chest at the look on her face. The expression that tells me this might be pretend for the court system, but for Lisa, there's still a part of her that wants it to feel real. That wants her wedding day to matter, even if the marriage has an expiration date.

"Then we'll make it special," I hear myself say. "Nothing fancy, but special. Meaningful."

"How?"

I'm quiet for a moment, thinking. What would make a wedding special for Lisa? What would make her feel like this matters, like she matters?

"We'll do it at sunset," I say finally. "Up on the ridge behind my house, where you can see the whole valley. We'll ask Margaret from the station to officiate, she's licensed. Luke can be our witness, and we'll invite my brothers. Make it family."

"Your brothers?" There's something like panic in her voice. "Sawyer, they're going to ask questions. They're going to want to know why you're suddenly getting married after being single for forty-seven years."

"Let me worry about my brothers." I reach out and touch her arm gently. "They love you, Lisa. They've known you since you were eight years old. They want me to be happy, and if they think you make me happy, that's all they'll care about."

"Do I?" The question comes out so quietly I almost miss it. "Make you happy?"

The honesty in her voice, the vulnerability, stops me cold. She's looking at me like my answer actually matters, like the idea of making me happy is something she wants to be true.

And suddenly we're standing too close, breathing the same air, looking at each other like we're actually about to get married because we want to instead of because we have to. Like we're actually in love instead of just pretending to be.

Like we're about to kiss.

Tommy makes a sound, breaking the spell, and Lisa steps back, cheeks flushed.

"I should go," she says quickly. "Feed him, call my lawyer, start figuring out how to pack my life into boxes."

"Lisa." I catch her hand before she can turn away. "Tomorrow. Sunset. Will you marry me?"

She looks down at our joined hands, then back up at my face. Whatever she sees there makes her breathing change, makes her pupils dilate slightly.

"Yes," she whispers. "I'll marry you."

And as I watch her walk away, carrying the baby who's about to become my stepson, I realize I'm in deeper trouble than I thought.

Because somewhere between Lisa's proposal and me saying yes, this stopped being about helping an old friend. This became about getting everything I've ever wanted and knowing I can only keep it for six months.

This became about admitting that I'm already falling in love with my fake wife. A

fact that I won't be able to hide for very long with her beneath my roof.

And I don't think I want to.

4

LISA

I'm getting married in four hours, and I'm standing in Emma's closet trying not to have a panic attack.

Tommy is napping in his crib, finally worn out after spending the morning exploring every inch of Emma's apartment like he's memorizing it. Like he knows we're leaving tomorrow and wants to remember this place that was supposed to be his first real home.

The apartment feels different today. Smaller somehow, filled with boxes and the weight of endings. I've been packing since yesterday afternoon, sorting through Emma's things and my things and Tommy's things, trying to figure out what belongs in our new life and what gets stored away with the memories.

Sawyer's cabin. Our new home.

The thought sends a flutter through my stomach that has nothing to do with nerves and everything to do with the way he looked at me yesterday on the courthouse steps. The way his voice changed when he asked me to marry him for real, like he actually meant it.

Like this is more than just a legal arrangement to help me keep Tommy.

I pull the green dress from the closet, the one I wore to get our marriage license. It's

the nicest thing I own that isn't black funeral attire, and it brings out my eyes. Sawyer noticed that yesterday. I caught him looking, caught the way his gaze lingered on my mouth when I talked.

The way he stepped closer when I asked if I made him happy.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

The way we almost kissed right there on the courthouse steps with half the town watching.

My phone buzzes, and I grab it from the bed, hoping it's my lawyer with good news about Derek's custody petition. Instead, it's a text from a number I don't recognize.

Unknown Number: Heard you're marrying the sheriff tomorrow. Congratulations. We should talk before you make any permanent decisions. Derek.

The phone slips from my suddenly numb fingers, clattering onto the hardwood floor.

Derek knows.

Somehow, Derek already knows about the wedding, about Sawyer, about everything. Which means his lawyer knows, which means they're probably already working on some way to use this against me in court.

I sink onto Emma's bed, hands shaking as I pick up the phone and read the message again. The words don't change. Derek Morrison wants to talk to me before I marry Sawyer McKenna, and the only reason he'd want that is if he thinks he can stop me.

Another text comes through while I'm staring at the first one.

Unknown Number: I'm staying at the Mountain View Inn through Monday. Room 237. I think you'll want to hear what I have to say.

The Mountain View Inn. He's here. In Grizzly Ridge. Twenty miles from where

Tommy is sleeping peacefully in his crib, completely unaware that the man who abandoned him before birth is now close enough to touch.

I should call Sawyer. Tell him about the texts, let him handle this the way he handles everything else that threatens the people he cares about. But something stops me from dialing his number, some stubborn part of me that needs to know what Derek thinks he can say that would change my mind about protecting Tommy.

Some part of me that needs to face this myself before I become Mrs. Sawyer McKenna and lose the right to make decisions without consulting my husband.

Even if the marriage is fake, even if it's temporary, once I say those vows, I won't be just Lisa Graham anymore. I'll be part of something bigger, part of a partnership that comes with expectations and responsibilities I'm not sure I understand.

The thought terrifies me almost as much as losing Tommy.

My phone rings, making me jump. Sawyer's name appears on the screen, and for a wild moment I consider not answering. Consider pretending I never saw Derek's messages, never felt that cold stab of fear when I realized he's here.

But that's not who I am. That's not who Emma raised me to be.

"Hi," I answer, trying to keep my voice normal.

"How's the packing going?" His voice is warm, steady, the same voice that's been calming my fears since we were children.

"Good. Almost done." The lie comes easily. Too easily. "Tommy's napping, so I'm making progress."

"Good. Listen, I'm calling because Margaret wants to know if you have any preferences for the ceremony. Readings, music, anything specific you want included."

Margaret Randall, the station's trauma counselor who's licensed to perform marriages. Who's going to officiate our fake wedding in three and a half hours while the sun sets behind the mountains.

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it." Another lie. I've been thinking about nothing else since yesterday, imagining what it will feel like to stand in front of Sawyer and promise to love him forever when we both know it's temporary.

"Lisa." His voice changes, becomes more focused. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just..." I close my eyes, press my free hand against my forehead. "Nervous, I guess. This is all happening so fast."

"Having second thoughts?"

The question is gentle, but I can hear the tension underneath it. The worry that I'm about to back out, leave him standing on that ridge alone while Derek Morrison destroys my life in court.

"No. No second thoughts." And that's true, even with Derek's messages burning a hole in my phone. "I want to do this, Sawyer. I want to marry you."

The words are heavier than they should be for a fake arrangement. More loaded with meaning than either of us is ready to acknowledge.

"Good," he says finally. "Because I want to marry you too."

The way he says it, low and rough and completely sincere, makes my breath catch. Makes me wonder what would happen if I told him about Derek's texts right now, let my husband fix the problem.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

But I can't. Not yet.

"I should finish packing," I say instead. "Make sure Tommy has everything he needs for tonight."

"He's staying with you until after the ceremony?"

"Yes. Mrs. Chen offered to watch him during the wedding, but I want him close. In case..." I trail off, not wanting to voice my fears.

"In case what?"

"In case something goes wrong. In case Derek tries something."

The silence on the other end of the line stretches long enough that I start to worry we've been disconnected. Then Sawyer's voice comes through, deadly quiet and absolutely certain.

"Nothing is going to go wrong, Lisa. I promise you that."

The conviction in his voice, the complete confidence that he can protect us from whatever Derek might try, makes something warm and dangerous unfurl in my chest. Makes me want to believe that Sawyer McKenna really can fix anything, solve any problem, keep any promise he makes.

Makes me want to believe this marriage might be real after all.

"I know," I whisper. "I trust you."

"Good. I'll see you at sunset."

After he hangs up, I sit on Emma's bed for a long time, staring at Derek's messages and thinking about choices. About the difference between facing problems alone and letting someone else help carry the weight.

About what it means to trust someone with everything you have to lose.

Finally, I delete Derek's texts without responding.

Whatever he wants to say to me, whatever threat or bribe or manipulation he's planning, it doesn't matter. I made my choice when I walked up to Sawyer's cabin yesterday morning. I made my choice when I asked him to marry me.

I'm making it again right now.

Three hours later, I'm standing in front of Emma's mirror wearing the green dress and the only pair of heels I own, trying to work up the courage to drive to Sawyer's cabin. Tommy is fed and changed and sleeping peacefully in his car seat, completely oblivious to the fact that his life is about to change forever.

That we're about to become a family.

The drive takes twenty minutes, winding through pine forests and around curves that offer glimpses of the valley below. I've made this drive a hundred times over the years, visiting the McKenna family during holidays and summer barbecues, but tonight it feels different.

Tonight, I'm driving toward my wedding.

Sawyer's cabin sits on a rise overlooking the valley, surrounded by towering pines and built from logs that have weathered to a rich golden brown. It's bigger than I remembered, with a wraparound porch and large windows that catch the late afternoon light. Smoke rises from the chimney, and I can see lights glowing warmly inside.

It looks like home.

The thought hits me so suddenly, so completely, that I have to grip the steering wheel to keep my hands steady. This place, this man, this life we're about to build together, even temporarily, it feels like coming home after years of wandering.

Sawyer appears on the porch before I can get out of the car, moving down the steps with that easy, confident stride that's uniquely his. He's wearing dark jeans and a white button-down shirt that makes his eyes look even bluer, and he's cleaned up the scruff from yesterday. He looks like a man getting married.

He looks devastatingly handsome.

"You made it," he says, opening my car door and offering his hand to help me out.

"Was there any doubt?" I take his hand, let him pull me to my feet, and immediately regret it.

The contact of his warm fingers wrapped around mine, sends electricity shooting up my arm. Makes me acutely aware of how close we're standing, how good he smells, how the white shirt stretches across his broad chest.

How much I want to run my hands over that chest and see if it's as solid as it looks.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"You look beautiful," he says, his voice rough around the edges.

"Thank you. So do you. Handsome, I mean. You look handsome."

God, I'm babbling like a teenager. Like the girl who used to get tongue-tied whenever Sawyer McKenna smiled at her during high school.

"Lisa." His hand tightens around mine. "Are you okay? You seem..."

"Nervous. I am nervous." I take a deep breath, try to center myself. "This is just bigger than I expected. More real."

"It is real." The words come out intense, focused, like he needs me to understand something important. "Maybe it started as a practical arrangement, but Lisa, this is real."

Before I can ask what he means, voices carry from the back of the house. His brothers, gathering for the ceremony. The family that's about to become mine, at least on paper.

"They're here," I say unnecessarily.

"They're excited to welcome you officially." Sawyer releases my hand, moves to get Tommy from the car seat. "Though I think Cade might have some questions about the timing."

"What kind of questions?"

"The kind that come from a man who knows I've had feelings for you since we were kids and wonders why it took me so long to do something about it."

The confession sends a chill down my spine, stopping my breath in my chest. Sawyer continues unbuckling Tommy like he didn't just turn my world upside down, like he didn't just admit to feelings that make everything about this fake marriage infinitely more complicated.

"Sawyer." My voice comes out strangled. "What are you saying?"

He straightens, Tommy secure in his arms, and looks at me with those blue eyes that have always seen too much.

"The truth. This stopped being fake the moment I said yes. I'm saying that I've wanted to marry you for twenty-nine years, and I don't care why it's happening now." He steps closer, close enough that I can see the silver threads in his hair and feel his breath on my skin. "I'm saying that I'm falling for you, Lisa, have been for a while now, and I'm hoping that maybe, after tonight, you might start feeling the same way too."

The words hang between us like a bridge, terrifying and beautiful and completely unexpected. Everything I thought I knew about this arrangement, about Sawyer's motivations, about my own feelings, shifts and realigns around this new truth.

He has real feelings for me.

Sawyer McKenna is falling for me.

"I..." I start to speak, but Tommy makes a sound that draws our attention. He's looking between us with those seriousdark eyes, like he understands that something important is happening.

"We should go," Sawyer says gently. "People are waiting."

I nod, not trusting my voice, and follow him around the side of the house to where the others have gathered. Margaret is there with a book in her hands, looking elegant and official.

Sawyer's brothers have all shown up as if this is the most natural thing in the world, and not a wedding they found out about yesterday. Luke stands nearby with his daughter Lily, who's wearing a pretty dress and holding a small bouquet of wildflowers. Cade and his wife, Harper, are talking quietly near the edge of the ridge, and Boone has his arm around his wife, Tessa, who's holding their adorable baby, Jackson.

Elias, the second oldest of the McKennas, stands apart from the group, as always, but he nods at me when our eyes meet. A gesture of acceptance, of welcome. And his new wife, Riley, sits in the front row, having a spirited discussion with Finn, Caleb, and Lila about some new celebrity contract.

The McKenna family. My family now, in whatever way this works.

"Miss Lisa!" Lily breaks away from her father and runs toward me, holding out the flowers. "I picked these for you. Daddy said you needed something pretty for your wedding."

I kneel down to accept the bouquet, and the sweet gesture, the pure innocence of it, nearly breaks me.

"They're perfect," I tell her, and mean it. "Thank you."

Margaret steps forward, smiling warmly. "Are you ready?"

I look around at the faces surrounding us, at the family that's about to witness our vows. At Sawyer, who's holding Tommy like he belongs there, like he's always belonged there.

At the sun beginning to sink toward the horizon, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Yes," I say. "I'm ready."

The ceremony is simple, beautiful, and over almost before I realize it's begun. Margaret speaks about love and commitment and the promises we make to each other, to the families we create. Sawyer and I repeat vows that are traditional and timeless and feel more true than anything I've ever said.

When Margaret asks if I take Sawyer to be my husband, my voice is steady and sure.

"I do."

When she asks Sawyer the same question, he looks directly into my eyes and says, "I do," like he means it with every fiber of his being.

Like this is the moment he's been waiting for his entire life.

"You may kiss the bride," Margaret says, and suddenly my heart is racing for an entirely different reason.

Sawyer hands Tommy to Finn, who steps up almost on cue, before stepping closer to me. He reaches up to cup my face and runs his thumb across my cheek, gentle and reverent, allowing me to see everything he's feeling in his eyes.

Love. Want. Hope. Fear.

The same emotions that are rioting through my own chest.

"Mrs. McKenna," he says softly, just for me.

And then he's kissing me.

It's supposed to be for show, for the family watching, for the legal requirement of sealing our marriage. But the moment his lips touch mine, everything else disappears. The world narrows to this. Sawyer's mouth moves against mine, his hands are in my hair, and the way he drives me insane.

He kisses me like he's been dreaming about this moment all his life.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathless and shaking and completely undone. The family is cheering, and Tommy is making happy baby sounds like he approves of this development.

But all I can see is Sawyer, looking at me like I'm everything he's ever wanted.

"I have feelings for you too," I whisper, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

His eyes go wide, then impossibly soft.

"Say it again," he demands, his voice rough with emotion.

"I'm falling for you, Sawyer McKenna."

This time, when he kisses me, it's with the complete certainty of a man who's finally gotten everything he's ever wanted.

And I kiss him back like a woman who's just realized she's been in denial her whole life.

SAWYER

My wife is in my kitchen, making coffee at eleven PM like she's lived here her entire life.

My wife.

The words still don't feel real, even though I've been repeating them in my head for the past three hours. Even though I watched Lisa say "I do" with the sunset painting her skin gold, felt her kiss me back like she meant it, watched her tell my family I meant the world to her with tears in her eyes.

Even though she's wearing my ring and sleeping under my roof and just told me she loves me back.

Lisa McKenna.

She's changed out of her wedding dress into jeans and one of those soft sweaters that make me want to run my hands over every inch of her. Her hair is down now, falling in waves around her shoulders, and she's barefoot in my kitchen like she belongs here.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Like she's always belonged here.

Tommy is finally asleep in the nursery my brothers helped me create earlier, worn out from being passed around to every McKenna at the reception dinner. The kid charmed the hell out of my brothers, especially Luke, who knows what it's like to raise a child alone. By the time we got back to the cabin, Tommy was calling Cade "Uncle" and trying to grab Boone's shield.

But now it's just me and Lisa, alone in my house for the first time as husband and wife. The weight of what just happened, what we just promised each other, settles between us like something alive.

"You didn't have to make coffee," I say, leaning against the doorframe and watching her move around my kitchen with an efficiency that makes my chest tight. "It's late."

"I couldn't sleep." She doesn't turn around, focused on measuring coffee grounds with the same careful precision she brings to everything. "Too much adrenaline, I think."

"Lisa." I push off the doorframe, move toward her. "We need to talk."

"I know." Her voice is quiet, careful. "About what happens now. About how this works."

She's putting up walls again. I can see it in the set of her shoulders, the way she's avoiding eye contact. Like she's already regretting what she said at the ceremony, already trying to figure out how to take it back.

Like she thinks I'm going to let her.

"Turn around." The command comes out rougher than I intend, edged with the authority I use when I need someone to listen.

She freezes, coffee scoop halfway to the machine. "Sawyer..."

"Turn around and look at me."

She does, slowly, and the uncertainty in her green eyes makes something primitive and possessive roar to life in my chest. She's scared. Scared of what she feels, scared of what this means, scared of letting herself want something she thinks she can't have.

Scared of trusting that I meant every word I said tonight.

"What did you think was going to happen?" I keep my voice gentle, controlled, even though every instinct I have is screaming at me to back her against the counter and show her exactly what happens now. "What did you think would change after you told me you had feelings for me?"

"I don't know." She wraps her arms around herself, defensive. "I wasn't thinking clearly. The ceremony, the kiss, everything just felt so..."

"Real."

"Yes. Real." She looks down at her hands, at the simple gold band on her ring finger. "But Sawyer, we agreed this was temporary. We agreed separate bedrooms, separate lives. Just a legal arrangement to help me keep Tommy."

"That was before."

"Before what?"

"Before you told me you feel the same way about me as I do you." I step closer, close enough to see the pulse fluttering at the base of her throat. "Before I kissed you and felt you melt against me like you've been waiting for it as long as I have."

Her breath catches. "That doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it?" I reach out, trace the line of her jaw with one finger. "Because from where I'm standing, it changes everything."

She shivers at the contact but doesn't pull away. "Sawyer, I'm scared."

The admission is barely a whisper, but it guts me. Because I know Lisa Graham, know how much courage it takes for her to admit fear, to show vulnerability.

"Scared of what?"

"Of this. Of wanting something I might not be able to keep. Of letting myself believe this is real when in six months, when the custody case is over..." She trails off, but I know where her mind is going.

Six months. The arbitrary timeline we set for this arrangement, back when we thought we could fake our way through being married. Back when I thought I could keep my feelings locked down for half a year and then let her walk away.

Back when I was lying to myself about what this really was.

"Lisa, look at me." I wait until her eyes meet mine. "There is no six months. There is no expiration date. There's just this, just us, just the family we're building together."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"But what if the court..."

"The court is going to see exactly what everyone else sees. A man who's completely gone for his wife and would move heaven and earth to protect her and her son." I cup her face in my hands, make sure she can see the truth in my eyes. "A family that belongs together."

"Tommy isn't your responsibility."

"Tommy is my stepson. He became my responsibility the moment I said 'I do.'" My voice goes hard, final. "And Lisa, anyone who tries to take him from us is going to learn exactly what happens when someone threatens what's mine."

The possessiveness in my tone makes her pupils dilate, makes her breathing go shallow. She's responding to the claim, to the promise of protection, even as her logical mind tries to fight it.

"Sawyer..." She starts to say something, but I cut her off.

"Do you want me to stop?" The question comes out low, rough. "Do you want me to step back, give you space, pretend this is still just a business arrangement?"

She's quiet for a long moment, looking at me like she's trying to solve a puzzle. Like she's weighing the risk of jumping against the risk of staying safe.

"No," she whispers finally. "I don't want you to stop."

The admission breaks something loose in my chest. Without giving her time to change her mind, I back her against the kitchen counter, caging her in with my arms.

"Good," I growl against her ear. "Because I wasn't planning to."

I kiss her then, hard and hungry and completely unrestrained. This isn't the careful kiss from the ceremony, the one meant for public consumption. This is twenty-nine years of want and need and desperate longing finally finding an outlet.

Lisa responds immediately, her hands fisting in my shirt, pulling me closer. She kisses me back with a passion that matches my own, with nibbles and tongue and soft sounds that make my head spin.

When I break away to trail kisses down her throat, she arches against me, her head falling back to give me better access.

"God, Sawyer." Her voice is breathless, shaky. "I've wanted this for so long."

"How long?" I scrape my teeth across her pulse point, and she shudders. "Tell me."

"Since high school. Since that night at the bonfire when you drove me home and I thought you might..." She gasps when I find that sensitive spot just below her ear.

"But you didn't."

"I wanted to." I pull back to look at her, see the flush spreading across her cheeks, the way her lips are swollen from my kisses. "God, Lisa, I wanted to so badly I could barely function. But you were about to go off to that fancy university in the city, and I was just enrolling in our little college here, and I thought..."

"You thought what?"

"I thought you deserved better than a mountain man with too much baggage in this town to ever leave." I brush her hair back from her face, gentler now. "I figured you'd leave Grizzly Ridge and find someone who could give you the world because you deserved that and more. More than I could offer you at eighteen years old."

"I didn't want the world, Sawyer." Her hands come up to frame my face, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones. "I wanted this. Wanted you. I still do."

The simple honesty in her voice nearly brings me to my knees. Twenty-nine years of thinking I wasn't good enough, of watching her from a distance and wanting what I couldn't have, and she's been wanting me too.

"Lisa." I rest my forehead against hers, trying to get my breathing under control. "Are you sure? Because once we do this, once we cross this line, I'm never letting you go. Court case or no court case. You'll be mine."

"Promise?" The word comes out barely audible, but the hope in it is unmistakable.

"I promise." I seal the words with another kiss, slower this time but no less intense. "You're mine, Lisa McKenna. You and Tommy both. Mine to protect, mine to care for, mine to love."

"Yours," she agrees against my mouth. "But Sawyer, I need you to know something."

"What?"

Her cheeks flush deeper, and she looks down. "I'm not... I haven't done this very much. With anyone."

The admission sends a surge of primitive satisfaction through me. The idea that I'm going to be the one to show her how good this can be, the one to teach her body what

it's capable of feeling, makes me feel ten feet tall and completely primal.

"Good," I say, tilting her chin up so she has to meet my eyes. "That means I get to be the first to do it right."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Before she can respond, I lift her onto the counter, step between her knees, and claim her mouth again. This time, when my hands slide under her sweater to find warm, soft skin, she doesn't tense or pull away. She melts into me, her own hands exploring the muscles of my chest and shoulders like she's been wanting to touch me forever.

Her skin is fucking soft. Like velvet over the finest silk, with a current of heat under every inch. My hands, which have spent decades manhandling the cold steel of handcuffs and the grit of the mountain, feel too rough, too big for her. But she doesn't flinch. She arches into my palms like she wants to be marked by them.

The sweater's first. I push it up, bunching the fabric under her ribs. She pulls it off the rest of the way and tosses it somewhere behind her, never breaking eye contact. Her bra is green, lacy, and the moment I see it, my cock throbs so hard it almost hurts. Every inch of her is trembling, but she doesn't look away. Doesn't hide. Just sits on the counter, knees wide, waiting for whatever comes next.

"Jesus, Lisa," I murmur, letting my gaze rake over her. "You're fucking beautiful."

Her breath shudders out, lips parted, eyes dark and wild. "So are you. Please?—"

That's all I need. I catch her mouth in another kiss, greedy and hungry, then start to work my way down. I take my time. She's waited long enough, and if it kills me, I'm going to give her every second. My hands slide to her back, tracing the line of her spine, and I find the clasp. One flick, and the bra is loose. I pull it away and toss it somewhere behind me.

Her breasts are perfect. High and round, nipples already hard and flushed the color of

strawberries. I palm them both, kneading gently, and she moans. Fuck, that sound. I roll one nipple between my thumb and forefinger, tugging it until she gasps, then switch and give the other the same attention.

Her hands are in my hair, nails scraping my scalp, pulling me closer. She's got her head thrown back against the kitchen cupboards, eyes squeezed shut, mouth open in a perfect "O."

"God, Sawyer," she whimpers, "please, more."

Fuck, yes. I lower my head and take one nipple in my mouth, flicking it with my tongue, then biting it just hard enough to make her jerk against me. She whimpers again, and her thighs clamp around my waist.

"Is this what you want?" I ask against her skin, voice low and dark.

"Yes, yes." She's panting, half-wild, grinding her hips into my stomach. "Please don't stop."

I don't. I feast on her, switching from one nipple to the other, licking, sucking, biting, worshipping every inch. My free hand slides up her thigh until I reach the waistband of her shorts. She's already squirming, trying to get closer, so I peel them off one slow inch at a time.

She's wet. I haven't even touched her where she needs it, and I can smell the sweetness of her arousal. My cock is straining against my boxers beneath my sweats, but I ignore it. This is for her. It's always been for her.

When I finally slide my hand between her thighs, and over the green lace of her panties, fingers tracing the fabric, she moans like she's about to shatter.

"You're soaked," I growl, and grip her cunt hard enough that my fingers nearly sink through the sodden cotton. Lisa's body bows, her hips canting for more pressure, and I oblige by pinning her against the counter with one hand while I cup her pussy with the other. I rub slow, brutal circles with my palm with enough friction to make her gasp, not enough to let her tip over the edge.

She's so fucking responsive it drives me out of my goddamn mind.

I pull my hand back and slap her pussy lightly, right where her clit is swollen and pushing at the lace. The sound is obscene in the quiet kitchen, the sharp wet slap of it. She yelps, then gives a low, urgent whimper, her hands clawing at my shoulders for something to anchor her.

"Fuck, Lisa," I murmur, rubbing the sore spot with my thumb, soothing her, then smacking her again, harder this time. "Love how needy your pussy is. Bet you soaked through these panties the second I touched you."

A whine punches out of her and her thighs tremble around my waist.

"More," she pleads, voice barely more than a ragged exhale.

I shove the lace aside and stroke my bare fingers over her, two of them sliding through her slick heat. She's so wet I can't help myself, I need to taste her.

"Stay," I order, and she nods frantically, still perched on the edge of the counter.

I drop to my knees, hauling her closer, her legs thrown wide over my shoulders and her perfect ass braced on the butcher block. I bury my face in her, inhaling her, and drag my tongue up the seam of her cunt, flattening it over her clit. She rocks against my mouth, cursing, and I lock my arms around her thighs so she can't get away.

I eat her through the fabric first, mouthing at her, biting, sucking. I want her sensitive, want her wild. When she's sobbing in my hair, begging for more, I hook my fingers into each side of her panties and yank them off. The band pops free from her hips and I shove them down her legs, then bare her to the cold air and my hungry mouth.

I don't go for her clit right away. I lick a stripe from her dripping hole all the way to the bundle of nerves at the top, teasing, barely brushing her, then blowing gently so she feels every molecule of air.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself," I say, drawing back enough to see her face, her eyes wide and glassy and dark. "Show me what you do when you've thought about me over the years."

There's not a doubt in my mind that she's thought about me just as I have her, but I leave the ball in her court.

She blinks, startled, then her cheeks flush even darker. But I see the flicker of curiosity, the flash of challenge, and she does exactly what I asked. Her hand travels to her mouth, licking two fingers, then sliding down her belly, over the curve of her hip, until she's right there, eagle spread, touching her clit with me between her thighs.

"Fuck me," I growl, as I watch her take the other hand to squeeze her breasts.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

The sight of my stunning wife on my counter, legs spread, finger working her clit as she watches my reaction, hell, there's nothing in the world short of a bullet to the chest that could stop me from coming apart at the seams.

I palm my cock through my pants, barely aware that I'm doing it, just trying to take the edge off while I watch her show me how she wants it. My other hand shoves my sweats down, the waistband snapping against my thighs, and then I'm standing there in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, my dick so hard it's already soaking the cotton with pre-cum. I squeeze myself, groaning at the pressure, and fuck if her eyes don't go straight to bulge, her lips parting in a greedy little gasp.

"Tell me what you think about," I command, voice rough. "When you do this and I'm not here."

Her mouth works. Her other hand braces on the wood behind her, knuckles white, and she keeps rubbing slow, tight circles with her middle finger. "I think about you," she whispers, barely audible. "I think about you coming home after a long shift, your hands dirty, your voice all gravel. I think about you pinning me down and making me take it the way you want."

"Goddamn," I mutter, chest tight. "What else?"

She's getting bolder now, hips flexing into her own touch, whole body open for me. "I think about your mouth," she says, and her cheeks flare pink, but she holds my gaze. "I think about you going down on me, eating me until I can't think straight."

I groan, actually groan, the sound embarrassing and desperate, and pull my boxers

down so my cock springs free, thick and flushed and already leaking. I wrap my hand around the shaft, stroking in time with her fingers, unable to look away from the sight of my wife pleasuring herself and talking so fucking dirty it's like she's pulling this fantasy out of my skull and giving it a name.

"Keep going," I urge, stroking myself harder. "Tell me what else you want."

She hesitates, her breath coming in broken pants, then whispers, "I want you to taste me. I want you to put your tongue inside me and not stop until I'm begging."

I can't take it anymore. I drop to my knees again, and grip her thighs, so soft, so goddamn smooth, and spread her open even wider. She's pink and slick and glistening, her clit swollen and begging for attention, and I bury my mouth between her legs with a growl that vibrates through her entire body.

The taste of her is better than anything I've ever had. Sweet and a little salty, pure Lisa. I lap at her, slow strokes at first to make her squirm, then faster, more relentless, fucking her with my tongue and squeezing her ass in my hands to hold her right where I want her.

She comes completely undone, hot cum draining from her pretty pussy.

I slow down, giving her a breather, flicking her clit with my tongue until her whole body goes taut. Then I press a kiss right to the tip of her clit, the gentlest, softest thing I can do, and watch her break apart for me. Her thighs clamp around my head, her hands twine in my hair, and she lets out a sound that's equal parts sob and moan, hoarse and perfect in my ears.

She's still shuddering, hips rocking through the aftershocks, when I stand and scoop her into my arms. She's boneless, pliant, the flush on her skin working its way down her chest and painting her breasts with a hot, needy pink.

"Stay here," I say, voice hoarse with want.

She nods, and I make it to my bedroom in record time, rip open the drawer and grab a condom. By the time I come back, she's slid off the counter and is standing unsteadily, hair messy, cheeks flushed, nothing but those lacy panties bunched around her ankle and a wild, dazed look in her eyes.

I kiss her before she can say a word, pulling her against me so her bare tits press into my chest, her nipples dragging over my skin. She tastes like herself, like me, like everything I've ever wanted. "Bedroom," I grunt, and she nods, already letting herself be steered through the house.

But halfway down the hall, I change my mind.

The sofa is closer. I want her now.

I hook my hands under her ass, lift her bodily, and deposit her face-down over the arm of the sofa, so her tits are pressed to the back cushion and her hips are perfectly presented, ass up in the air and her thighs trembling.

Fuck, she's perfect.

She looks over her shoulder at me, eyes wide, mouth open, and I see something flickering there, uncertainty, yes, but also trust. A desperate kind of trust, like she's giving me something no one else ever has.

I stroke her ass, palm it, then lean down and bite the curve hard enough to leave a mark. She shivers, breath coming in quick little gasps.

"You ever wanted this before?" I ask, voice low and rough, fingers tracing the seam of her pussy.

She bites her lip, nods. "I... I used to wonder what it would be like. To have a man take me like this. From behind. To not be able to see his face, just to feel him... inside me."

The confession almost undoes me. I thumb the edge of her entrance, feeling how soft and hot she is. "Ever had it before?"

She shakes her head, hair falling over one eye. "No. Never."

"You will now," I promise, and roll on the condom with one hand.

I settle behind her, grip her hips, and nudge the head of my cock to her entrance, already slick and open from how hard I made her come. I press in slowly, spreading her inch by inch until she sighs, then moans, then shudders so hard I have to hold her steady.

"You okay?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Yes," she gasps, voice trembling but sure. "Don't stop."

That's all I need to start moving. She's so tight I almost lose it right then, her pussy gripping my cock like it's starving for it, and the sound she makes, a high, broken sigh, goes straight to my fucking chest.

"You feel so good," she manages, arching her ass higher, inviting me deeper.

I continue slow, pulling out until just the head is caught in her, then driving back in with a steady thrust. She chokes on a cry, shuddering with the force of it.

"God, you feel—" I can't even finish, have to clench my teeth and force myself not to rut into her like an animal. I want to make this last, want her to come for me again, but fuck if her cunt isn't perfect and greedy, squeezing me every time I move.

I set a rhythm, slow and deep. The slap of my hips against her ass is loud in the quiet room, every movement shameless and obscene. She pushes back, meeting each thrust, her breaths turning into needy, desperate whimpers.

"Harder," she begs, "please, Sawyer, I want?—"

I lose control then, hands bruising her hips as I fuck her harder, each stroke rocking her into the sofa until her knees nearly buckle. I feel her getting close, hear it in the way her voice breaks, see it in the way her back bows.

"Touch yourself," I order, and she obeys without hesitation, reaching between her legs to rub her clit, the greedy slick sounds only driving me crazier.

"You're going to come for me," I tell her, voice harsh. "You're going to cum on my cock and let me know who this pussy belongs to."

She shatters then. Her pussy clamps down, a wet rush coating me, and she moan-screams my name, so loud I almost think she may wake Tommy. The sound of it, the way she milks me, is more than I can take.

I cum hard, hips jerking, teeth bared, every muscle in my body pulled tight. The orgasm is relentless, blinding, and I almost black out from the force of it.

But I don't stop. Not when she's still trembling from the aftershocks, not when her thighs spasm around me. I pull out, drop to my knees behind her, and bury my tongue in her ass and pussy, licking her clean, eating her until she's clawing at the couch and begging for mercy.

I slide two fingers inside her, curling them just right, and when I suck her clit into my mouth she falls apart again, sobbing my name, legs shaking so hard I have to hold her up. Her second orgasm is violent, primal, and I keep her there, keep her riding it for as long as I can until she finally collapses on her side, limp and spent.

I stand and sweep her into my arms, her body weightless, spent, her skin gleaming with sweat and the afterglow of everything I've just taken from her. She buries her face in my shoulder as I carry her down the hall, her hair falling wild and dark over my chest.

Inside the bedroom, I lay her gently on the sheets. She's still trembling, but the look in her eyes is pure, unfiltered wonder. For the first time since we started this, she looks completely at peace.

"I'll be right back," I murmur, and she catches my hand before I can leave.

"Sawyer?"

I lean down and kiss her forehead. "Just getting cleaned up and checking on Tommy. Then I'm coming back to you, sweetheart."

She lets me go, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as I cross to the bathroom. I peel off and tie the condom, toss it, then wash my cock in the sink, splashing my face with cold water for good measure. Everything in me feels raw and new, like I've sloughed off decades of armor and I'm standing exposed for the first time since I became the sheriff, protector of the Ridge.

I pull a towel around my waist and move to check on Tommy. He's still surprisingly fast asleep, confirming to me he's my brand of baby. Smiling, I tiptoe back out of the nursery and head back to my bedroom.

When I return, Lisa's still sprawled on her back in my bed, hair tangled, arms above her head. The sight of her there, in the space I've always guarded so jealously, makes something ancient and possessive flare deep inside me.

I slide into bed behind her, curling around her body, letting her back rest against my chest. Her skin is cooler now but still feverish where our bodies touch.

She nestles closer, her ass pressed to my hips, and sighs. "That's... the best sex I've ever had," she says, voice slurred with exhaustion and a little awe.

"Yeah? You saying you want to do it again?" I murmur, pressing a kiss to the curve of her shoulder.

She laughs, low and sleepy. "Maybe after I can feel my legs again."

I laugh with her, burying my face in her hair and breathing her in. Vanilla and sweat

and the sharp tang of sex. I stroke her arm, slow and soothing, and feel her relax one vertebra at a time.

For a long time, there's only the sound of our breathing and the wind rattling the pines against the house. It's a sound I've known my whole life, but tonight, it feels different. Calmer. Like this cabin finally has a heart beating at its center.

Lisa shifts, turning to face me, her hands splayed on my chest. "Sawyer?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you scared?"

"Of what?" I brush her hair from her eyes, trace her lips with my thumb.

She hesitates, searching my face. "Of... all of this. Of how fast it's happening. Of not being enough for you."

I almost laugh, but the look on her face tells me she's dead serious. I tilt her chin up so she's forced to meet my eyes.

"You've always been enough. You're the only thing I've ever really wanted," I say, letting the words hang in the darkness between us. "I'm not scared. I'm happy, for the first time in a long time, I'm utterly and truly happy."

"I hope you know I'm completely gone for you, Sheriff McKenna," she says, making my smile grow bigger.

I rest my chin on her head. "I know, and I'm never letting you forget it," I say. "You, me, Tommy, this house. We're a family now. You got that?"

She hums, sleep already pulling her under. "Yeah. I got it."

We fall asleep like that, skin to skin, her heartbeat soft against my stomach.

I wake up in Sawyer McKenna's bed at five AM with sunlight streaming through the windows and my husband's arm wrapped around my waist like he's afraid I might disappear.

My husband.

The word still makes my stomach flip, even though we've been married for exactly fourteen hours. Even though I can still feel the delicious soreness between my thighs, the memory of what it felt like when he worshipped every inch of my body with his hands and mouth.

Even though what happened between us last night changed everything.

Sawyer is still asleep, his face relaxed in a way I rarely see when he's awake. The hard lines of authority and responsibility have softened, making him look younger. Making me remember the boy who used to build me elaborate sandcastles and share his lunch when I forgot mine.

The boy who grew up to be the man I married yesterday.

The man who showed me pleasure I never knew existed, who made me feel things I didn't know my body was capable of feeling.

I should feel happy. Settled. Complete. Instead, there's a knot of anxiety sitting heavy in my stomach, growing tighter with each passing minute. Because in the bright light of morning, with the euphoria of last night fading, reality is starting to creep back in.

Derek is still out there. Still in town, still trying to take Tommy away from me. And now, instead of just fighting for my nephew, I'm fighting for this new life, this family, this happiness that feels too perfect to last.

Sawyer stirs beside me, his arm tightening around my waist before his eyes flutter open. When he sees me watching him, his face transforms with a smile that makes my chest ache.

"Morning, baby." His voice is rough with sleep, intimate in a way that makes heat pool low in my belly.

"Morning, husband." I try to match his casual tone, but something in my expression must give me away because his smile fades.

"What's wrong?" He's immediately alert, shifting to face me fully. "Lisa, what happened?"

"Nothing happened. I'm just..." I trail off, not sure how to explain the fear that's eating at me. "Thinking."

"About?"

"About Derek. About the custody hearing. About what happens if this doesn't work." The words spill out faster than I can stop them. "What happens if the judge sees through us? What happens if Derek's lawyer finds some way to prove this marriage is fake?"

Sawyer's jaw tightens. "It's not fake."

"But it started fake. We have a marriage license dated two days before the wedding. People are going to ask questions, Sawyer. They're going to wonder why the sheriff suddenly married his childhood friend right when she's facing a custody battle."

"Let them wonder." His voice carries that dangerous edge I recognize from when he's dealing with a threat. "Let them ask all the questions they want. The only thing that

matters is what happens in that courtroom."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"And what if what happens in that courtroom is that we lose?" The question comes out smaller than I intend. "What if Derek gets custody and takes Tommy back to Connecticut? What if I never see him again?"

The possibility I've been trying not to think about hangs between us like a curse. Tommy, growing up in Derek's world of manipulation. Tommy, believing that his father is a man who only wanted him for money. Tommy, forgetting Emma entirely.

"That's not going to happen." Sawyer sits up, pulls me with him until we're both leaning against the headboard. "Lisa, look at me."

I do, and the absolute certainty in his blue eyes should be comforting. Should make me feel safe and protected and sure that everything will work out.

Instead, it makes the anxiety worse.

"You don't know that," I say. "You can't promise that everything will be fine just because you want it to be. Life doesn't work that way."

"My life does." The words come out flat, final. "My family is protected. Always. Whatever it takes."

"But what if..."

"No." He cuts me off, his voice sharp enough to make me flinch. "No what ifs, no worst case scenarios. We're not doing this, Lisa."

"Doing what?"

"Borrowing trouble. Creating problems that don't exist." He runs a hand through his hair, and I can see the frustration building. "We have a plan. We have a good lawyer. We have a marriage certificate and a home and a family that any judge would be crazy to break up."

"Derek has money. Derek has connections. Derek has..."

"Nothing Lisa! Derek has nothing." Sawyer's voice goes deadly quiet. "Derek Morrison is a man who abandoned a pregnant woman and only came back when there was profit involved. Any judge with half a brain is going to see exactly what kind of father he'd be."

I want to believe him. God, I want to believe him so badly it hurts. But Emma believed Derek would change too. Emma thought love could fix a man who saw women as possessions instead of people.

Emma was wrong.

"My sister thought she could handle Derek too," I say quietly. "She thought she was strong enough, smart enough, determined enough to make their marriage work. And look how that ended."

The words hang in the air between us, loaded with all the fear and doubt I've been carrying since Emma died. Since I realized that sometimes love isn't enough to protect the people you care about.

Sawyer is quiet for a long moment, studying my face like he's trying to solve a puzzle.

"You think I'm going to leave," he says finally. "You think I'm going to decide this is too hard, too complicated, too much trouble, and walk away like Derek did."

"I think you're a good man who agreed to help a friend and got more than you bargained for." The admission tears out of me like a confession. "I think what happened between us last night was just... physical. Because you felt sorry for me, because you wanted to make things easier."

"Jesus Christ, Lisa."

"I think that when the custody case is over, when Tommy is safe, you're going to realize that you don't actually want to be married to a woman with a baby and a mountain of baggage and..."

I don't get to finish the sentence because Sawyer's mouth crashes down on mine, hard and possessive and completely overwhelming. He kisses me like he's trying to prove a point, like he's trying to drive every doubt from my head through sheer force of will.

When he finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard.

"Are you done?" His voice is rough, edged with something that might be anger or hurt or both.

"Sawyer, I..."

"Are you done questioning what we have? Are you done assuming I'm going to abandon you the first time things get difficult?" His hands frame my face, forcing me to look at him. "Because I've got news for you, Lisa McKenna. I've wanted you since we were kids. I've watched you date other men, move away for college, build a life that didn't include me, and I never stopped wanting you."

The intensity in his voice, the raw honesty, makes my chest tight.

"I married you because I want you," he continues. "I made you mine last night because I want you. I'm going to fight Derek Morrison and anyone else who tries to hurt our family because you're mine now." His thumbs brush across my cheekbones, gentle despite the steel in his voice. "So no, I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

"But what if the judge..."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"The judge is going to see a family that belongs together. A woman who's devoted her life to caring for her nephew, a man who would die before letting anything happen to them, and a baby who's surrounded by more love and protection than most kids get in a lifetime."

He makes it sound so simple. So certain. Like the outcome is already decided, and all we have to do is show up.

"I'm just scared," I whisper.

"I know." His voice gentles. "But Lisa, you're not in this alone anymore. You don't have to carry all the worry, all the responsibility. That's what marriage means. That's what being a family means."

"I've never been good at letting other people help."

"I've noticed." There's the hint of a smile in his voice now. "Good thing I'm patient."

I lean into his touch, let myself absorb some of his certainty. It would be so easy to let Sawyer carry all of this, to trust that his confidence and protection are enough to keep us safe.

But the practical part of my brain, the part that's been taking care of myself since I was eighteen, won't let me relax completely.

"We should probably get up," I say instead of voicing the fears still circling in my head. "Tommy will be awake soon, and I want to finish unpacking his things."

Sawyer studies my face for another moment, like he knows I'm deflecting but doesn't want to push. "Okay. But Lisa, this conversation isn't over."

"I know."

He leans down to kiss me again, softer this time but no less claiming. "You're mine, Lisa. Remember that when your brain starts spinning worst-case scenarios."

"I'll try."

Twenty minutes later, I'm in the kitchen making coffee while Sawyer showers, trying to focus on the ordinary tasks of morning instead of the anxiety that's still gnawing at my stomach. The coffee maker is different from the one at Emma's apartment, and it takes me three tries to figure out the right ratio of grounds to water.

Everything here is different. Bigger, more masculine, designed for a man who lives alone. I keep opening cabinets looking for things that aren't there, reaching for light switches that are in the wrong places.

It doesn't feel like home yet. It feels like I'm playing house in someone else's life.

The thought makes me feel guilty immediately. Sawyer has been nothing but welcoming, nothing but generous. He's turned his entire life upside down to help me, and here I am criticizing his kitchen layout.

Tommy's cry echoes from the nursery, saving me from my spiral of self-doubt. I abandon the coffee and hurry down the hallway, pushing open the door to find him standing in his crib, hands gripping the rails, looking around the unfamiliar room with wide eyes.

"Hey, baby boy." I lift him out, settle him against my hip. "Good morning. How did

you sleep in your new room?"

He babbles something that might be an answer, then leans back to study my face with those serious dark eyes that remind me so much of Emma.

"I know, sweetheart. Everything's different, isn't it? New house, new room, new..." I pause, not sure how to explain the concept of a stepfather to a baby. "New family."

The word feels strange on my tongue. Family. For so long, it was just me and Emma, and then just me and Tommy. Now suddenly we're part of something bigger, something that includes brothers and sisters-in-law and Sunday dinners and the kind of support system I've never had before.

It should feel wonderful. It does feel wonderful, when I let myself think about it.

So why can't I shake the feeling that it's all going to disappear?

"There you are." Sawyer appears in the doorway, hair still damp from his shower, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt that makes his eyes look impossibly blue. "How's our boy this morning?"

Our boy. The casual possessiveness in the words makes something warm unfurl in my chest, even as it terrifies me.

"He's good. Just getting used to the new surroundings." I bounce Tommy gently, and he reaches toward Sawyer with grabby hands.

Sawyer steps forward without hesitation, taking Tommy from me like he's been doing it for months instead of days. The easy confidence with which he handles my nephew, and the way Tommy immediately settles against his chest, makes my throat tight with emotion.

"What do you think, buddy? You like your new room?" Sawyer walks Tommy over to the window, pointing out at the mountains visible in the distance. "See those peaks? That's where your mama and I used to go hiking when we were kids. Someday I'll take you up there, show you the best fishing spots."

The casual way he talks about the future, about years of shared memories still to be made, should comfort me. Instead, it makes the anxiety spike again.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Because Derek could still take all of this away.

"Lisa." Sawyer's voice is sharp with concern. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Worrying yourself into a panic attack." He shifts Tommy to one arm, and reaches out to touch my face with his free hand. "Talk to me. What's going through your head?"

The gentleness in his voice, the patience, almost breaks me. Here I am, spiraling into worst case scenarios on our first morning as a married couple, and he's still trying to take care of me.

"I'm sorry," I say, the words rushing out. "I'm being ridiculous. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"It's just that this feels too good to be real. You, Tommy, this house, this family. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to go wrong and ruin it all."

Sawyer is quiet for a moment, bouncing Tommy absently while he thinks.

"You know what Emma used to say about you?" he asks finally.

The question catches me off guard. "What?"

"She said you were the strongest person she knew, but that your strength came from always being prepared for the worst. She said you'd rather expect disappointment and be pleasantly surprised than hope for good things and get crushed."

The accuracy of the observation, coming from Emma, makes my eyes burn with unshed tears.

"She wasn't wrong."

"No, she wasn't. But Lisa, sometimes you have to take the risk. Sometimes you have to believe that good things can last, that people can be trusted, and that love is strong enough to weather whatever comes."

"And if I'm wrong? If I let myself believe this is real and permanent and then lose it all?"

"Then you'll have had something beautiful for however long it lasted." His voice is serious, intent. "But you're not going to lose it. You're not going to lose me, you're not going to lose Tommy, you're not going to lose this family we're building."

"You can't know that."

"I can." The certainty in his voice is absolute. "Because I won't let it happen. Because Derek Morrison is going to learn that there's a difference between a woman alone and a woman protected by a man who loves her."

The primitive satisfaction in his tone, the promise of violence barely leashed, should probably worry me. Instead, it makes me feel safer than I have in months.

"Okay," I say quietly.

"Okay?"

"Okay, I'll try to stop borrowing trouble. I'll try to believe that this is real and good and permanent." I take a shaky breath. "But Sawyer, you have to be patient with me. I've never had anything this good before. I don't know how to trust it."

"I can be patient." He leans down to kiss me, soft and sweet and reassuring. "As long as you need me to be."

Tommy chooses that moment to grab a handful of Sawyer's shirt and make a sound that might be approval or might just be baby commentary. We both laugh, the tension of the morning finally breaking.

"Come on," Sawyer says, shifting Tommy to his other arm. "Let's get some breakfast in this kid and finish getting you settled in. Our lawyer wants to meet with us this afternoon to go over strategy for the hearing."

"Right. The hearing." The reminder sends another spike of anxiety through me, but I push it down. "What time?"

"Two o'clock. That gives us the morning to get organized, maybe take Tommy for a walk around the property so he can get used to his new home."

His new home. The words should make me happy. Instead, they make me think about Derek's messages, about the custody hearing, about all the ways this perfect morning could turn into a nightmare.

But I follow Sawyer to the kitchen anyway, watch him make Tommy's bottle with the same competence he brings to everything else, let myself pretend that anxiety and love can coexist.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Let myself pretend that sometimes, the good guys actually win.

Even when they're going up against men with money and connections and no conscience at all.

7

SAWYER

The lawyer's office smells like old books and expensive cologne, the kind of place that charges by the hour just to breathe the air. Rebecca Winters sits behind a mahogany desk that probably cost more than most people make in a month, but her reputation for destroying men like Derek Morrison is worth every penny.

Lisa is sitting beside me, holding Tommy on her lap while he chews on a teething ring and eyes the law books with the serious consideration of someone planning a hostile takeover. My wife looks professional in her navy dress, composed and ready for battle, but I can see the tension in the set of her shoulders.

She's been wound tight since this morning, despite my best efforts to reassure her. Still borrowing trouble, still expecting the worst. It's going to take time for her to trust that this happiness we've built is permanent, but I've got nothing but time.

And patience.

And a burning need to destroy Derek Morrison before he can hurt my family.

"So," Rebecca says, closing the file she's been reviewing. "The custody hearing is scheduled for Friday. That gives us four days to prepare." With anyone else, just a few days to prepare would terrify me, but Rebecca has taken the McKenna brothers through so many battles over the years that my confidence doesn't falter.

"What are we looking at?" I keep my voice calm, and professional. "What's Morrison's angle?"

Rebecca's expression tightens. "He's claiming that Lisa is an unfit guardian due to emotional instability, financial insecurity, and unsuitable living conditions. His lawyer has also raised questions about the timing of your marriage."

Lisa's breathing goes shallow beside me. I reach over, take her free hand in mine, and squeeze gently.

"What kind of questions?" Lisa's voice is steady, but I can hear the fear underneath.

"Nothing we can't handle. They're suggesting that the marriage is a sham, entered into solely to improve your custody case. It's a common tactic when someone remarries quickly before a hearing."

"But we have documentation that contradicts that," I say. "Witnesses who can testify that Lisa and I have known each other for decades."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm not concerned about that particular line of attack." Rebecca leans back in her chair. "What does concern me is this."

She slides a piece of paper across the desk. It's a photograph, clearly taken with a telephoto lens, showing Lisa and me outside the courthouse after we got our marriage license. We're standing close together, and Tommy is reaching for my badge.

But that's not what makes my blood run cold.

It's the second photograph underneath it.

Derek Morrison, standing outside Emma's apartment building three days ago. The day before our wedding. He's partially concealed behind a parked car, but there's no mistaking his expensive suit or the predatory way he's watching the building.

Watching for Lisa.

"Where did they get this?" My voice comes out deadly quiet.

Rebecca's expression is grim. "Private investigator. Morrison hired someone to follow Lisa as soon as he filed the custody petition. So, I hired our own."

Lisa has gone completely still beside me, staring at the photograph like it might burst into flames.

"I never saw him," she says finally, her voice tight with shock. "I had no idea he was watching me."

"You don't need to explain anything to me." I turn to face her fully, my jaw tight with fury. "But I need to know what happened. Did he approach you? Did he try to contact you?"

The silence stretches between us, thick with tension. Tommy makes a soft sound, oblivious to the bombs going off around him.

"Derek sent me text messages," Lisa says finally. "The morning of our wedding. He said he was staying at the inn, said we should talk before I made any permanent decisions."

Something cold and violent unfurls in my chest. "And what did you do?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"I deleted them." Her voice is firm, certain. "I deleted every single message without responding. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of engaging with his manipulation."

"Lisa." Rebecca's voice is carefully controlled. "Did you respond to any of the messages? Any contact at all?"

"No. None." Lisa's voice gets stronger, more defiant. "I knew he was trying to get under my skin, trying to make me doubt myself and my decisions. So I refused to play his game."

"Smart move." I run a hand through my hair, trying to process this. "Why didn't you tell me about the messages?"

"Because I handled it. Because I didn't want to give Derek the power to disrupt our wedding day." She turns to look at me, her green eyes blazing. "Because for twenty-eight years, I've been making my own decisions, and deleting those messages was the right call. He's still sending messages, though."

The honesty in her voice, the smart choice she made despite the pressure, makes me want to pull her close and tell her how proud I am.

"What did the messages say?" Rebecca asks.

"He offered me money to sign over my parental rights and disappear from Tommy's life completely." Lisa's voice is flat, matter-of-fact. "When I didn't respond, the messages got more threatening. He said I was making a mistake. That he had

connections, resources, ways of making sure I'd never see Tommy again."

"Did he threaten you specifically in the messages?"

"Not in so many words. But the implication was clear." Lisa adjusts Tommy on her lap, and he reaches up to grab her necklace. "He said that single women with questionable judgment don't make good mothers. That courts tend to favor stable, wealthy families over... and I quote... 'desperate women clinging to children that aren't theirs.'"

The rage that's been building in my chest explodes into something white-hot and deadly. Derek Morrison threatened my wife through text messages, then stalked her outside her home.

"But you never saw him? Never knew he was watching you?" My voice comes out rough with barely controlled fury.

"Never. I was focused on packing, on getting ready for the wedding, on Tommy." Lisa meets my eyes steadily. "If I'd known he was outside the building, stalking me like some kind of predator..."

"You made the right call by not responding." The words come out sharper than I intend. "Lisa, not engaging with him, refusing to meet with him, that was smart. But this photograph proves he's dangerous. He was stalking you."

"I know that now." Her voice rises slightly. "But at the time, I thought I was just dealing with threatening text messages. I thought ignoring him was the best strategy."

"It was the right strategy. You didn't give him any ammunition to use against you." I can hear the possessiveness in my own voice, the claim that goes bone-deep. "But Lisa, when someone threatens my family, when they stalk my wife, they deal with

me."

"I can take care of myself, Sawyer."

"I know you can. But you don't have to anymore."

The argument that's been building between us all day finally breaks the surface, crackling with tension and unspoken fears.

"This is exactly what I was worried about," Lisa says, her voice tight with frustration.

"You wanting to control every situation, every decision I make."

"Control?" The word hits like a slap. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Isn't it? You want me to tell you about every text message, every threat, let you handle all the difficult situations."

"I want you to trust me enough to include me when you're being threatened. I want you to care enough about your own safety to let me know when predators are stalking you."

"I've been making my own decisions for my whole life, Sawyer. I'm not going to stop now just because we signed a marriage certificate."

The pain in her voice tells me this goes deeper than one hotel meeting. This is about control and trust and the fear that marriage means losing herself in someone else's wants and needs.

This is about Emma.

"Your sister tried to handle Derek alone too," I say quietly. "How did that work out

for her?"

The words leave my mouth before I can stop them, and I know immediately that I've crossed a line. Lisa goes white, her hands tightening around Tommy until he makes a sound of protest.

"Don't." Her voice is barely above a whisper. "Don't you dare use Emma against me."

"Lisa, I didn't mean..."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Yes, you did." She stands abruptly, settling Tommy against her hip. "You meant exactly what you said. That I'm making the same mistakes Emma made. That I'm too stubborn and independent for my own good."

"That's not what I said."

"It's what you meant." There are tears in her eyes now, but her voice is steady. "And maybe you're right. Maybe I am too much like Emma. Maybe I am too damaged to be a good wife."

"Don't put words in my mouth." I stand too, needing to close the distance between us. "Lisa, you're nothing like... what happened with Emma and Derek is completely different."

"Is it? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like I married a man who wants to make all my decisions for me. Who thinks I'm too emotional and reckless to handle my own problems."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?" She backs toward the door, and the movement feels like she's running away from more than just this conversation. "You've been patient with me, Sawyer, but I can see it wearing thin. I can see you getting frustrated with my fears, my need to control things, my inability to just trust and let you handle everything."

The accusation hits too close to home because there's a grain of truth in it. I have been frustrated with her fears, her walls, her determination to carry every burden

alone. But not because I think she's weak or damaged.

Because I care about her too much to watch her suffer when I could take the weight.

"Rebecca," I say without taking my eyes off Lisa. "Could you give us a moment?"

"Of course. I'll be right outside." Rebecca slips out of the office, closing the door behind her.

Lisa and I stare at each other across the expensive carpet, the air between us crackling with hurt and misunderstanding.

"This isn't about Emma," I say finally. "This is about you being scared that caring about me means losing yourself."

"Maybe it does."

"It doesn't. Lisa, I love your strength, your independence, your refusal to back down from a fight. Why would I want to change the things that make you who you are?"

"Because it's easier. Because having a wife who follows orders and doesn't ask questions would make your life simpler."

"Fuck simple." The curse explodes out of me with enough force to make Tommy startle. "I don't want simple. I want you. Complicated, stubborn, fierce, incredible you."

She's crying now, silent tears that track down her cheeks while she holds my nephew against her chest like a shield.

"I don't know how to do this," she whispers. "I don't know how to be married, how to

share decisions, how to trust that you won't get tired of my baggage and leave."

"You think I don't have baggage? You think twenty-three years of wearing this badge, of seeing the worst people can do to each other, doesn't leave marks?" I take a step closer, slowly, like I'm approaching a wounded animal. "Lisa, we're both damaged. We're both carrying scars. But that doesn't mean we can't build something beautiful together."

"Derek said..." She stops, shakes her head.

"Derek said what?"

"He said that you only married me out of pity. That a man like you, with your reputation and your standing in the community, could have any woman he wanted. That the only reason you'd choose someone with my... complications... is if you felt sorry for me."

The words send angry flaring hot in my gut, and suddenly everything makes sense. Lisa's fears this morning, her determination to handle Derek alone, her certainty that I'm going to leave.

Derek Morrison poisoned her against me before we even had a chance to build something real.

"Lisa, look at me." I wait until her green eyes meet mine. "Derek Morrison is a manipulative bastard who gets his power from making people doubt themselves. Everything he said to you was designed to hurt you, to make you question what we have."

"But what if he's right? What if..."

"He's not." I close the remaining distance between us, cup her face gently in my hands. "I need you to really hear me right now. I have never, not once in my entire life, done anything out of pity. I'm too damned selfish for that. Everything I do, I do because I want it."

"Sawyer..."

"I want you, Lisa. Not because I feel sorry for you, not because you need protecting, not because it's the right thing to do. I want you because you make me laugh, because you challenge me, because you're brave enough to stand up to me when I'm being an ass."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Tommy makes a soft sound, and I reach out to stroke his dark hair.

"I want Tommy because he's part of you, because he represents everything good and innocent that Derek tried to destroy. I want this family we're building because it's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"But the hotel meeting..."

"Seeing Derek sitting outside her apartment scared the hell out of me because I care about you, and the thought of Derek hurting you makes me want to commit murder." My voice goes rough with emotion. "But Lisa, I'm proud of you for not letting that bastard get to you. I'm proud that you haven't buckled and given in to his delusional demands."

"Really?"

"Really," I admit. "Though next time, I'd appreciate a heads up so I can be backup instead of finding out from a private investigator's photographs."

That earns me a watery smile. "Next time?"

"There won't be a next time. Because after Friday, Derek Morrison is going to learn what happens when someone threatens what's mine." The promise comes out dark and final. "And he's going to spend the rest of his life regretting that he ever heard the name Tommy Graham."

"McKenna," Lisa corrects softly.

"What?"

"Tommy McKenna. If we're really doing this, if this is really permanent, then Tommy is a McKenna now."

The simple correction, the acceptance it represents, hits me harder than any declaration of love.

"We're really doing this," I confirm. "And Lisa, I need you to understand something. Derek Morrison played his hand too early. He showed us his strategy, revealed his tactics, gave us everything we need to destroy him in court."

"How?"

"By proving that he's exactly the kind of man who would threaten a grieving woman for money. By demonstrating that his interest in Tommy is purely financial. By showing a pattern of intimidation and manipulation that started with Emma and continues with you."

Lisa is quiet for a moment, thinking. When she speaks again, her voice is stronger.

"So what do we do?"

"We sit here and we plan Derek Morrison's complete and total destruction." I lean down to kiss her forehead gently. "As a family."

"As a family," she agrees.

And when Rebecca walks back into her office, I'm holding my wife's hand on one side, and my stepson on my lap. We look like exactly what we are.

A family that's worth fighting for.

A family that's going to win.

8

LISA

The courthouse steps feel like they're made of ice beneath my feet, even though the morning sun is warm on my face. In thirty minutes, I'm going to walk into that building and fight for the right to keep raising my nephew, and the right to keep the family Sawyer and I have built.

The right to keep everything that matters to me in this world.

Tommy is in Sawyer's arms, babbling at a squirrel that's perched on the courthouse railing like he's giving it a stern lecture about proper courtroom behavior. He's wearing his best outfit, a tiny button-down shirt and khaki pants that make him look older than his eight months, and he's completely oblivious to the fact that his entire future is about to be decided by a stranger in a black robe.

"You ready for this?" Sawyer's voice is calm, steady, but I can see the tension in the set of his shoulders, the way his jaw tightens when he looks toward the courthouse doors.

"No," I answer honestly. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

It's been three days since our fight in Rebecca's office, three days of preparation and strategy sessions and sleepless nights spent staring at the ceiling while Sawyer held me and promised that everything would be fine.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

Three days of learning to trust that "together" doesn't mean "controlled."

Three days of falling even deeper for the man who married me to save my nephew and ended up saving me too.

"Mrs. McKenna?" Rebecca appears at the bottom of the courthouse steps, looking professional and confident in a way that makes me stand a little straighter. "Are you ready?"

Mrs. McKenna. The name still sends a little thrill through me, even now, even when my stomach is tied in knots and my palms are sweating.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I say.

We walk up the steps together, Sawyer's free hand warm and steady on the small of my back, and Rebecca briefing us on last-minute details. The judge is known for being fair but thorough. Derek's lawyer is known for being expensive and ruthless. The social worker who'll be observing will be looking for signs of a stable, loving home environment.

Everything we've practiced, everything we've prepared for, comes down to the next two hours.

The courthouse lobby is crowded with people dealing with their own legal dramas, but I spot Derek immediately. He's sitting on a bench near the family court entrance, wearing an expensive suit and the kind of confident smile that makes my skin crawl.

He's not alone.

The woman beside him is blonde and polished in a way that screams money and privilege. She's younger than Derek by at least ten years, with the kind of practiced perfection that comes from a lifetime of beauty treatments and personal trainers.

His new wife. The replacement family he found to go with his replacement dreams for Tommy.

"That's her," I whisper to Sawyer. "That's Melissa."

Sawyer's gaze finds Derek and his wife, and something dangerous flickers across his face. The same expression I've seen when he's dealing with a threat, when someone is about to learn why you don't mess with Sheriff McKenna or anyone under his protection.

"Easy," I murmur, touching his arm. "We handle this the legal way."

"I know." But his voice carries that edge that makes grown men step carefully around him. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Derek looks up as we approach, and his smile widens when he sees us. It's the kind of smile a predator gives when it thinks it's cornered its prey.

"Lisa." He stands, buttoning his suit jacket with practiced ease. "You look well. Marriage clearly agrees with you."

The casual tone, like we're old friends running into each other at a coffee shop instead of adversaries about to battle for custody of a child, makes my teeth clench.

"Derek." I keep my voice neutral, professional. "Melissa."

The blonde woman looks me up and down with the kind of assessment women give each other when measuring competition. Whatever she sees must not impress her because she just nods coolly and turns her attention to Tommy.

"So this is little Thomas," she says, reaching out like she's going to touch him.

Sawyer steps back smoothly, keeping Tommy out of reach while making it look completely natural.

"His name is Tommy," I correct. "And he doesn't know you."

"Yet," Derek says, and there's steel underneath the casual tone. "But he will. We're looking forward to getting to know him, aren't we, darling?"

Melissa nods, but I notice she doesn't seem particularly enthusiastic about the prospect. She's looking at Tommy like he's a prop in someone else's play, something to be managed rather than loved.

"Mrs. McKenna?" Rebecca appears at my elbow. "We should head inside. They're ready for us."

The courtroom is smaller than I expected, more intimate. It feels wrong somehow that such a huge decision is going to be made in a space that looks like it could be someone's living room if you took away the judge's bench and witness stand.

Judge Patricia Henley is a woman in her sixties with silver hair and sharp eyes that seem to take in everything at once. She reviews the case file while we take our seats, Derek and his lawyer on one side, Sawyer and I with Rebecca on the other.

Tommy sits quietly on my lap, occasionally reaching for my necklace or making soft sounds, but otherwise behaving like the perfect angel he usually is in new situations.

"This is a custody modification hearing in the matter of Morrison versus McKenna," Judge Henley begins. "Mr. Morrison is seeking full custody of the minor child, Thomas Morrison, currently in the care of his aunt, Lisa McKenna."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

The formality of it, hearing Tommy reduced to "minor child" and "Thomas Morrison," makes my chest tight. But I force myself to sit still, to breathe, to trust that the truth will be enough.

Derek's lawyer goes first, painting a picture of a successful businessman who was tragically denied the opportunity to raise his son due to the vindictive actions of his deceased ex-wife. He talks about Derek's stable marriage, his financial resources, and his ability to provide opportunities that a "single aunt" could never match.

He never mentions that Derek abandoned Emma when she was pregnant. Never acknowledges that Derek showed no interest in Tommy until there was money involved. Never admits that the "stable marriage" is less than a year old and was clearly entered into to strengthen Derek's custody case.

But the implication is clear, Derek Morrison is a father wrongfully separated from his child, and I'm an obstacle to their reunion.

When it's Rebecca's turn, she methodically destroys every argument Derek's lawyer made. She presents evidence of Derek's abandonment, testimony from Emma's friends about his treatment of her, financial records showing that his interest in Tommy coincided exactly with the settlement of Emma's life insurance.

She talks about the life Tommy has in Grizzly Ridge, the extended family that's embraced him, and the community that knows and loves him. She presents character witnesses who testify about my devotion to Tommy, about the sacrifices I've made to ensure his well-being.

But it's when she calls Sawyer to the stand that the real story emerges.

"Sheriff McKenna," she begins, "how long have you known the defendant?"

"All my life," Sawyer answers, his voice clear and strong. "We've been friends since childhood."

"And when did your relationship with Mrs. McKenna become romantic?"

There's a pause, just long enough for Derek's lawyer to lean forward expectantly.

"I've wanted Lisa Graham since we were teenagers," Sawyer says simply. "But I was too much of a coward to tell her until recently."

The honesty in his voice, the vulnerability of the admission in front of a room full of strangers, makes my throat tight with emotion.

"So your marriage wasn't a recent development prompted by the custody case?"

"Our marriage was prompted by the fact that I finally worked up the courage to ask the woman I've wanted for twenty-nine years to spend her life with me." Sawyer's gaze finds mine across the courtroom. "The timing had nothing to do with custody and everything to do with not wanting to waste another day."

"And your feelings about Tommy?"

"Tommy is my stepson. He's part of our family. I would do anything to protect him and ensure his happiness."

"Including marrying his aunt to improve her custody case?"

Derek's lawyer objects, but Sawyer answers anyway.

"I married Lisa because she completes me. Tommy is a blessing that comes with that, not a burden or a legal strategy." His voice carries that absolute certainty that's uniquely his. "Any man who would abandon a pregnant woman and then try to claim her child for money isn't fit to be called a father."

The objection that follows is heated, but the damage is done. Sawyer has laid out the truth in terms so clear even Derek's expensive lawyer can't twist them.

When the social worker presents her report, it's everything we hoped for. She talks about the stable, loving environment Tommy enjoys, the attachment he has formed to both Sawyer and me, and the extended family support system that surrounds him in Grizzly Ridge.

She also notes Derek's obvious discomfort with Tommy during their supervised visit, his wife's apparent lack of interest in childcare, and the fact that their Connecticut home is set up more for entertaining than child-rearing.

But it's Derek himself who seals his fate.

When his lawyer calls him to testify about his desire to be reunited with his son, Derek can't help himself. He talks about the advantages he can provide, the private schools and country clubs and social connections. He talks about rescuing Tommy from a "limited small-town existence" and giving him opportunities worthy of the Morrison name.

He never once talks about love.

He never mentions bedtime stories or scraped knees or the simple joy of watching a child discover the world. He talks about Tommy like a business acquisition, an

investment in the Morrison legacy.

When Rebecca cross-examines him, she's surgical in her precision.

"Mr. Morrison, you stated that you want to give Tommy opportunities. What opportunities specifically?"

"The best education money can buy. Connections that will serve him well in his career. A life of privilege and respect."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"And what about love, Mr. Morrison? What about emotional support and stability?"

"Of course, those things matter. But love doesn't pay for college or open doors in the business world."

"So, you're saying that financial advantages are more important than emotional well-being?"

Derek realizes his mistake too late. "That's not what I said."

"Actually, Mr. Morrison, it's exactly what you said. Now, during Emma's pregnancy, did you provide emotional or financial support?"

"We were having relationship difficulties..."

"That's not what I asked. Did you provide support of any kind during Emma's pregnancy?"

The pause stretches long enough to be damning. "The situation was complicated."

"It's a yes or no question, Mr. Morrison. Did you support the mother of your child during her pregnancy?"

"No."

"And after Tommy was born, did you visit him? Send gifts? Express any interest in his well-being?"

"I was giving Emma space to figure things out."

"For eight months? You gave her space for eight months?"

"Yes."

"Until you learned about the life insurance settlement."

Derek's lawyer objects, but the timeline is clear. Derek Morrison abandoned his son and only returned when there was profit to be made.

When Judge Henley calls for a recess, I feel like I can breathe for the first time in hours. Sawyer's hand finds mine immediately, warm, steady, and reassuring.

"How do you think it went?" I whisper to Rebecca.

"Better than I hoped," she admits. "Derek came across exactly as we wanted him to. Cold, calculating, and more interested in the Morrison legacy than in Tommy's welfare."

When the court reconvenes, Judge Henley delivers her decision with the measured authority of someone who's made thousands of similar rulings.

"The court finds that the minor child, Thomas Graham, is currently in a stable, loving environment with his aunt and her husband. The petitioner, Derek Morrison, has failed to demonstrate that a change in custody would serve the child's best interests."

The words wash over me like a wave of relief so strong I almost miss the rest.

"Furthermore, the court notes that Mr. Morrison's abandonment of both the child and his mother during pregnancy, followed by his absence during the child's first eight

months of life, demonstrates a pattern of behavior inconsistent with the best interests of the child. The petition for custody modification is denied."

It's over.

Tommy is mine. Ours. Forever.

Derek's face goes red with fury, and he says something sharp to his lawyer, but I can't hear it over the rushing in my ears. Sawyer's arm comes around me, solid and warm, and I lean into him like he's the only thing keeping me upright.

"It's over," he murmurs against my hair. "He can't hurt you anymore. He can't take Tommy."

"We won?"

"We won."

When we walk out of the courthouse twenty minutes later, Derek and Melissa are nowhere to be seen. But that's fine with me. I never want to see Derek Morrison again as long as I live.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"So what now?" I ask as we reach Sawyer's truck.

"Now we go home," he says, settling Tommy into his car seat with practiced ease.

"Now we live our life."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." He straightens, pulls me into his arms right there in the courthouse parking lot. "Lisa McKenna, you are officially and permanently the mother of the most beautiful boy in Montana."

"And you're officially and permanently his father."

"Best job I've ever had," he says, and kisses me like we're not standing in public, like we're not surrounded by lawyers and court officers and people dealing with their own legal dramas.

Like we're just a family celebrating the best day of our lives.

Which, I realize as I kiss him back, is exactly what we are.

9

SAWYER

The house is finally quiet.

It's been six hours since Judge Henley handed down her ruling, six hours since Derek Morrison learned that money and connections don't always win against love and family. Six hours since Lisa and I walked out of that courthouse as the legal, permanent, unshakeable guardians of Tommy McKenna.

My stepson. My family. Mine to protect forever.

The celebration dinner at Luke's house went longer than planned, with every McKenna brother and their families gathering to welcome Tommy officially into the clan. Lily insisted on teaching him to clap, even though he's still too young to understand the concept. Cade grilled enough burgers to feed a small army. Boone brought out his guitar and played lullabies until Tommy fell asleep in Lisa's arms.

My brothers, who've been watching me live like a hermit for so long, couldn't stop grinning at the sight of me with a wife and baby. Like they'd been waiting for this moment as long as I have.

Now we're home, and Tommy is sound asleep in his crib, worn out from being the center of attention. Lisa is in our bathroom, running a bath, and I'm standing in our bedroom trying to process the fact that it's really over.

Derek Morrison is on his way back to Connecticut with his tail between his legs and no legal claim to my stepson. The custody case is closed. The threats are gone. The family I've dreamed about for twenty years is safe, secure, and mine.

"Sawyer?" Lisa's voice carries from the bathroom, soft and questioning. "You okay out there?"

"Yeah." I head toward the sound of her voice, needing to see her, to touch her, to reassure myself that this is real. "Just thinking."

The bathroom is filled with steam and the scent of whatever fancy bath salts Lisa uses, the ones that make her skin smell like vanilla and flowers. She's sitting on the edge of the tub in her robe, testing the water temperature, and the domestic simplicity of it hits me like a punch to the chest.

This is my life now. This woman, this home, this quiet evening routine that I never thought I'd have.

"Thinking about what?" She looks up at me with those green eyes that have been driving me crazy since we were kids.

"About how different today could have gone. About what would have happened if Derek had won."

Her face goes serious, the way it does whenever the custody case comes up. Even now, even with the victory fresh and final, the fear hasn't completely left her eyes.

"But he didn't win." She stands, moves toward me. "He lost. Completely and permanently."

"He lost because he showed the court exactly who he is. A man who sees children as possessions instead of people." I reach for her, pull her against my chest, need the contact to calm the protective rage that still simmers whenever I think about Derek's testimony. "A man who abandoned you and Emma when you needed him most."

"A man who's never going to hurt Tommy again." Lisa's voice is fierce, certain. "Because Tommy has you now. He has us."

The word 'us' does something warm and dangerous to my chest. Us. A unit. A family that no court, lawyer, or manipulative bastard can break apart.

"Lisa." I frame her face with my hands to make sure she's looking at me. "I have a confession to make."

"What?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Today wasn't just about keeping Tommy. Today was about proving that what we have is real, that this family we've built deserves to be protected." My voice goes rough with emotion. "Today was about showing the world that I love you more than anything, that I'd fight anyone who tried to hurt you or take what's ours."

She's quiet for a moment, studying my face like she's trying to memorize it.

"I know," she says finally. "I saw the way you looked at Derek in that courtroom. Like you wanted to tear him apart with your bare hands."

"I did want to tear him apart. Still do." The admission comes out darker than I intended. "The way he talked about you, about Tommy, like you were obstacles to be managed instead of people to be loved. It took every ounce of self-control I have to let the legal system handle it."

"But you did let them handle it. Because you knew that was the right way, the way that would keep our family together."

"Our family," I repeat the words like a prayer. "God, Lisa, I love the sound of that."

She smiles, the first truly relaxed smile I've seen from her in weeks. "Me too."

The bath is still running, steam continuing to fill the air around us, but I can't bring myself to care about anything except the woman in my arms. The woman who's finally, permanently, unshakeably mine.

"The water's going to overflow," she says, but she doesn't move to turn it off.

"Let it." I lean down to kiss her neck, taste the salt and vanilla sweetness of her skin.
"I have more important things to worry about right now."

"Like what?"

"Like showing my wife how much I love her. Like celebrating the fact that we won, that our family is safe, that Derek Morrison is never going to threaten what's ours again."

She shivers at the possessiveness in my voice, her hands fisting in my shirt.
"Sawyer..."

"Like making love to Mrs. McKenna until she screams my name and forgets everything except how good we are together."

The promise makes her breathing change, makes her pupils dilate with want and need and the same desperate hunger that's been eating at me since the moment we walked out of that courthouse.

"The bath..."

"Can wait." I lift her onto the bathroom vanity, step between her knees, claim her mouth in a kiss that's part celebration and part possession and completely overwhelming.

She responds immediately, her arms coming around my neck, her legs wrapping around my waist like she's been waiting for this moment as long as I have. Like she needs the physical connection as much as I do, needs to feel that this is still real and permanent and ours.

When I break the kiss to trail my mouth down her throat, she arches against me, her

head falling back to give me better access.

"I was so scared," she whispers. "When Derek was testifying, when his lawyer was painting me as an unfit guardian, I was terrified that I was going to lose everything."

"Never." The word comes out rough. "You're never going to lose me, never going to lose Tommy, never going to lose this family we've built."

"Promise?"

"I promise." I seal the words with another kiss, harder this time, more desperate. "You're mine, Lisa McKenna. You and Tommy both. Mine to love, mine to protect, mine to keep safe from bastards like Derek Morrison."

"Yours," she agrees, and the breathless way she says it makes me want to beat my chest like a caveman.

I turn off the bath water without breaking our kiss, then lift her from the vanity and carry her to our bedroom. Our bed, where I've held her every night for the past week, where I've learned every sound she makes, every spot that makes her gasp and arch beneath me.

Where I'm going to worship every inch of her until she understands exactly how much she means to me.

"Sawyer." She looks up at me as I set her down beside the bed, her green eyes dark with desire but also something deeper. Something that looks like wonder. "I can't believe this is real. I can't believe that we won, that Tommy is safe, that I get to keep you."

"You don't get to keep me." I start untying the belt of her robe, my fingers steady

despite the hunger burning through my veins. "You get to have me. Forever. There's a difference."

"What's the difference?"

"Keeping implies that you might lose me. Having means I'm yours permanently, no matter what." The robe falls away, and she's naked underneath, beautiful and mine and perfect in the lamplight. "Having means that even if you try to push me away, even if you get scared and build walls, I'm not going anywhere."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"And if I never try to push you away? If I never get scared again?"

"Then you'll still have me. Every day, every night, for the rest of our lives." I trace the line of her collarbone with one finger, feel her shiver at the touch. "You'll have a husband who loves you more than breathing, who would move mountains to make you happy."

"I love you too." The words come out soft, wondering, like she still can't quite believe she gets to say them. "I love you so much it scares me sometimes. But other times, it makes me want to be brave enough to deserve this happiness."

"Lisa." I cup her face in my hands, and make sure she can see the truth in my eyes. "You don't have to deserve happiness. You just have to accept it."

"I'm learning."

"Good. Because I plan to spend the next fifty years making you so happy you forget what sadness feels like."

"Fifty years?"

"At least. Maybe longer if the technology improves."

That earns me a laugh, bright and genuine and completely unguarded. The sound goes straight to my chest, settling in the space right next to my heart.

"I love it when you laugh," I tell her, leaning down to kiss the smile from her lips. "I

love everything about you, but your laugh might be my favorite."

"Just my laugh?"

"Well, your laugh and the way you make that soft sound when I touch you here." I demonstrate, running my thumb across the sensitive spot just below her ear, and she makes exactly the sound I was talking about.

"And the way you say my name when I do this." My hand trails lower, finding the spot that makes her breathing change, makes her grip my shoulders and arch against me.

"Sawyer." The word comes out breathless, needy, perfect.

"That's the one."

I take my time undressing, let her watch as I reveal skin she's already explored, muscles she's already mapped with her hands and mouth. The hunger in her eyes, the way she looks at me like I'm everything she's ever wanted, makes me feel ten feet tall and completely invincible.

When I finally join her on the bed, when I cover her body with mine and feel her soft curves fit perfectly against my hard angles, it's like coming home.

"I used to dream about this," I confess against her neck. "About having you in my bed, in my life, in my arms like this."

"What did you dream?"

"That you'd look at me the way you're looking at me right now. Like I'm worth loving." I kiss my way down her throat, across her collarbone, lower. "That you'd

trust me enough to let me take care of you."

"I do trust you." Her hands thread through my hair, holding me close. "I trust you with everything."

"Good." I look up at her, see the love and trust and desire written clearly across her face. "Because I'm going to take care of you for the rest of my life."

I show her exactly what that promise means.

I worship every inch of her skin, learn all over again what makes her gasp and moan and arch beneath me. I take my time, make it good for her, and make sure she knows how precious she is to me.

When she finally falls apart in my arms with my name on her lips like a prayer, it's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

Afterward, we lie tangled together in the lamplight, her head on my chest, her breathing slowly returning to normal. The house is quiet around us, peaceful in a way that speaks of safety and permanence and home.

"Sawyer?" Her voice is soft, and satisfied.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"For fighting for us. For fighting for Tommy. For making me believe that love can win against money and connections and all the Derek Morrisons of the world."

"Love doesn't just win, sweetheart. Love conquers. Love claims. Love protects what's precious and destroys anything that tries to hurt it." I press a kiss to the top of her head. "And I love you and Tommy more than anything in this world."

"More than your job?" She teases.

"More than my job."

"More than your brothers?"

"More than my brothers, though, don't tell them I said that."

She laughs, the sound vibrating against my chest. "More than your truck?"

"Definitely more than my truck. Though that's a really nice truck."

"Good to know where I rank."

"You rank first, Lisa. In everything. Always." I tighten my arms around her, hold her close. "You and Tommy are my priority, my purpose, my reason for getting up in the morning."

She's quiet for a moment, and when she speaks again, her voice is thick with emotion.

"I never thought I could have this. A real marriage, a real family, a man who loves me the way you do." She lifts her head to look at me. "I thought that kind of happiness was for other people."

"It's for you too. It's for us." I brush her hair back from her face. "And this is just the beginning. We have years ahead of us, decades of mornings like this, of Tommy growing up surrounded by love, of building a life together."

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

As we drift off to sleep in each other's arms, I make a silent promise to Emma, wherever she is. I promise to love her son like my own, to give him the life she dreamed of, to make sure he never doubts how much he's wanted and cherished.

And I promise to love her sister with everything I have, to protect the family we've built, to spend every day proving that some things are worth fighting for.

That love really can conquer everything.

Even Derek Morrison and his expensive lawyers and his blood money.

Love wins.

We win.

And this is just the beginning of forever.

EPILOGUE

LISA

Two Years Later

"Mama, up!" Tommy's voice carries across the backyard where he's been "helping" Sawyer build a new chicken coop, his little hands covered in sawdust and his dark hair sticking up in every direction.

My two-year-old son runs toward me with the determined waddle of a toddler who has places to be and people to see, his overalls already dirty from his morning adventures. He's talking constantly now, a steady stream of observations and demands and the kind of logic that only makes sense to someone who's just figured out that words have power.

"Up, Mama!" He reaches me and lifts his arms, confident that I'll drop everything to pick him up. Which, of course, I do.

"What are you and Daddy building out there?" I ask, settling him on my hip and breathing in that sweet smell of baby shampoo and outdoor adventures that always clings to him.

"Chicken house!" he announces proudly. "For eggs!"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"For eggs," I agree, smiling at his enthusiasm. "Are you being a good helper?"

"Best helper!" His face is serious, like this is the most important job in the world.

"Daddy says so."

I look over at my husband, who's standing in the partially constructed frame of what will eventually house the chickens he insists we need for "fresh eggs and self-sufficiency." His flannel shirt is rolled up to his elbows, revealing forearms that still make my mouth go dry, and there's sawdust in his dark hair.

He catches me looking and grins, the same smile that's been making my knees weak for twenty-two years.

"How's our best helper doing?" he calls out, wiping his hands on a rag.

"He's doing great, but I think he needs a snack and a nap." I bounce Tommy gently.

"Someone has been very busy this morning."

"No nap!" Tommy protests immediately, because naps are clearly a conspiracy designed by parents to ruin all the fun. "More building!"

"The building will still be here after you rest," Sawyer says, walking over to us. "And Daddy needs a break too."

This is a lie. Sawyer McKenna could probably build chicken coops for twelve hours straight without breaking a sweat. But he's learned that sometimes the best way to convince a stubborn toddler to do something is to make it seem like the adults need it

too.

"Will you read me the truck book?" Tommy asks, already negotiating. "The one with the big trucks?"

"I'll read you the truck book if you take a good nap," Sawyer promises, reaching out to ruffle Tommy's hair. "Deal?"

"Deal!" Tommy reaches for Sawyer, and I transfer him over to his father's arms. The easy way they interact, the complete trust and love between them, still makes my chest tight with emotion.

Two years ago, Tommy was a baby who barely knew Sawyer existed. Now he's a little boy who calls him Daddy without hesitation, who runs to him when he's hurt, who insists on helping with every project and mimicking every gesture.

Now he's completely and utterly Sawyer's son in every way that matters.

"Mrs. McKenna?" Sawyer's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Getting that look on your face. The one that says you still can't believe this is your life."

He knows me too well. After two years of marriage, he can read my expressions like a book, knows when I'm happy or worried or just overwhelmed by how good everything turned out.

"Can you blame me? Two years ago I was a single woman living in a tiny apartment,

terrified I was going to lose Tommy to Derek. Now I'm married to the best man in Montana, living in a house I love, with a son who calls us both Mama and Daddy."

"And don't forget the chickens we're about to have," Sawyer adds solemnly.

"How could I forget the chickens?" I laugh, standing on my toes to kiss him. "Though I still think six chickens might be excessive for a family of three."

"Four," Tommy announces from Sawyer's arms.

"Four?" I look between my husband and son, confused.

"Baby," Tommy says seriously, like he's explaining something obvious. "Baby in Mama's tummy."

My heart stops. Literally stops beating for a full three seconds while I process what my two-year-old just said.

"Tommy, sweetheart, there's no baby in Mama's tummy." I keep my voice calm, even though my pulse is suddenly racing. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Daddy told me." Tommy looks at Sawyer with complete confidence. "Daddy says baby comes for Christmas."

I turn to stare at my husband, who's looking remarkably calm for a man whose toddler just announced my pregnancy before I knew about it myself.

"Sawyer McKenna, what exactly did you tell him?"

"I told him that Santa might bring us a special present for Christmas this year. A baby brother or sister." Sawyer's blue eyes are dancing with mischief and something that

looks suspiciously like smugness. "I told him we'd have to wait and see."

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"But I'm not..." I start to say, then stop. Because suddenly I'm thinking about how tired I've been lately, how emotional I got yesterday when a commercial about puppies made me cry, how I've been craving foods I normally hate.

"When was your last period, sweetheart?" Sawyer's voice is gentle, patient, like he's talking to a spooked animal.

I try to remember, counting back days and weeks, and realize with growing shock that it's been almost two months.

"Oh my God." The words come out as barely a whisper. "Oh my God, Sawyer, I think... I might actually be..."

"Pregnant," he finishes, and the satisfaction in his voice is unmistakable. "Yeah, I figured that out about a week ago."

"I was going to say pre-menopausal," I protest. "Sawyer, I'm forty-eight years old. The odds of pregnancy are pretty darn low. Besides, did you say you've suspected this for a whole week? And you didn't tell me?"

"I was waiting for you to figure it out yourself. But then this morning Tommy started asking when the baby was coming, and I realized my son is more observant than his mother."

My son. Even now, even after two years, hearing Sawyer refer to Tommy that way makes my heart swell.

"But how did Tommy know?" I look at our son, who's watching this conversation with the intense focus of someone trying to understand adult mysteries.

"Kids know things," Sawyer says simply. "Animals too. Have you noticed how the cat's been following you around lately? How she keeps trying to sleep on your stomach?"

Now that he mentions it, Patches has been unusually clingy lately. And Tommy has been more cuddly than usual, always wanting to sit on my lap, always patting my belly when he hugs me.

"I need to take a test," I say, the reality starting to sink in. "I need to know for sure."

"Already got one." Sawyer reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a pregnancy test still in its box. "Figured you'd want to confirm what we already know."

"You bought a pregnancy test?"

"Yesterday. Along with prenatal vitamins and a book about what to expect when you're expecting your second child."

I stare at him, this man who somehow knew I was pregnant before I did, who's already planning for a baby I just found out might exist.

"You're very sure of yourself, Sheriff McKenna."

"I'm sure of us. I'm sure of our family. I'm sure that whatever happens, we can handle it together." He shifts Tommy to one arm and reaches for me with the other. "But yeah, I'm pretty sure you're pregnant. Call it husband's intuition."

"And how do you feel about that? About the possibility of another baby?"

His answer is immediate, certain, completely unshakeable. "I feel like the luckiest man alive. I feel like we're about to get even more blessed than we already are."

"Even though it means less sleep, more chaos, twice as much work?"

"Even though it means all of that." He leans down to kiss me, soft and sweet and full of promise. "Lisa, two years ago I thought I'd never have a family. Now I have a wife I love more than breathing, a son who calls me Daddy, and possibly another baby on the way. If that's not worth losing some sleep over, I don't know what is."

"Baby!" Tommy announces again, patting my stomach with his small hand. "Christmas baby!"

"Maybe a Christmas baby," I correct, even though something deep in my bones tells me that my two-year-old and my husband are right. "We have to take a test first to know for sure."

But even as I say the words, I'm already imagining it. Another crib in the nursery, another high chair at the kitchen table, another little voice calling for Mama and Daddy. Tommy as a big brother, protective and proud and probably a little jealous at first.

Sawyer holding a newborn, looking at me like I've given him the world all over again.

Our family growing, expanding, becoming even more than I ever dreamed possible.

"Test first," Sawyer agrees, but his voice carries the same certainty I'm feeling. "But Lisa, whether it's this month or next month or sometime in the future, we're going to have more children. I want to fill this house with babies who look like you and call me Daddy."

"How many babies exactly?"

"As many as you have in your tummy." The possessive satisfaction in his voice makes my pulse quicken. "Two, three, maybe four if you're feeling generous."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:56 pm

"Four children?" The number makes my head spin.

"Four McKennas running around, driving their mother crazy and keeping their father busy building chicken coops and tree houses and whatever else they need." He grins at the image. "Tommy teaching his little brothers and sisters how to fish, how to climb trees, how to be brave and kind and strong."

The picture he's painting is so vivid, so appealing, that I can almost see it. A house full of children with Sawyer's blue eyes and stubborn chins, a yard full of laughter and adventure and the kind of chaos that comes from a family that's too big and too loud and absolutely perfect.

"Nap time," Tommy announces, apparently bored with our conversation about theoretical siblings. "Truck book now."

"Truck book now," Sawyer agrees, shooting me a look that promises we'll continue this conversation later. "Come on, buddy. Let's get you settled."

As I watch my husband carry our son toward the house, talking quietly about trucks and naps and the sandwich we'll make for lunch, I press my hand to my still-flat stomach and wonder if there really is a baby growing inside me.

A baby created from love and trust and the kind of happiness I never thought I deserved.

A baby who will grow up in this house, on this mountain, surrounded by family and safety and more love than any child could possibly need.

A Christmas baby, if Tommy's prediction is right.

Twenty minutes later, I'm staring at two pink lines on a pregnancy test, tears streaming down my face while Sawyer holds me against his chest.

"Happy tears?" he asks, though his voice suggests he already knows the answer.

"The happiest tears." I look up at him, this man who saved me and Tommy, who built us a life I never thought we could have. "We're having a baby, Sawyer."

"We're having a baby," he agrees, and the wonder in his voice matches my own.

"Tommy's going to be a big brother."

"The best big brother. He's going to teach this baby everything he knows about trucks and building and being part of the McKenna family."

"The McKenna family." I say the words like a prayer. "Our family."

"Our family," he confirms, leaning down to kiss me. "Growing and perfect and ours."

As he holds me in our bathroom, with our son napping down the hall and our unborn baby safe inside me, I think about how far we've come from that desperate morning two years ago when I asked him to marry me.

I think about Derek Morrison, who's hopefully living a miserable life somewhere far away from here. About Emma, who I like to think is watching over us from wherever she is, proud of the life we've built for her son.

About love winning over money and manipulation and fear.

About dreams coming true in ways you never expect.

About the family I found when I thought I'd lost everything.

And about the man holding me now, who loved me for twenty years before he ever got the chance to tell me, who fought for us when I didn't know how to fight for myself.

Who's about to be the father of two children and couldn't look happier about it if he tried.

"I love you, Sawyer McKenna," I whisper against his chest.

"I love you too, Lisa McKenna. You and Tommy and this baby we're going to have." His arms tighten around me. "I love this whole beautiful, chaotic, perfect life we've built."

"Even when there are four kids running around driving us crazy?"

"Especially then."

And as I stand in my husband's arms, in the house that's become our home, listening to our son sleep peacefully down the hall while our unborn baby grows safely inside me, I know with absolute certainty that this is exactly where I belong.

This is exactly the life Emma would have wanted for Tommy.

This is exactly the love story I never thought I'd get to live.

This is our happily ever after.

And it's only just beginning.