



Some Cowboys Brave the Flames

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Description: Charlie Keagan has always been the one to stand on her own, but facing her old insecurities isn't easy—especially when it comes to Mason “Ash” Ashton, the rugged smokejumper who disappeared from her life after a single, unforgettable kiss. Ash was her brother's best friend, the one guy she could never have... but also the only one she ever wanted.

Now, years later, Ash is back in town, filling her thoughts with memories she'd tried so hard to bury. He's still just as protective, and that fire in his eyes still sparks whenever they're together. But with the danger of his job—and her brothers watching their every move—Ash knows better than to get involved with the Keagan family's youngest.

But staying away from Charlie isn't as easy as it sounds. Because some flames refuse to be extinguished, no matter how hard he tries.

Total Pages (Source): 69

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

1

Michael “Ash” Ashton

Six Years Ago

Save me.

Ash snorted at the text from his best friend. Mason Keagan was a lot of things, but he wasn't a lady's man and hated the fact that his younger brother had become one. They'd been friends since before Ash had received his nickname. While Ash didn't mind hanging out with Liam and the girls he was usually surrounded by, he had other interests—interests similar to Mason.

Sometimes it was nice to find a good book and have a quiet night in.

There weren't many folks in Copper Creek who liked the Keagan family. They had a reputation, and people preferred to keep their distance. It could have been due to the fact that they were considered rabid children without parents to guide them. Or it could be the fact that all ten Keagan men had grown up and could intimidate a wolf out of its skin with one look.

The Keagans weren't bad at all. They protected what belonged to them fiercely—and that included their land and their siblings.

Streetlights flickered past his view as he drove along the highway leading to the Keagan property. It still got dark early, even though spring was starting to make an

appearance. Ash had little doubt that Liam had already invited several girls out to the house so they could go dancing at the club. It was his birthday, and no one could fault him for wanting to celebrate—not even Mason, who would rather gouge out his eyes than enable his younger brother’s philandering ways.

Ash shoved the gearshift into park as soon as he came to a stop in front of the house. Movement caught his attention. A figure marched back and forth in the shadows of a large tree. She wore a dress and her hands were at her sides, but by the way she paced, he could tell she wasn’t happy.

Had Liam already made a girl mad?

A chuckle escaped his throat as he pulled the keys from the ignition and pushed the door open. No wonder Mason had already pleaded for reinforcements. Ash shoved his hands into his pockets and strolled toward the poor girl, then stopped suddenly.

It wasn’t just some girl.

Charlotte Keagan didn’t look like herself at all. Gone were her braids and the hand-me-down overalls that she usually wore around the ranch. Instead, her hair had been carefully teased and curled. It fell over her shoulders in soft waves, drawing his eyes to the low-cut dress. Off-the-shoulder straps clung to her upper arms, and the dress flared at the waist before ending at her lower thigh—an outfit that Ash knew her brothers hadn’t seen yet or they would have made her change.

He’d never seen her made up like this before. It was almost hard to remember that she was just Charlie—Mason’s kid sister.

She stopped her pacing, a gasp tearing from her throat when she realized he was standing there. The surprise was quickly replaced with a flat look. She folded her arms across her chest. “Mason is inside if you’re looking for him.”

Ash couldn't tear his eyes from her. His mouth was suddenly dry, and a subtle warmth started in his lower stomach and was spreading throughout his entire body. He wouldn't say that Charlie wasn't attractive before. He'd heard her brothers make comments about having to keep guys from asking her out. He wouldn't even say that she had improved herself with these changes—quite the contrary. She'd merely enhanced what was already there.

“Ash,” Charlie snapped, drawing his attention back to her face. She tapped her foot, and her brows lifted. “What’s your problem?”

He stiffened and motioned to her with a fling of his arm. “I could say the same thing about you.”

Charlie huffed as only a sixteen-year-old could. She was six years his junior, which was only the second most important reason she was off-limits to him. The first was that he was Mason's friend, and he knew the guy, along with his brothers, would burn the world down if anyone hurt their sister.

Charlie clenched her hands into fists and resumed her pacing. “Boys are so frustrating.”

He smirked, a chuckle escaping his chest. “You’re not wrong.”

In the distance, thunder rumbled through the sky. Lightning flickered, too, matching Charlie's electric fury.

Charlie spun around to face him. “Why?”

“Why what?” He moved toward the tree and leaned against the trunk. As hard as he tried, he couldn't ignore the feelings that had started churning within him. It felt wrong and, at the same time, addictive to imagine getting to know her on a more

personal level. He shrugged that thought aside and forced himself to listen to her rant.

“He’s the one who asked me out. Not me! Him. He wanted to take me out mini golfing, and I was going to say no.”

Ash’s eyes trailed over her body, and he arched a brow. “You were going to go golfing in that?”

Her cheeks flushed, and she glowered at him. “There’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing.”

He shrugged, though he knew exactly what she’d been trying to do. She’d dressed for this guy—this idiot who didn’t realize he’d regret bailing on her. Irritation raced through his chest, hating that Charlie had been treated this way. “Your brothers don’t know, do they?”

“Why would they care?” she shot back.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

He gave her a pointed look, not missing the hesitation in her face. But then she allowed her fury to return. Only this time, sadness joined the party. Tears pooled in her eyes, and she folded her arms tight across her body. “I was dumb to think that the cute guy in school would be interested in taking me out.”

Ash pushed away from the tree, his own anger growing. “Hey!” he barked.

She jumped and looked up at him with wariness. He’d never used that tone with her or anyone else. It had come out of nowhere. And now she stood stiff like she was preparing to bolt from him—or maybe take a swing at him. It could have gone either way.

He strode toward her, his voice low. “All sixteen-year-old boys are immature. You might as well get used to that now because they don’t start wising up for a few years. They have to lose out on a few good ones before?—”

Raindrops exploded against the roof of the house, Ash’s truck, and the ground that surrounded them. Charlie gasped, the tree not giving them any coverage since the leaves hadn’t come in fully. She ducked her head and took off running toward the house. She avoided the porch steps and chose instead to dart around to the side.

Ash groaned and followed after her. He probably should have just let her go, but their conversation wasn’t over. It was clear she’d changed who she was to impress this guy, and that didn’t sit right with Ash. Her brothers would only berate her for her desire to impress some teenager. Ash was the only one who might be able to convince her that she had made a mistake.

He found her pressed against the wall, her skin covered in goosebumps as she stared up at the sky with disdain. “Great,” she muttered. “Now my hair is ruined.”

Biting back a smirk, Ash leaned against the side of the house beside her. The makeup she wore was smudged beyond repair, and she still looked just as beautiful as ever.

He clenched his jaw and balled his own hands into fists at the inappropriate thought. She was a minor. He was an adult. And up until tonight, she’d only ever been his best friend’s kid-sister. Maybe the universe was out to get him.

Ash glanced over to her, studying her in the moonlight. He wanted to wipe the mascara from under her lashes. He wanted to tell her that she didn’t have to change for anyone—especially some punk kid. He would know because he used to be one.

But he refrained.

Charlie heaved a shivering sigh and turned her head to look at him. “It’s probably my fault,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry, what?” The edge returned to his voice just like that, but thankfully she didn’t notice.

She shrugged. “I’ve never cared about my appearance before. He probably thought he’d get here and I’d still look...” Charlieshook her head, her cheeks flushing as she motioned to her body. “I don’t wear dresses. I don’t wear makeup. I don’t try to be pretty.”

Ash practically vibrated with fury. His whole body had gone tense. Every muscle was strained, and he felt like he’d been coiled tight like a spring under pressure. He didn’t have any sisters, but if he had, he would have made sure to tell them they didn’t owe anything to anyone. They shouldn’t feel the need to change themselves just because

they want to impress a guy. His silence must have indicated that he wasn't interested in their conversation because she started to move away. She couldn't have been more wrong.

Charlie pushed away from the house, but his hand reached out to stop her. He grabbed her upper arm—gently but firmly—and turned her to face him. His other hand wrapped around her other arm as he glowered into her face, his nose inches from his own. “Don’t,” he growled.

Her eyes flared wide. “What?—”

“Don’t plant those thoughts into your head.”

They stood in the rain, but he couldn't care less. Understanding flooded her face and she rolled her eyes. “You’re not my brother, Ash. And you’re not Kevin, so you don’t know anything.” Charlie shook her head, her face scrunching with visible pain. “You want to know the worst part? I thought he actually liked me. I thought for once I’d met someone who could accept me for who I am.” She was almost shouting through the rain now. Her eyes blinked away the droplets that clung to her lashes. “I’ve never even been kissed! Did you know that? What sixteen-year-old has never been kissed? I must be really low on the scale for Kevin to change his mind and ghost me.” Charlie snorted with derision. “He’s not even the hottest guy in our grade.” She shifted as if she were going to pull away again.

Ash didn't know what had gotten into him in that moment. Every logical reason why he needed to keep her at arm's length completely disintegrated. No longer did he care if Mason would murder him or if the sheriff would show up at his door to lock him up. The most important thing at this moment was showing Charlie that she was wrong.

He released one of her arms and slipped his hand along her jaw, pushing it behind the

nape of her neck. Ash barely registered a soft gasp that escaped her lips before he brushed a kiss to them.

He'd kissed plenty of women in his lifetime. Those interactions ranged from quick pecks to more passionate sessions. But kissing Charlie was something entirely different than he'd ever experienced in his life. Their kiss was as short as it was tender. Her lips were soft and cool from the rain. The moment his lips met hers, that pleasant warmth deep inside him burst to life. Like someone had thrown a flammable substance over glowing embers, creating a roaring bonfire.

Ash pulled back, but his hand lingered at the base of her neck. They stared into each other's eyes. For a moment he could see a future with her, but then that idea came crashing down as the realization of what he'd done hit him like a bullet to the chest.

She appeared to be in shock. No anger or indignation in her eyes, though. Just surprise.

As if driven by a force that wasn't his own, he tucked her wet hair behind her ear. "You're perfect, Charlie," he whispered. "Just the way you are. Don't change yourself for anyone." He took a sudden step back, the cold encompassing him. Then he pushed past her and strode toward his truck.

He'd rather die than look Mason in the eye after what he'd just done. It wasn't only the fact that he'd crossed the line. No, this situation was different. Somehow Ash knew nothing would ever compare to what he'd just experienced with Charlie.

2

Charlotte "Charlie" Keagan

Present Day

Charlie touched her lips. It wasn't the first time in the last six years that she'd recalled her first kiss. For the past five months, the memories had consumed her more than usual—ever since Ash returned to town. It certainly didn't help that Ash had started hanging out with her brother Daniel lately—probably because Mason was usually busy running his own ranch.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

After Ash had kissed her that night, he avoided coming around the house. At first, he told Mason he was busy. Then Mason had met Harriet, and their friendship had taken a backseat.

Charlie couldn't deny that she'd been disappointed. That kiss had haunted her dreams for the next several months. Every kiss she'd received was compared to it, and none of them measured up.

Ash had ruined her for everyone.

"Charlie? You okay?" Isabelle nudged her leg. They sat on the front porch steps while Isabelle's oldest brother, Mateo, spoke with Hudson and Caleb. It made sense that they'd all gotten to be a little closer over the last couple of years. It seemed like Caleb was interested in getting involved in the business side of things when it came to ranch dogs. Mateo was happy to oblige. "Charlie," Isabelle said more forcefully this time. "What is up with you?"

Shame was a constant companion these days, along with Charlie's obsessive thoughts of Ash. She hadn't breathed a word to anyone about the kiss she'd shared with her brother's friend. She'd known what her brothers would have done if they'd found out, and Charlie didn't want to be the start of a war. She forced a smile at her friend. "Yeah, why?"

Isabelle frowned. "You're a terrible liar, you know that?"

Charlie scoffed and pushed her friend on the shoulder. "Am not."

“So, what’s going on? You look like you’ve been visited by three ghosts or something.”

Ironic. Ash had returned to Copper Creek at Christmastime. He barely spoke two words to her. It wasn’t fair. He’d gone on living his life, free from the consequences of his actions. And she went on living and wishing to find someone—anyone—who could come close to the way he’d made her feel that night.

She’d ignored his request to never change, but she could still hear his husky voice as if he were standing right in front of her.

You’re perfect, Charlie. Just the way you are. Don’t change yourself for anyone.

After that night, she’d thrown out all the hand-me-downs she could afford to, and she’d raided her older sister’s closet. She’d watched tutorial after tutorial to learn how to do her makeup just right. Ash wasn’t going to dictate what she did with herself.

Besides, he’d been willing to kiss her when she looked more like a girl. As much as she didn’t want to associate the changes she’d made with one of the biggest moments of her life, she couldn’t help it.

For the next year and a half, she’d done everything she could to get his attention whenever they bumped into each other.

It never worked. She might as well have never existed.

“You’re scowling again,” Isabelle murmured. “Did something happen? Is it a boy?”

Charlie stiffened and glanced at her friend. “No,” she said too quickly.

Isabelle’s smile spread slow and wide. “It is a boy.”

A groan slipped from Charlie's lips and she dug her fingers into her scalp. She was still furious with Mason for not telling her that Ash was moving back to town. She was even more upset that Daniel had befriended the guy so quickly.

But most of all, she was mad at herself for allowing the jealousy to crawl and twist in her chest like choking vines. Liam still had connections and wanted to set Ash up with all the girls he could. Charlie had lost count of how often Liam had brought it up, but each time Charlie eavesdropped on those conversations, Ash would turn him down.

No blind dates. It was his rule.

At that moment a familiar truck pulled up, and Ash climbed out.

"Oooh. He's cute..." Isabelle drawled.

Charlie gritted her teeth. Ash was more than cute. He was the kind of guy to be splashed all over a calendar just so a girl would buy it to catch a glimpse of his chiseled abs. He'd taken off his shirt once when helping Daniel with some chores, and Charlie had choked on the water she'd been drinking. Unfortunately, her body language gave her away.

Charlie could sense that Isabelle was going to prod about the mystery guy who was causing the frown on her face, but thankfully, Mateo called Isabelle over.

"Come on, sis. We have to get back to take the dogs on a ride."

Isabelle groaned.

"I thought you liked riding?" Charlie said.

Isabelle got to her feet and stared hard at Charlie. “For once there’s something more interesting going on here.” She took a step, then paused and glanced at Charlie. “You realize that we’re going to have a chat the next time I come over.”

“Hey, Charlie,” Ash said, his voice low, delicious, and rumbling over every nerve of her body. “Daniel around?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

Isabelle grinned and wagged her brows at Charlie, who made a face at her.

Ash glanced over to Isabelle, then back to Charlie.

“He’s inside,” she muttered.

He nodded and moved past her. Just like that. Just like he hadn’t been the one to change her life. Just like he’d never stolen and gifted her with the best kiss she’d ever experienced.

Isabelle laughed.

“Isabelle!” Mateo called.

She groaned again. “I’mcoming!”

Charlie sighed just as the front door shut behind her. She needed to head inside to start cooking dinner. With her luck, the guys would be in the kitchen ruining their appetites with some late-afternoon snacks. Maybe she should just go to her room and pretend she wasn’t there. Those who were here could fend for themselves.

She placed her head into her hands and a strangled sound escaped her lips. Who was she kidding? Cooking was her release. With all this pent-up energy rippling through her body, she knew she wasn’t going to handle just stewing in her room.

Just as she’d suspected, Daniel, Liam, and Ash were all lounging in the kitchen when she entered. She moved to the refrigerator and pulled out the ingredients to make

some spaghetti. It would be easy enough, and she wouldn't have to focus too much. The guys were in the middle of a conversation when she moved to the pantry to pull out a glass jar of tomato sauce.

"I'm telling you, Ash. This girl is amazing. She's a paramedic. You'd like her."

Ash laughed. "Thanks, but like I said, I'm not interested."

"Why not? You're almost thirty. You can't just sit around and wait for a girl to find you. Maybe I'll just invite her over so she's here when you come to visit next," Liam joked. His phone rang and he picked it up. "One sec."

Just as Liam reached the doorway, Ash called out to him, "Don't bother. I've already got a girl."

Glass shattered. Sauce splattered at Charlie's feet. She blinked, and everything felt like it was going in slow motion. Daniel and Ash jumped up from where they sat at the table.

Charlie dropped down to start picking up the shards.

"I'll go find the mop," Daniel offered. "I think I saw it upstairs."

Ash nearly bumped his head against hers when he crouched down beside her to pick up the broken glass. He was close—tooclose. He smelled the same—like mint with lemons. Something else lingered on him. Smoke? Like he'd been tending to a campfire.

Then it hit her why she was down on her knees in the first place.

Ash was dating someone. She hated how her stomach had the jitters. Of course he

was dating someone. Why wouldn't he be? She'd seen how hot he was. She knew what it was like to kiss him.

Her face flushed when she realized he was talking to her. "Are you okay? Charlie? What happened?"

She rose and dumped her palm full of the larger pieces into the garbage can, ignoring his question. Then a gasp ripped from her chest as a shard snagged on her skin.

He was by her side in a second. His hand wrapped around her wrist. "You're cut."

Charlie attempted to tug her hand free from him, but his hold on her was too strong. He practically tugged her toward the sink. In a swift movement, he turned on the water. Then he ran her hand under the faucet. She watched him, studied him. This was the closest she'd been to him in five months, then nearly six years before that.

He looked the same—just a little older and wiser. Smile lines framed his eyes. He was clean-shaven, unlike her brothers who preferred to have at least a little scruff on their faces. His hair was a little long and it curled at the nape of his neck.

Ash glanced closer at her, and she gasped before turning her focus on her hand. He said, "Doesn't look like you're going to need stitches. But you'll want to keep it clean." His touch lingered on her, and she glanced up to meet his steady gaze.

"I've had worse." The words slipped from her lips unheeded. She hated how her tone made them sound more accusatory than anything else. With a jerk of her arm, she pulled her hand free. "I'm getting a bandage." With that, she left the room. Her heart thundered with each step she took. Her blood roared in her ears, and if she wasn't careful, she'd end up collapsed on the floor.

By the time she returned, Ash and Daniel had the mess cleaned up. Liam was

sprawled out on a chair at the kitchen table, and they were all chatting again.

“I was thinking it’d be nice to do something special for her,” Ash said, not even looking in Charlie’s direction.

“Like what? Take her dancing?” Daniel asked.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

Ash shook his head, leaning over to rest his forearms on his knees. “Like something that shows I’m in it, you know? I don’t get to spend a lot of time with her.”

Liam snorted. “Because you’re here with us.”

Ash rolled his eyes. “No,” he drawled, “Because she’s not in Copper Creek.”

Daniel spoke next. “What does she like?”

Charlie’s ears burned as she listened to the conversation. She wanted to be sick, and it didn’t even make sense. She barely even knew Ash anymore. And he probably didn’t want anything to do with her.

“Food,” Ash offered. “She likes a good meal.”

The men grew quiet for a few moments. Then Liam snapped his fingers. “I know what you could do. It’s perfect.”

Charlie glanced over her shoulder toward them. Whoever this girl was, she had to be the luckiest woman in the world. She had the love of a guy who wanted to do something special to show his love for her. Not only that, but she had a guy who looked like him.

“You should learn how to cook something for her. And I’m not saying an easy meal. I’m saying make it worth it. Learn how to do three courses minimum.”

Ash chuckled. “I wouldn’t know the first place to start with something like that.”

“Charlie could teach you.”

If Charlie had been holding another jar of sauce, it too would have been shattered. Thankfully, she’d been digging for some pans under the countertop. Her hands froze, and the room went utterly still. She would have sold her soul to know what was happening. She couldn’t see any of their faces.

Then a pair of dark eyes peered down at her over the side of the island, and her heart skipped. “What do you say, Charlie? Want to teach me everything you know?”

3

Ash

Ash was torturing himself, and he knew it. He’d played off Liam perfectly. Did he have a girlfriend? Nope. Did he want an excuse to spend time with Charlie? Absolutely. And he was willing to do it despite knowing she was completely off-limits.

He watched her, studied her, and drank her in like he had been deprived of water while in the desert. Ash didn’t miss the way her eyes widened nor the way her skin flushed. She didn’t want to have anything to do with him.

Could he blame her? He’d practically stolen her first kiss nearly six years ago. Based on the fact that he hadn’t been torn to shreds by her brothers, he would bet that she hadn’t said anything. Ash had done what made sense. He’d disappeared, hoping that distance would be enough to get her out of his head.

He’d been wrong.

Daniel, Liam and Ash still stared at her expectantly. Then Liam chuckled. “Earth to

Charlie.”

She blinked, and her eyes shifted to Liam as if still in a daze.

Liam waved a hand from side to side and a frown touched his lips. “Seriously, Charlie. Are you okay?”

She nodded sharply. “Fine. I’m... fine.”

Still her brothers stared at her. Neither one of them knew her reasons for hesitating, but Ash did. The awkward tension had only heightened since he’d come back to town. While initially he’d done his best to avoid her—to give her space—he couldn’t take it any longer. She didn’t have a boyfriend. And as far as he could tell, she wasn’t interested in dating either.

Ash cleared his throat, and Charlie’s eyes darted from her brother to lock with his. She blinked, then jolted as if returning to the moment. “Yeah, sure. I can teach you a few things.”

Liam appeared to be content with her answer. He nodded and turned to Daniel to discuss setting him up instead.

Charlie turned her back to them, but Ash didn’t miss how stiff she’d become. She was just as beautiful as he’d remembered—more so even. She’d shed her tomboy preferences for subtle makeup and clothing that accentuated her slender waist and curvy hips. Most of the time she had her dark hair pulled back into a bun atop her head, with wisps framing her face.

But it was her eyes that he dreamed about. Those blue eyes that had stared at him with surprise the night he kissed her. He could have lost himself within them, drowning in their depths. Had he stayed in Copper Creek, that was exactly what

would have happened.

He dragged his attention to Liam and Daniel. He didn't want to have to answer any questions if he got caught staring at her. The air practically hummed with electricity. He was painfully aware of every move she made, every sound that came from her lips. It took every ounce of self-control he could muster to keep his eyes on Liam.

“You gonna sign up for the bull riding at the rodeo in a few weeks?” Liam asked Daniel.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:44 pm

Charlie snorted, but she didn't join in on the conversation.

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know. Last year I didn't do that great."

"You kidding? You placed fourth." Liam glanced at Ash. "He says he's not great, but he's better than most of the locals."

"I can't beat any of the professionals."

"That's because they're idiots and make their whole life about bull riding," Charlie muttered from across the room.

All the men glanced toward her, but Liam didn't pay attention to her statement. "You have to practice more."

"Do you guys even have access to a bull you could practice with?" Ash asked.

Daniel shook his head. "Wade doesn't like it. The way they get the bulls angry enough to buck us off is to prod them."

Ash grimaced. No wonder Charlie didn't like the idea of anyone riding a bull. "Maybe you should try something else. Don't they do barrel racing or something? That sounds cool."

Liam and Daniel glanced at one another and then laughed. "That's usually mostly women barrel racing," Liam pointed out. Then he tilted his head, a smirk still on his lips. "I don't imagine there's that many women in your line of work. I can't imagine

too many could drag a heavy person's body out of a house."

"Oh, I don't do that," Ash said with a chuckle.

Daniel and Liam exchanged glances, and then Daniel leaned forward. "But I thought you were a firefighter."

Ash leaned back in his seat and laced his fingers behind his head. "Oh, I am, to a degree. But it's different. I'm a smoke jumper."

The brothers looked between themselves again, confusion written on their faces. "What's that?" Liam asked. "You still put out fires, right?"

The sounds from behind Ash went quiet—the pots, pans, clanking sounds disappeared. The room hung with anticipated silence from every member of the Keagan household—Charlie included.

Ash grinned. "A smoke jumper parachutes into the wildfires to put them out."

Daniel choked on his drink. "What?"

He nodded. "Yep. It's easier that way. We don't have to hike or carry our supplies with us. It's a rush."

"Sounds like it," Liam said with a grimace. "Dude, how does your girlfriend feel about it? I know Margot would kill me if the flames didn't get to me first."

Ash shrugged. "There's no issue. I love my job. She knows it's important to me." Ash couldn't see Charlie's reaction to him discussing his job, but he wouldn't imagine he was very far off. A job was a job. His just happened to be more exciting than most.

“That’s cool. Can’t wait to meet her.” Liam pushed out from the table and stood. “You staying for dinner?”

Ash glanced over to Charlie, noting that she’d gone still again. “Nah. I’ve got a TV dinner with my name on it.”

Liam wrinkled his nose. “And I have a wife who can cook for me at home, but everyone loves Charlie’s cooking. Besides, there’s plenty of room. You should stay. Margot’s on her way, too.” He called over to his sister. “Can you make enough for one more?”

Charlie glanced over her shoulder toward Liam, purposefully avoiding Ash. “Yeah. No problem.”

“See? You’re staying.” Liam clapped him on the back. “You can repay me by helping me get the horses in for the night.”

Ash chuckled with a nod. “How can I turn down that deal?”

“Easy. You can’t.”

A few horses grazing in the pasture needed to be brought in for the night. Others who were in their stalls needed some feed. Ash wasn’t a cowboy by any means, but he’d spent enough time with the Keagans that he knew how to do some of the basic stuff. They worked quietly, side by side.

Liam had to be one of the hardest workers Ash knew. He would have made a great firefighter if he wasn’t so devoted to his family. He worked for the Callahan family as well, usually only picking up chores when Wade asked him to.

It almost felt like the family had scattered to other parts since Ash had been here last.

Caleb spent more time with his wife on her smaller property or shadowing Mateo while he raised ranch dogs. Liam still worked for Zeke Callahan. Mason ran his wife's uncle's property. And Hudson preferred to work with Rachel and her horse sanctuary. That was a quarter of the family—and the guys that Ash had gotten to know the best.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Can I ask you something?” Liam’s voice shattered Ash’s musings.

“Shoot.”

“You’re here a lot.”

A smile ticked up the corners of Ash’s mouth. “That’s not really a question.”

“Okay, you’re here an awful lot for having a girlfriend.”

“Again, not a question.” Ash folded his arms and turned to Liam, who was looping a set of reins on a nearby hook.

Liam faced him and shrugged. “Why aren’t you spending time with her?” The way the guy said it made it clear he was moderately suspicious. He didn’t believe Ash had a girlfriend. It didn’t appear he was upset—rather, it felt like he was trying to figure out why Ash wasn’t interested in dating anyone.

But if Ash admitted that he didn’t, in fact, have a girlfriend, then he wouldn’t have an excuse to spend time with Charlie. Ash cocked his head. “I told you, she doesn’t live here. She lives a couple hours away.”

Liam lifted a brow. “Still, we have access to technology. You could video chat with her, you could take trips to visit on the weekend.” He rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes shifting to nothing in particular. “I get trying to do something nice for the girl you’re dating, but maybe you should start with seeing her more often.”

Ash chuckled. “Why don’t you just say it?”

“Say what?”

“You don’t think I have a girlfriend.”

His friend stared at him, giving nothing away.

Ash sighed. “Would it help if I told you more about her? She works nights and weekends as a nurse. She’s got the most beautiful dark hair and blue eyes I’ve ever seen.” Ash had meant to lie the whole way through, but his description shifted to the girl who filled his dreams. “She’s got the best laugh when she thinks something is funny. It can make even the biggest grouch chuckle.” Ash sighed. “I know we’re meant to be together.” A heaviness in his stomach tugged at him, his voice sobering.

“Sounds like you feel it’s not going to work out.” Gone was the suspicion in Liam’s voice. Instead, Ash could hear the concern. He shoved his hands in his pockets and moved closer to Ash. “What’s going on?”

Ash glanced at Liam, then shook his head with a wry smile. “I’m not sure her family would approve of us.”

Liam snorted. “Who cares what her family thinks. If you like this girl and can see yourself with her, then that’s all that matters.”

“She’s younger than me,” Ash hedged.

“How much younger?” Liam’s brows creased, and he frowned. “She’s not under eighteen, is she?”

“What? Of course not,” Ash replied. “Six years younger.” He flinched the second

he'd admitted to it. The words had fled his lips before he could restrain himself. He should have said five or seven. He didn't need Liam to put two and two together. If any one of Charlie's brothers knew about Ash's attraction to their sister... Ash didn't even want to think about what might happen.

"Six?" Liam tilted his head. "That's not too bad. You really think they wouldn't approve of your relationship?"

Slowly, Ash nodded.

His friend shrugged. "To heck with them. If she loves you and you love her, then that's all that matters. They'll get over it."

Something told him Liam would be singing a different tune if he knew Ash was talking about himself. Liam must have noticed the look of skepticism on his face because he stilled.

"Is she close to them or something?"

Ash nodded. "They're her whole world."

Liam considered this, then nodded. "I guess you only have one option."

"Which is?"

"You're going to have to win them over."

Ash chuckled. "And how do you suggest I do that?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

His friend gave him a pointed look. “You have to actually spend time with them. You can’t just show up once a month to take her out on a date. Show them you’re committed. Show them you care about her and will take care of her at all costs. These days, actions speak louder than words.”

He made a good point. But it wasn’t one that really applied in this situation. If Ash sat down with the Keagan men and Annabel to tell them he was in love with Charlie, he’d get a variety of responses. Laughter and jokes would be on the luckier side. Accusations and broken trust would be more rampant. It wouldn’t matter if he told them that he intended to keep her safe and love her unconditionally. No one was good enough for Charlie.

Part of Ash had to agree.

And yet he knew he’d claw his way through the wildfires themselves to be with her if that was what it took. She just didn’t know it yet.

4

Charlie

Winged beasts beat inside Charlie’s chest, thrashing and thundering until she couldn’t hear anything but her roaring pulse in her ears. The closer it got to her first cooking lesson, the harder it became to keep a level head.

She felt like she was going crazy. Her reactions weren’t normal. The man who’d be arriving today was just that—a man. She’d known him for years. Sure, he was

objectively attractive, and her schoolgirl crush had decided to stick around, but he was also very taken.

Charlie despised the way her body had betrayed her when he'd told Liam he was already dating someone. She knew that was a possibility. It wasn't like he would have told her about it anyway. The tiny beam of hope that had shone just a few months prior when she'd noticed just how much time he spent at her home had been eclipsed by the hard reality that he was still just her brother's friend.

"Geez, Charlie, you okay?" Daniel's voice cut into her thoughts, and she focused on him standing in the kitchen doorway. His brows were pulled tight together, and then he moved across the room and touched her forehead.

She swatted him away. "I'm fine," Charlie said.

"You look like a zombie," he said, shaking his head. "Do you even know how long you were standing there staring off into space? Maybe you should go get some rest."

"I'm fine," she snapped once more.

He lifted a brow along with both hands. "Okay, okay. You're fine." Daniel glanced around the counter at what Charlie had spread out. Today she planned on teaching Ash how to make cream cheese rangoons. They were a simple but delicious starter for almost any meal. Daniel lifted his focus to her once more and opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off.

"If you ask me if I'm okay one more time, I'm going to bite your head off." She was on edge. She could admit it. But she wasn't going to have her brothers hovering over her. It had gotten old when she was only twelve. Lately, Daniel had seemed to take on the full responsibility of making sure she didn't date anyone who was not up to their strict standards, and occasionally his helicopter nature would bleed into

everyday life.

Her brother chuckled. He was nine years older than she was and the tallest of all her brothers, towering over her five-foot-four frame a good thirteen inches. He was the most intimidating man in town—second only to Zeke Callahan. He had a couple tattoos on his arms—something Wade had disapproved of the second he'd gotten them. The ironic thing about Daniel was that while he would have been terrifying on the outside to almost anyone, his family knew just what a teddy bear he was.

Daniel was quiet. He loved old buildings and architecture. If he hadn't been born into the cowboy lifestyle, she could have seen him designing works of art in the biggest cities around the world.

Charlie smiled despite herself. "Really, I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. I'm just a little distracted." That was putting it mildly. She had no way of knowing how Ash would behave once they were alone. Everyone was busy working today—Daniel included. She didn't know why he'd come inside, but she knew he would be heading out again any second.

He motioned to the fixings for her lesson. "Are you going to save some for me?"

A wider smile streaked across her face. Out of everyone in their family, he enjoyed her food the most. He was always first in line to eat, and he almost always came back for seconds. She counted him as two people when she fixed supper, and to this day, she couldn't figure out where he put it all. "Do you even have to ask?"

Daniel beamed. "Okay, good." His concerns seemed to be forgotten, and he headed out of the house.

Charlie turned her gaze to the food on the counter, and her vision blurred as she let her thoughts be consumed by Ash again. He would be there any second. They'd be

stuck together for the next few hours, and she wasn't sure if her heart was going to handle it.

It would have to. That's what she kept telling herself. Charlie would have to suffer through the afternoon with Ash close enough to touch. She'd have to ignore all the inappropriate thoughts because he was taken. She didn't have any claim to him, and she never would.

A light knock, and her head snapped up to find Ash standing just inside the kitchen. He had one hand shoved in his pocket and stood with the majority of his weight on his right foot. A half smile tugged at one side of his mouth, but he didn't approach her yet. "Are you ready for me?"

No. She nearly blurted the word and told him he should leave—that this was a mistake and the two of them should stay far, far away from each other. But if she did that, she'd be proving that she wasn't as mature as she thought she was.

Charlie nodded, reaching for her apron off the counter. "Yeah. Come on in."

He strolled into the kitchen like he owned the world. Darn him and his confidence. Ash had always been that way, though. Come to think of it, he'd been Mason's opposite, which was why they were probably such good friends.

Charlie swallowed hard and tied her apron behind her. She turned away from him, praying he didn't notice how he affected her. Six years, and he still made her feel—small, unworthy of his attention.

"Do I get one of those?" His low voice was so close to her ear that she jumped.

A gasp ripped from her throat, and she spun to face him. "What?"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He reached out and plucked the strap that wrapped around her neck. His skin brushed against hers briefly before he released it. “An apron. You got one for me?”

She lifted her brows with amusement. “You want an apron?”

He shrugged.

Charlie snickered. “I think you’ll be fine. But if you really want one, I’m sure there’s one hanging in the pantry.” She motioned, only moderately surprised when he immediately moved in that direction. When he emerged, she let out a laugh.

Kiss the Cook was sprawled across his chest. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s time to get started,” she said, ignoring his question. “We’re making rangoons. Right there are the wraps. And we have cream cheese, chives, bacon, and imitation crab mix if you want to try out something more traditional.” She could feel his eyes on her as she got down to business. If she could get through this lesson without him talking about their past, then she’d call that a win.

“Did you ever tell anyone?”

She froze at his whispered question. Then her head snapped up, and she looked over to the door. If any of her brothers overheard what he’d said, she’d be in so much trouble. Her eyes darted to Ash. “Of course not,” she hissed. “Who do you think I am?” She should be offended by his assumption. And yet she couldn’t blame him for wondering.

Ash shifted at her side, and she ignored the way his closeness added to the tension of his pointed question. They didn't speak of anything besides the food for a good twenty minutes. But then he got a call and excused himself. It was short, and when he returned, she asked. "Work?"

He glanced over to her briefly. "Yes. I'm going to be on call next weekend."

She nodded, her mouth forming a tight line.

"What's that look for?" he asked.

Charlie glanced at him with surprise, then shook her head. "Nothing."

"That wasn't nothing," he pressed. "I know nothing, but the look you just gave me? I'd say it bordered on disgust."

Charlie placed her hands on her hips. "You really wanna know?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't," he said, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Fine. I think your job is dumb."

His brows shot up, and for a moment she thought he might get mad. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "You don't beat around the bush, do you? Wanna tell me why?"

She continued to frown, her eyes drifting to the rangoons in the pan of hot oil. "Any job that puts a life in danger isn't worth doing."

Ash tilted his head and stared at her, his expression more contemplative. "Don't you think you should be able to do something you love?"

She pressed her lips together hard until they tingled, then met his gaze once more. “I think that it’s selfish to believe that a person’s job only affects themselves. You have a girlfriend. If something were to happen to you, I’m sure she’d be devastated.”

He frowned at her. Good. She’d struck a nerve. He needed to think about others—about the people in his life who would suffer if something went wrong. But he didn’t agree with her. Nor did he argue. Instead, Ash changed the subject. “Are you seeing anyone?”

Charlie shook her head, a flush spreading across her cheeks. No one compared to him, and that meant she didn’t usually accept a second invitation for a date. “Want to tell me about her?” she asked, referring to his girlfriend.

Ash’s eyes narrowed momentarily, then he nodded. “Like I’ve said. She enjoys food—and cooking. She’s quiet but strong. The blue in her eyes could make a sane man go crazy and a crazy man turn sane.”

She bit back a smile at his last statement. “She sounds lovely.”

“She is. But she’ll never admit it. I think she doesn’t believe she’ll ever be good enough.”

His words struck a chord. Charlie knew exactly what that felt like. She could relate on so many levels to that one statement—and she hated it. She wanted to dislike whoever had stolen Ash’s heart, but knowing she was just as insecure as she was made it difficult.

“It’s nice to see that you’ve honed your cooking skills. I seem to recall you getting into it when you were fourteen. Do you think you’d like to make something more of it?”

She shrugged. “It’s great, but I’m not sure if I’d ever be good enough to run a restaurant or anything.” Then she tossed him a pointed look. “If I did, you could bet that it’d be safer than smoke jumping.”

He chuckled. “I dunno. Those knives can be pretty sharp.” He reached across her and picked up a steak knife. His hand brushed against her arm, but he didn’t seem to notice.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Unfortunately, Charlie's whole body was set aflame. She could feel the heat emanating from deep inside her bones. She stared at the spot where he'd touched her, not able to drag her gaze from it.

Only once in her life had she felt this way. And it had been with Ash.

She shook her head and closed her eyes. Nope. She wasn't going to go there. Ash had a girlfriend. He was learning to cook for her, for goodness' sake. Charlie was just his friend's kid sister, and that was all she'd ever be. It didn't matter that her body wanted to react to him. All that mattered was that he wasn't available, and she needed to respect his space.

Charlie took a step away from him and motioned toward the rangoons still in the pan. "Fish them out with that metal slotted spoon and put them on the paper towels. I'll be right back." She rushed off to the bathroom without waiting for him to make a comment. Once alone, she pressed trembling hands to her face and let out a sigh.

This whole thing was ridiculous. She was blowing it all out of proportion, and it needed to stop. She gulped in deep breath after deep breath. She'd learned to ignore him back when he'd given her that first kiss.

She could do it again.

5

Ash

Ash: Up to hang this week? I don't have any shifts.

Liam: Anytime. But not Fri. Wade wants us at an auction.

Ash stared at the message and smiled. He'd heard about the auction happening in town on Friday. Mason had mentioned it as well. Everyone in town would likely be in attendance, which meant that he had a good chance of spending time with Charlie alone.

Deep down, he knew it was a bad idea. She had a particular effect on him that was similar to what he thought drugs might be like. Whenever he got to see her—speak to her—he walked away with a high.

His crush on Charlie was supposed to be wrong, but how could it be when he felt so connected to her? It begged the question: what would he do when she inevitably fell in love with someone else—someone who wasn't him?

Ash shoved that thought away, burying it like it was a dead body he had to hide. Out of sight, out of mind. He glanced down at the message, and the grin returned to his face. He'd make sure to stop in and hang out like he usually did.

Then he'd show up on Friday.

Ash: Sounds good, man.

The Keagan household looked empty without all the trucks that were usually parked out front. Ash shut off his engine and climbed out of his truck. He glanced toward the house as he shut the door with a soft thud.

His chest tightened unexpectedly as he wondered if he was making a mistake by allowing himself to become so attached to Charlie when she had no idea of his true

feelings—nor would anything come of it. Ash could be setting himself up for failure.

Who was he kidding? Hewassetting himself up for failure.

Like all the times before, he rationalized his motives. He'd spent several years attempting to rid himself of the memory of her—of her scent, her touch, and the way she'd tasted on his lips. He'd made himself sick, wondering when he would suffer the consequences of his impulsive behavior.

Part of him had even hoped that she was involved with someone else when he'd decided to return to Copper Creek.

But as fate would have it, she was available.

Just not to him.

Ash raked a hand through his hair. He was already at the Keagan property. He might as well just see her, even if it wasonly for a few moments. Those few seconds of hearing her voice and seeing her eyes were worth the trouble.

Movement near the barn caught his attention when he'd nearly made it to the front entrance of the house. He turned, expecting to see someone who might work for the Keagans or perhaps one of the many brothers who might not have gone to the auction.

Nervous energy ripped through his body when he immediately recognized Charlie leading her horse from the barn. She was clad in a tan cowboy hat, a jeans jacket, form-fitted Levi's, and a pair of black riding boots.

Initially, she didn't notice him. She went so far as to climb into the saddle before her eyes shifted to his truck, then dragged across the yard to him. She stiffened, her gaze

locking on him as if she expected him to turn into a beast and charge at her. Then he noted the way she took in a deep breath and turned the horse in his direction.

He pasted on his usual smile—the one that he used as a mask to keep others from paying too close attention to what he might be thinking. Ash shoved his hands into his pockets and strolled toward her, his eyes never leaving her face.

When they reached one another, she stared down her nose at him, two deep lines etched between her brows. “We didn’t have a lesson, did we?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well, my brothers aren’t here.”

Ash almost thought he heard a tremor in her voice, but that didn’t seem right. She wasn’t scared of him. If anything, she might be mad—though she hadn’t seemed to portray those emotions either. Playing along, he cocked his head slightly. “They’re not? I could have sworn Liam said that he was free this afternoon.”

She frowned. “There’s an auction in town.” She glanced toward the road as if she might see them from where she sat perched on the back of her horse. “Do you want me to call him?”

Ash shook his head. “Don’t bother him. I’m sure I just got my wires crossed.” He continued to study her, watching her, drinking her in. Five minutes of talking to her was worth the trip. If anyone knew his feelings on this matter, they’d say he had an unhealthy obsession. As far as he figured it, as long as he didn’t act on it, nothing was wrong.

She shifted in her seat. Her fingers fidgeted with the reins. It was clear she was waiting for him to say something more or to get up the nerve to tell him to leave. It would be for the best. The longer he stood there watching her, the higher the chance that she might catch on and cut off their lessons.

He cleared his throat and raked a hand through his hair, but before he could take his leave, she spoke.

“I’m... going on... a ride.”

The corners of his lips quirked upward and he bit back a laugh, his eyes tracing over her and then down to the horse. “Really? I would have never guessed,” he said wryly.

She rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t hide the amusement buried in their depths. “What I’m trying to say is that you’re welcome to come along. Only if you’d like to, of course.”

He peered over to the barn through narrowed eyes, then swung his focus up to her once more. This was better than he could have ever hoped, but he couldn’t seem too eager. As nonchalantly as he could manage, he shrugged. “I could go for a ride.”

From the way Charlie remained stiff and her jaw tightened, he got the distinct feeling that she wasn’t prepared for him to take her up on her offer. Well, that was too bad. He wasn’t above accepting an invitation to spend time with her, even if it had only been offered as a form of country hospitality.

The ride was strained at first, their conversation stilted and awkward. A pair could only talk about the weather and the town gossip for so long before silence wrapped its claws around each of their throats.

He burned to ask her why she wasn’t dating anyone—or to confirm if his suspicions were correct. Heck, if it wouldn’t have made him sound like a psychopath, he would have asked her how many people she’d dated since that first kiss.

The pit in his stomach grew exponentially.

Ash couldn’t ask her those sorts of questions. He needed to start with something simpler—something to get her out of her shell and talking about things that made her happy. He wracked his brain for anything he could bring up, but nothing came to mind. They rode their horses through brush and foliage—farther and farther from her home.

He nearly brought up that one night again. The temptation was so strong that he wasn't sure he could stop himself, but then she asked her own question, and his body sagged.

“How did you meet?”

He glanced at her. There was no need to ask her who she was speaking about. She wanted to know about his fake girlfriend. Ash scratched his neck, attempting to gather his thoughts. He needed to keep the story as close to something truthful as possible so he didn't end up falling into a trap of lies—a web he could very well spin for himself. “She's related to a good friend of mine.”

Did Charlie seem a little disappointed? He couldn't tell from where they rode side by side without looking at her straight-on. “How long have you known her?”

He chuckled. “You seem awfully curious about my girlfriend.” He was avoiding answering the questions, but unfortunately his statement seemed to bolster her confidence. “I'm just curious. You've never talked about her with my brothers. How am I supposed to believe that you're telling the truth?”

He laughed, his hand coming to his chest. “You have wounded me.”

She snorted.

“Do you actually think that I would lie about something like that? What would I have to gain?” He might gain Charlie; that was who. But she didn't have to know that. Especially right now.

“Is she from Copper Creek?” That question was the most unexpected one yet. He'd told Liam about the girl when Charlie was present. She had to know the answer to that question already. But then it dawned on him that Charlie might actually be trying

to get him to fess up to something he'd lied about.

He arched a brow and noted the way she squirmed beneath his scrutiny. "Yes."

"Do I know her?"

Uh-oh. She was getting dangerously close to figuring out it was all a lie. Then she would cut him out of her life. That thought alone was enough to remind him to tread carefully. As much as he didn't want to pile on to the current lies, he would have to do so right now or risk what he had going with the Keagan household. He swallowed audibly, then looked away. "She's not local. But she grew up here. I have no clue if you knew her or not."

Charlie opened her mouth to ask yet another question, but he cut her off.

"What's with the third degree, huh? I thought we were friends."

She gave him a side-eyed stare, then turned her attention to the trail ahead. "We are," she murmured quietly.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

More of that awkward silence—but he found he far preferred it to the interrogation. Why was she so interested in his dating life anyway? He shook off his concern, then glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “You’re not at the auction.” It wasn’t a question.

She sighed. “I didn’t want to go. I’d much rather ride than go to some stuffy auction.”

He chuckled. “I could see that. The view is something else.”

Charlie lifted a brow, then snickered. “Did you even spend that much time out here?”

Ash didn’t let his eyes leave hers, his expression dead serious. “I wasn’t talking about the landscape.”

Her face flushed deeply, and her eyes darted away.

What was wrong with him! Why couldn’t he keep those particular thoughts locked inside his head when he needed to? He wasn’t a flirt by nature. At least he hadn’t been one when he was a teenager.

And definitely not after he’d kissed her. He’d called it karma—to be so consumed by another girl back home who was untouchable.

Thankfully, Charlie’s blush was the only thing that indicated she had heard his comment for what it had been. She didn’t look at him for the remainder of the ride. When they returned home, she insisted that he head out. She was going to take care of the horses herself, and he didn’t need to stick around for that part.

Ash strolled away from Charlie, out of the barn, and toward his truck. He was torn between liking the way he'd made her blush and being terrified that she would kick him to the curb. There was the very real possibility that she thought he wasn't being faithful to his pretend girlfriend. Then again, his statement could have been rationalized as being harmless.

A compliment was a compliment, right?

He'd have to be more careful from this point forward.

No goo-goo eyes.

No obvious smiles.

And no flirting.

That last one seemed all but impossible. Hopefully he'd be able to figure it out and keep it hidden in the dark recesses of his mind.

But only if he was lucky.

6

Charlie

Agentle breeze rustled the leaves in the trees overhead. Occasionally it tugged at the pages of Charlie's book, ruffling them before she placed her hand on the edge to hold them still. The words blurred as her thoughts shifted to Ash for the millionth time.

How many times had she read this page? This paragraph? Charlie closed her eyes tight, letting out a frustrated breath as she snapped the book shut. The sound was loud

in the quiet space that surrounded her.

She'd chosen a park bench that was on the far reaches of the park. Several yards away, children played on the equipment, watched over by their parents. Far off to her left, there was a track and a handful of tennis courts. The sounds of everyone who had visited the park that afternoon were muffled like she heard them through a tunnel.

Charlie kept her eyes shut as she considered how she was going to survive spending time with the one man she couldn't get out of her head since that fateful day six years ago. The kiss had been both inappropriate and innocent at the same time. She'd never felt taken advantage of by him—especially because of how he avoided her like the plague since then.

A soft groan beside her had Charlie throwing her eyes wide to glance over at a sudden intrusion as someone sat next to her. She clutched the book in her lap, ready to take off at a moment's notice. The young man looked to be about her age. He quirked a smile at her. Clad in a T-shirt and a pair of athletic pants, he leaned back and rested his arm across the back of the bench.

His eyes dipped to the book in her hand. "Is it any good?"

She followed his gaze and then let out an embarrassed laugh. "I'm not sure."

He gave her an amused grin. "How's that?"

Charlie lifted the book briefly. "I'm a little distracted right now. Can't get into it."

The man scooted closer to her, but since she was on the edge of the bench, she had nowhere to move away unless she got to her feet. Her pulse quickened as she kept her eyes on him. "I like to read, too," he said, his voice coming across way too sultry for the words.

The small smile she offered him was strained. “What do you like to read?”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He twirled his hand in the air. “This and that.” His eyes landed on her. “You know something? You’re really pretty.”

She stiffened. “Thank you.” Her heart hammered, but not in the exhilarating way it did when she was with Ash. Charlie lifted the book again. “Well, I’m going to try to get into my book, so?—”

He took the book from her and flipped it over in his hands to read the title. She made a disgruntled sound to indicate she didn’t want him doing such a thing, but then he commenced flipping through the pages. His eyes found hers, and his smile stretched wider. “There are more interesting things you could be doing.” He leaned a little closer. “Like going out with me.”

“Thanks, but?—”

“Come on,” he purred with a voice that set her teeth on edge. “I don’t bite.”

Charlie frowned. If even one of her brothers were here, they’d pummel this guy. Unfortunately, she’d come to the park to get away from her overbearing brothers and the possibility of seeing Ash. She’d wanted to clear her head, but that wasn’t happening. She lunged for the book, but the man held it just out of reach. “I appreciate the invitation, but I’m not interested,” she insisted. “I didn’t come here for a date.”

He pouted. “That’s no fun. A girl like you? I’d think you’d want to get out and enjoy yourself.”

“Who said I wasn’t enjoying myself?” she snapped, surprising even herself with her terse tone.

His brow lifted, and he let out a dry chuckle. “You did—when you said you couldn’t get into your book.”

He had her there. Still, she wasn’t interested in a guy who didn’t know how to listen when she said no. Charlie got to her feet and snatched the book out of his hand, prepared to storm away. Unfortunately, he wasn’t ready to let her go. His hand wrapped around her free wrist, keeping her from making her escape.

“Please let me go,” she said, distracted by the anxiety that slowly woke from its chamber deep inside her.

The man tugged her closer, and she nearly fell into his lap. Her heart thundered as she looked around wildly, wondering if she screamed, would anyone come help her. He didn’t seem like the dangerous type—mostly just like someone who thought he could talk anyone into what he wanted.

As much as she wanted to scream or hit him over the head, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. On top of being a people pleaser, she had a hard time putting her foot down. Never wanting to step on anyone’s toes or offend them had gotten her into trouble more than once.

This was the reason she avoided the park and public places when she was alone. There were few moments in her life where she was willing to step out of her shell—out of the happy place she called home. A helpless-sounding sigh escaped her lips. “Another time, maybe.”

She couldn’t tell if he noticed the crack in her resolve or if it was something else, but he saw something. He rose to his feet, his hand still holding hers, his body too close

for comfort. Charlie stared up at him expectantly, and he said, “One date. Coffee. Get to know me before you dismiss me.” This time his voice was less cocky and sweeter.

Her mouth went dry, and she couldn’t fight the words that started infiltrating her head—ready to accept the offer of coffee if it meant getting out of this awkward position.

Before she could utter a word, the man’s eyes lifted to a spot above her head. Surprise crossed his face first, followed by a narrowing of his eyes. “Can I help you?” he muttered, his hand tightening on hers.

Charlie didn’t have a chance to turn and take in whoever it was behind her before he spoke.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d release my girlfriend.”

She knew that voice. That voice haunted her dreams both night and day. It could send a ripple of chills or a flush of searing heat through her body. She stiffened, noting how the man before her set his eyes on her once more at the exact moment he released her hand.

Out of instinct, Charlie took a decided step backward, only to collide with Ash’s firm chest. His arm came around her waist, and his head dipped closer to her right ear as he murmured, “Go get in the car, sweetheart.”

Goosebumps accosted her arms and legs. She couldn’t move. Her legs refused to listen to the signals her brain sent down to them.

“Charlie,” Ash murmured, this time with a note of warning. “I’d like to have a word with this young man.”

She blinked, still too stunned to move. Then Ash moved out from behind her. He grasped her upper arms, staring into her face with concern. She could see the question in his eyes. He didn't even have to speak it.

Did he hurt you?

She gave a sharp shake of her head.

Movement and shuffling behind him caught her attention. Her focus shifted to the man who looked like he was about ready to take off running.

"Don't move." Ash's voice was commanding. From where Charlie stood, she could compare the two. Ash practically towered over the other. His muscular frame and height made the young man look like a scrawny teenager.

It didn't help that Ash wore a white T-shirt that showed just what he was working with. Paired with his grey joggers, he was what fantasies were made of. Ash rubbed her arms up and down and peered at her closer. Then he jerked his chin to the left. "We're parked by the restrooms. Go wait for me there."

Charlie nodded, finally accepting the reality of what she'd been in the middle of. She took a stumbling step backward, then turned around and hurried in the direction Ash had told her to take. She knew what his truck looked like. It was a pewter Ford pickup. It had some black pinstriping along the sides, which made it stand out even more.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She found it and leaned against it, not sure if she dared to look over at where she'd been sitting. As if against her own control, she did just that. Ash was arguing with the guy who looked more and more like a kid when compared to the firefighter. Ash poked him in the chest once and the guy rubbed the spot, his expression heated. He only looked in her direction once, then he spun around and stalked away.

Ash didn't turn immediately. He raked a hand through his hair and shook his head. She could practically see him buzzing with angry energy. What was his problem? Had he heard her conversation with the stranger? Or was it something else? She refused to believe he'd been following her. That wasn't Ash's style.

He had a girlfriend. He wouldn't be obsessing over her. The idea was laughable. She blushed even though there was no one to witness her discomfort or hear the rationalization in her head. If Ash knew she fantasized about him, he'd laugh at her. Then he'd probably tell her brothers.

Charlie groaned, leaning her head against the truck and closing her eyes again. This was so embarrassing. She prayed he wouldn't mention this encounter to her brothers. While she didn't know the guy, the town wasn't so big they wouldn't be able to figure out who he was. The last thing she wanted was to have to lock herself away in her house so she didn't have to participate in any more of these situations.

"Hey," a quiet voice said.

Her eyes flew open and she jumped. Ash stood in front of her, legs wide and arms crossed. The concern that knit his brow was the only indication of what he was thinking. She frowned at him. "I didn't need you to step in."

Ash arched a brow and tilted his head. "I'm sorry?"

She jutted her chin toward the bench where she'd been sitting, all her anxiety and frustration bubbling over. "I was fine. I was handling it."

He didn't speak this time, but that look in his eyes said it all. He didn't believe her. He was being just like her older brothers. Protective. That was how he saw her—a small mouse needing protection.

Charlie moved to brush past him, but his arm shot out, his hand wrapping around her upper arm. She gasped and stared up at him. "What?"

"You want to tell me what was going on back there?"

"No," she snapped without hesitation. He was the reason she'd come here in the first place. He was the reason she needed to clear her head. Well, that wasn't turning out the way she'd planned. She glanced down at where he held her arm and yanked it from his grasp. "He wanted to ask me out. That's all."

Still he stared, his eyes hard. "Charlie," he said, that warning tone in his voice again.

She threw her arms into the air. "I wasn't going to go with him if that's what you're worried about." When he remained silent, she sighed. "What do you want me to say?"

He considered her for what felt like an eternity. Then he took a step toward her. She moved away from him, her back once again against the truck. "I want you to be honest with yourself."

His words surprised her. Were they code for something? Her thoughts clouded with memories of him from when they were younger to the most recent interactions. He

couldn't be referring to her crush. There was no way he even knew. "What's that supposed to mean?" she finally stammered.

Ash pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "I was running on the greenbelt. I saw the moment that guy showed up. You were clearly uncomfortable. And you did nothing. Nothing, Charlie. Just because we live in a small town doesn't mean we're safe." His hand dropped to his side, and he frowned at her. "You could have walked away. You could have screamed, slapped him, heck, you could have hit him over the head with that book of yours."

She glanced down at the object. He was right. She'd gotten so caught up in the moment—and not in a good way—that she'd been unable to act. Charlie worried her lower lip and nodded. "You're right."

He sighed, but she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze.

"Thanks. For helping me."

7

Ash

It had taken every ounce of self-control not to throw a punch or two at the guy who clearly didn't understand what the word "no" meant. From the moment Ash noticed Charlie had arrived, he'd kept his eyes on her. He'd told himself to give her some space. He was even going to cancel their next cooking lesson after their last interaction.

But the second that slimeball of a guy sat next to her, he knew he wasn't going to stick with that plan. He slowed his running to a jog and watched as Charlie grew increasingly uncomfortable. He didn't have to be standing beside her to know what

was happening. It wasn't hard to miss the way she'd tried to pull away from him.

Ash's blood still boiled at the memory. The guy even had the gall to tell Ash that Charlie had come unto him.

His hands balled into fists, and he glanced away from Charlie to see if the guy was still at the tennis courts. Sure enough, he was chatting with three other men. And they were looking over at where Ash stood with Charlie.

When Ash turned back to face her, he found her watching him with a curious sort of gaze. Tension remained high between them. He hadn't missed each time she'd tried to put distance between them. Each instance had been like a dagger to the heart.

"Where's your car?"

She shook her head. "It's not here. I walked."

He gaped at her. "Charlie, do you know how long of a walk that is?" He regretted his statement when she scowled at him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Clearly. I got here, didn’t I?”

“It’s got to be at least three miles.”

She shrugged. “I like walking.”

He dragged a hand down his face. Her brothers wouldn’t be thrilled to discover this tidbit of information. If he knew them, they’d probably lock her away in the house like one of those fairytale princesses.

“I’m an adult, Ash. I can handle myself.” Her clipped tone didn’t hold the confidence she probably wanted it to. Not after her experience with the guy from the tennis courts.

Ash jerked his chin to the paved path that lined the perimeter of the park. “Walk with me.”

Charlie lifted her brows. “You can’t walk me home?—”

“In case he tries to come talk to you again,” he clarified. “We can walk until I finish my rounds. Then I’m taking you home.”

She huffed, but at least she didn’t argue.

When he reached forward, she flinched, making him pause. He’d only been trying to access the door so she could put her book away. His eyes narrowed on her. “Are you sure nothing happened?”

The color that bloomed in her cheeks was the most beautiful shade of pink he'd ever seen. Thankfully, Charlie wasn't looking at him while he studied her. She merely shook her head as she muttered, "Nothing happened, Ash. Just—" she bit her lower lip and finally lifted her eyes to meet his. "Don't tell my brothers, okay?"

He hesitated. He couldn't agree to something like that. Could he? Rather than answering her question, he pulled the truck door open and motioned toward it. "Put your book inside."

She complied without a fight.

They started on their walk, Charlie keeping a comfortable distance between them. To the outside view, they definitely didn't look like they were in a relationship. Hopefully that wouldn't draw the attention of those at the tennis courts again. The last thing he wanted was to fend off more guys who didn't know when to stop.

Neither one of them spoke for what felt like eons. The silence stretched between them so far and long that he wouldn't have been surprised if she refused to say another word while they were together.

Well, he wasn't going to let that happen. "What was wrong with him?"

She jumped at his voice and glanced up at him. "What?"

Ash smirked, putting on the mask of the teasing big brother she was probably used to. "Why didn't you want to go out with him?"

Charlie scowled. "You're the one who interrupted us."

He held up his hands in surrender. "I only came over after I noticed how uncomfortable you were."

“How could you even tell?”

He stopped, and she took a few steps forward before turning to look back at him with question in her eyes. He folded his arms and cocked his head. “I’ve practically been part of your family for half of my life. You should be worried if I didn’t notice.”

“You were halfway across the park. How?—”

“I would have noticed you were in distress if I was on the opposite side of the park.” He let his words sink in, not caring if she started connecting certain dots.

“Then I suppose you have an answer to your question,” she said, her tone sharp, referring to his first question. “Something about him made me uncomfortable.” She spun on her heel and started walking again.

It took only a couple strides to catch up to her, but he wasn’t in the clear.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she asked. “Are you following me?”

He couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped his throat. “I like to run here. I have to keep up my endurance—especially at this altitude. Next time I have to jump into a fire, I need to be in top condition.”

She sent him a side-eyed stare. “You look like you’re in decent enough condition to me.”

He gave her another flirtatious smirk, pleased with himself when she blushed and looked away. “You’d be surprised. It takes a lot of stamina to be able to fight fires. And when there’s a man down or someone we have to drag out of the fray, then I can’t rely on just looking like I’m in decent condition. I have to keep pushing myself.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Charlie frowned at his statement.

“What?” he demanded with a laugh. “Is it bad that I want to be good at my job?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s that look for?”

This time she stopped to face him. “You know I don’t like what you do for a living.”

He chuckled. “Yes. You’ve made that very clear.”

“So forgive me if I don’t fawn all over you when you tell me you’re here so you can keep the job I loathe.”

“Why do you hate it so much?” He couldn’t help asking her. The disappointment she had in him because of his job more than confused him. It occasionally made him wonder if she might share some of the feelings he had for her.

Charlie groaned with frustration. “Do I have to have another reason besides the fact that you could get hurt—or worse? What if one day you don’t come home?”

His lips quirked upward. “So you’re saying you’re worried about me.”

“No—” she stammered far too quickly. “I’m saying that my brothers like having you around.”

“What about you?”

She ignored the question, though her face started filling with that delightful pink again. “And speaking of my brothers, I wouldn’t want any of them to be smoke jumpers either.”

He lifted his chin, folding his arms once more. “Okay. You think it’s dangerous and no one should do it. That’s fair. Now, tell me, if no one is doing that job, then what happens to the people whose homes are being burned to the ground? Who’s going to help them when they need it most?”

Charlie didn’t answer.

“You shouldn’t feel that way about a job that saves lives. Someone has to do it. Why not let it be someone like me who’s actually good at what I do?”

She huffed out a frustrated breath. “I don’t expect you to get it.” With that, she stormed away again.

Sheesh. Today, she was in a mood. He needed to come up with something else to talk about if he wanted to ensure they finished their walk.

This time when he caught up to her, he kept jogging—mostly in place—while she continued walking. “Okay, change of subject. What were you reading?”

Her eyes flitted up to meet his. “Why do you want to know?”

He fought the widening of his smile. He already knew she had an affinity for romance. She’d kept the cover well hidden from his view, but if he were to make a wager, he would guess it was that genre. Ash shrugged. “Maybe I need some reading material for when I’m on call at the station.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Somehow I don’t think we’ll share the same interest in books.”

“Why not?”

She gave him one more quick baffled look. “Do you like romance novels?”

“What are we talking?” Ash mused. “Romantasy? Western Romance? Christian Romance? Romantic Suspense? Dark?—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” she said, throwing her hand up for him to stop. He didn’t miss the small smile that practically tore at her lips—a smile she hid behind a fake yawn. “If you must know, I was reading a cowboy romance.”

At the very moment he started laughing, she snapped, “Don’t laugh!” She stopped walking and her arms folded tightly across her stomach.

He shook his head, wiping his brow with his forearm. “I’m sorry. But cowboy romance? You live with a bunch of cowboys. You can’t be serious.”

“Oh? And what would you suggest I read? Hero romances?”

Ash noted the way her eyes swept over him in an obvious attempt to make him uncomfortable. So he trailed his tongue along his lower lip before rolling them into each other just to toy with her. As expected, Charlie flushed. He chuckled. “Tell me about this cowboy romance. Anyone we know?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She scoffed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Something I would like? Let me guess. He’s charming and a little grumpy. But he’s got a heart of gold.”

Charlie’s laughter made his heart sing. It all but soared out of his chest and to the sky.

“You have the best laugh,” he said. Ash only realized he’d said that out loud when she sobered and stared at him with that look that said far more than her words ever would.

She blinked several times and looked away. “Does your girlfriend like to read?”

He choked, coughing on the spittle that had inadvertently made it to his airway.

A quick glance from Charlie was all the sympathy he got. “Of course... she likes to read,” he said softly. “For as long as I’ve known her.”

Charlie worried her lower lip. “So, she likes books and food.”

He nodded, suddenly more uncomfortable than he’d been since he’d arrived in Copper Creek a few months ago. “Yeah.”

“Sounds like a keeper,” she murmured, then started walking again.

Gone was their lighthearted conversation, replaced with the reality of the lies he’d spun in order to avoid other women altogether. There would never be anyone better

suited for him. He'd tried—and he'd failed. And yet Ash couldn't have the one person he wanted most. He'd rather be alone than settle for someone he knew he wouldn't be able to love like he loved Charlie.

That much had been made clear when he'd realized what she was going through today with that other guy. Ash would have risked everything to save her from potentially getting hurt. And yet their love story wasn't meant to be written.

He fell into step beside her, and they continued their walk in silence. He didn't dare bring up any other topics of conversation. None of them had ended well. So he forced himself to close the door on the possibility of happiness with a girl like Charlie—no, with Charlie.

Maybe he would have had a chance if she cared for him. Then he wouldn't feel so guilty over their first kiss. Maybe then he'd finally be able to squash the feeling that falling in love with her was inherently wrong.

Ash shoved his hands deep into his pockets and turned his focus to other things. The tennis players were gone. The park was clearing out. Soon it would be mostly empty as people headed off to get lunch.

When they finished their walk, Ash drove Charlie home. She practically bolted from his truck the second he put it into park. He didn't dare go inside to say hello to any of her brothers that might be home. It would only lead to questions, and he wasn't in the mood for the third degree. So he put the truck into drive and headed home.

8

Charlie

A couple of days had passed since Ash had gotten that boy away from her in the park,

and Charlie couldn't deny how on edge she was. From the moment Ash had rescued her, she knew another shoe was about to drop. Her brothers were overprotective to a fault. It was probably the reason she was more introverted in large groups. She didn't go out with people often. The only time she'd shed that skin was when she'd met Emma.

And that felt like a lifetime ago.

Charlie preferred the company of her family to strangers. She preferred to stay in with a good book than going out dancing. Heck, even going to Emma's concert had been draining. When she'd returned home afterward, she'd slept for a full day.

Now every single time one of her brothers entered the kitchen, she went stiff. She waited for one of them to demand what had happened at the park. She expected to be interrogated for the guy's description and where exactly she'd spoken to him.

Of course she wouldn't tell her brothers about the situation. But Ash? He was loyal to a fault. He'd tell her brothers just because he was their friend before he was hers.

By the time their next lesson came up, her jaw ached from being tightened so often. Mason had come over to help Daniel with some vaccinations for the new calves that had been born, and the two of them were finishing up their lunch when Ash wandered into the house.

He hadn't knocked. He never did. Sometimes she'd be so focused on a task that it felt like her soul did a somersault in her stomach every time she heard his voice come from behind her. Thankfully, this time she was facing the door when he entered.

Ash glanced at her briefly before pulling out a chair and sitting beside Mason. "Long time, no see."

Mason slugged him. “Yeah, you need to quit hanging out here so much. I’m just one ranch away.”

Ash chuckled, his answer smooth and without thought. “I’d rather not hang out with a set of newlyweds.”

Daniel snorted, water coming out of his nose. Mason scoffed. “There are newlyweds here.”

Ash shrugged. “Not the same, dude.” He gave Charlie a look, but the second he noticed her watching him, he looked away. Normally, she was the one to break her stare first. She hated it when he caught her. But today, she needed an answer to something. She needed to dig deep and get the confidence to confront him.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Their conversation continued, and she moved to get out the ingredients to make her favorite dinner recipe. Fried chicken took time to master—especially when one wanted to copy the big restaurants. She'd come about as close as anyone, and today, she was going to show Ash how to do it.

He was still speaking to her brothers when she had to clear her throat to drag him away from his conversation. Ash glanced in her direction. "I guess that's my cue." He pushed away from the table, and her brothers did the same. Daniel and Mason grabbed their hats and headed for the door, leaving her alone with Ash.

Her heart hammered with nervous energy. Not surprising, he noticed.

Ash leaned his forearms against the countertop and gazed at her, making her nerves even worse. "What's the matter with you?"

She snorted, and he lifted a bemused brow. Her eyes darted to the doorway before she leaned forward so her face was inches from his. "Did you tell them?"

"Tell... who... what?" Still the amusement could be read in his face. He knew exactly what she was talking about, and he was toying with her!

Charlie rolled her eyes. "Just tell me. Do they know?" When he didn't respond, she groaned. "About the day at the park."

"Oh," he said exaggeratedly. His voice was too loud as he continued. "You want to know if your brothers know about the guy who wanted to have his way with you."

She gasped and pressed both hands over his face, nearly jumping onto the counter to do so. “Sh!”

Ash laughed, pulling back so she couldn’t reach him. “No. I didn’t breathe a word.”

Charlie glowered at him. “You might as well have with how loud you’re talking.”

He only shrugged. Then his eyes swept over the food she had set out, and his brows lifted. “No way. You’re going to teach me how to make your fried chicken?”

The excitement in his voice momentarily threw her off guard. It wasn’t a surprise that he’d had her fried chicken. Over the years, she’d made it often enough. Usually, her brothers requested it for their birthdays. Then she reminded herself that she wasn’t here to impress him or make him happy. She was doing him a favor—a favor he had asked for to impress his girlfriend.

That thought left a sour taste in her mouth.

“You know,” Ash murmured, still taking in the spices and ingredients. “I almost did—tell them, I mean.”

Her eyes cut to his so sharply she saw stars. “What?” she hissed under her breath.

“Yeah. I thought they should know. But then I figured maybe I don’t have to.”

“No,” she agreed. “You really don’t.”

He lifted his gaze to her and resumed his relaxed form on the counter. “Since you’re helping me with this cooking thing, maybe I can help you with something.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that. What kind of favor? It wasn’t like he could

be her bodyguard.

“Self-defense,” he said like he’d heard her thoughts. “I can’t be there to protect you all the time. Neither can your brothers. But you have to learn how to be more careful. And that means you should learn how to protect yourself.”

A snort slipped from her lips, and she shook her head. “My brothers would never go for that. And what makes you think I can do any damage? I’m barely over five feet.”

Ash seemed to size her up, leaning a little farther over the counter so he could take her in fully. The scrutiny made her feel far more vulnerable than she had any right to be. He nodded as if answering a question he’d posed to himself. “You’d be fine. I could teach you some moves that would guarantee to give you a head start if the worst were to happen.”

She considered what he was saying. If she’d had lessons, would her confidence in turning down that guy at the park have made a difference? Probably. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea. Rather than tell Ash that, she motioned to the spices. “These are what we’re going to mix into the batter for the chicken. I’m going to have you measure them out and put them in that bowl over there.”

They worked quietly for the first little bit. She nearly thought he wouldn’t say anything else for the rest of their lesson, but then he shattered the wall between them when he murmured, “How often do you think about it?” His question was soft, and there was absolutely no context.

Instinct told her she already knew before she asked, “About what?”

He gave her a look—one that said he was trying to be patient with her.

She swallowed hard and turned away from him, acting as if she didn’t see it.

“That kiss, Charlie.” If she wasn’t mistaken, she might have thought his voice cracked when he’d said it.

Charlie froze, her fingers gripping the dial on the stove. She could barely breathe. Hadn’t they agreed to never speak of it again? Or had that been in her imagination? Without turning, she whispered, “Sometimes.” Immediately, she grimaced. She hadn’t wanted to admit to it, and yet the words came out of their own accord.

“Yeah, me too.”

The hairs prickled on the back of her neck and along her arms. “Why do you ask?”

He shifted behind her. She didn’t dare turn to look at him. He let out a sigh. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m going to find the kind of love your brothers have. You know—someone who’s worthy of loving.”

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut until she saw sparks. Then she heaved her own shuddering breath as she turned to face him. He was staring at her, studying her, questioning her. “Maybeyou have—found that love, I mean. You never know.” He had a girlfriend—one he was willing to learn a new skill for.

There was something in his eyes. A cloudiness maybe? Or something else. A spark? Perhaps it was both—like a lightning storm. It made her stomach swirl and her throat tighten. How much did he really care about this woman? Was she a means to an end? The way he’d made it sound, perhaps she wasn’t who he really wanted.

Charlie thrust that thought from her head. It was dangerous to entertain such things. He took a step toward her, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

When his hand reached up toward her face, she didn’t move, didn’t dare continue breathing. His finger and thumb ran over the hair at her shoulder—the hair she kept down and curled at the ends. He stared at it for a long moment before he finally murmured, “You ended up changing it.”

And just like that, she was thrown back in time to that night in the rain when he’d

told her not to change anything about herself. His words had stuck with her for the next six years. Rarely did she apply makeup—unless it was a special occasion. She still liked to put her hair into braids, but there was a part of her that clung to the memory of their kiss and the fact that she'd had her hair done just like this when it had happened.

“I grew up,” she rasped.

His eyes lifted to meet hers, pinning her into place. She wondered if he mentioned her hair because he didn't like it. Perhaps he associated the change with something sour, whereas she linked it to the most memorable night of her life.

Her breath hitched in her chest when he leaned closer. She searched his gaze, watching him intently. There was nothing in his eyes to give away what he was feeling at this moment. She could only feel his warm breath against her face, smell his citrus scent, and hear her own pulse roaring in her ears. The way her stomach twisted and knotted, the way her legs threatened to buckle beneath her, she wasn't sure she would be getting out of this moment unscathed.

And she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Her hands gripped the handle of the oven behind her. Each second ticked by ten times slower than it normally would.

“Charlie,” he whispered, his voice husky and low. “I?”

The front door banged open and loud laughter spilled into the house. Ash jumped back from her, spinning around so he faced the island between them and the kitchen door. Moments later, Liam, Carter, and Wade entered. All three nodded to Ash, who called out a hearty, “Hey, guys.” He gestured to the counter filled with breaded chicken with a flourish. “I hope you're hungry.”

Only Carter seemed to look at Charlie with curiosity. Then he moved toward the fridge and opened it. Without looking at her directly, he whispered, “Everything okay?”

She would have stiffened at his words if she wasn’t already as stiff as a board while still gripping the oven handle. “Fine,” she whispered. “Just a little lightheaded.”

Carter looked at her and quirked a brow. “Need some water?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. She grabbed the bottle and rushed for the back door. “I’ll be right back,” she called out over her shoulder as she yanked the door open. “Just getting some fresh air.” Charlie didn’t wait to hear if anyone objected. She couldn’t stay in that room a moment longer. Heck, she didn’t know if she’d be able to finish cooking the meal with Ash being so close to her.

She’d have to rally, she reminded herself. Otherwise, her brothers would notice something was wrong. Charlie closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. Just another dinner with her brothers’ friend. That’s all this was. That’s all it would ever be.

9

Ash

Smoke swirled around Ash as he stood in the middle of a fire in the northern part of the state. It wasn’t as bad as it had been made out to be, but the atmosphere would be shifting tonight, which meant a lot of wind. They needed to contain it before it moved down the mountains.

He’d canceled his cooking lesson earlier today after he’d gotten the call. For the first time in his life, he wasn’t thrilled about being called in to help. Usually, this sort of thing was a release. It helped keep his mind from straying too far.

Unfortunately, all he could think about was Charlie and how he'd nearly kissed her—again. He wanted to kick himself. He'd nearly lost control, only to be saved by her brothers. He could still feel the way his chest heaved with effort. He could feel the way his heart wanted to explode because it was beating so hard.

And after she'd left the room, she'd returned like nothing had happened.

Technically nothing had, but it could have.

He scowled and shook his head sharply. He had a job to do. He couldn't get distracted. If he did, he'd risk several people's lives. Right now, he needed to keep Charlie from slipping past his defenses.

Ash set to work dousing the roaring fires alongside his companions. They managed to get it to an eighty percent containment when they were called off it. Others would come in to finish the job.

The thrill he'd expected to feel while onsite wasn't nearly as exhilarating as it had been when he was with Charlie. He was losing his grip on reality. That was the only way he could explain it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Was it an addiction? The way he felt about her—could he be destroying himself? He'd already decided he wasn't going to date anyone before he'd returned to Copper Creek. Then that mindset had turned into him choosing to be alone.

Yes.

He had his answer. It wasn't healthy to obsess over a woman he had no chance of getting. That evening he'd almost leaned in for a kiss, and she hadn't exactly looked scared of him. Ash couldn't describe what he'd seen in her eyes other than an expectation of what was to come.

After he'd been dropped off at the station, he got into his truck, ready to go home. Only he didn't end up there.

His face was still covered in smudges of soot. His hair smelled of smoke. And yet he found himself sitting in his truck in front of the Keagans' home. He'd been drawn to it, needing closure for something he wasn't sure he deserved.

Ash pushed the truck door open, then hesitated. It was dark out. Not many lights were on in the house. Anyone who was home could already be asleep. Still, he ignored that fact and walked around the back to where the door would lead him into the kitchen.

A twig snapped beneath his foot and a quiet gasp echoed toward him. His head shot up, and he found Charlie sitting on the back porch with a mug in hand.

Her eyes rounded and she rose to her feet. "Ash? What are you doing here?"

He stepped into the light, eliciting another gasp. She took a step toward him, her hand reaching for his face only for her to think better about it and withdraw.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

He shook his head, rubbing a hand over his head briskly as if it would air out the smoke smell. “I’m fine,” he replied.

She glanced toward the house. “Do you want to see Liam? I can go get?—”

“No,” he said far too quickly. Ash hadn’t even been aware that Liam was staying the night here. He knew the brothers occasionally stayed at the house when they had work to do early in the morning. “Do you mind... if we talk? Just you and me?”

Charlie hesitated. She had one foot on the steps and the other on the porch itself. He could see the cogs in her head whirling. She probably thought he was going to talk about what happened between them last time. He wouldn’t blame her for turning him down. He’d overstepped; she deserved to have space.

But then she shifted to face him. “Can I get you some tea?”

He smiled. “That sounds nice.”

When they were seated beside one another, both with steaming mugs in hand, she finally spoke again. “What did you want to talk about?”

Ash glanced sideways at her. “I had to work today.”

She stilled, her mug halfway to her lips. Then she blew on it and said, “I know.” He could hear the disappointment in her voice, and he flinched.

“It was harder today.”

This time she turned to face him fully.

He smirked at her. “Doesn’t mean I love it any less.” Then he breathed a heavy sigh. “I guess it makes it interesting when it’s a challenge.” Though, admittedly the challenge had nothing to do with the fire itself and everything to do with the woman seated beside him.

She huffed, but at least she wasn’t tearing him to pieces.

Ash chuckled and took a sip of his drink. “I don’t think I will ever stop loving my job no matter how hard it gets, no matter how dangerous.” He wanted so badly to ask her if she could ever love a guy who put his life on the line like he did. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t have a girlfriend. But most of all, he wanted to tell the beautiful girl beside him that he wanted a chance with her.

And yet he couldn’t.

Charlie sighed. “Yeah, well, lucky for you, I’m not your mom.”

He nearly choked on his drink, laughing as he turned to look at her. He couldn’t agree more—but for different reasons. Instead, he said, “My mother wouldn’t dare tell me what job I should have.”

She shrugged but didn’t meet his eyes. She kept her focus on the darkness surrounding them.

“Have you thought about my offer? About the self-defense classes?”

Still, she didn’t look at him. She wore a knitted shawl around her shoulders, a pair of

pajama pants, and a loose-fitting T-shirt. It looked like she had been preparing for bed. Had he interrupted her nighttime routine? He wanted to say he was sorry—but he really wasn't.

Finally, she glanced at him. “Would your girlfriend approve?”

He flinched at her question—and she likely noticed.

“She wouldn’t, right? I bet she wouldn’t approve of me teaching you how to cook, either.” She frowned before bringing her drink to her lips. “It’s probably not a good idea.”

“It’s not a problem,” he insisted.

Charlie snorted. “By the way you reacted to my question, I doubt that very much.”

He’d lied far too much as it was. If he told her his girlfriend wouldn’t mind, that would only add to the lies he’d spun. The web had grown too large. But he couldn’t risk telling the truth about his fake relationship. If he did, Liam would pounce. All her brothers would. Too many questions to answer. Too many excuses he’d have to make. So he phrased it differently. “Do you think I’d actually date someone who would be jealous about me teaching another girl how to defend herself?”

“I wouldn’t like it,” she blurted.

He stared at her, wondering if she’d meant to say that out loud.

When she started to fidget, he got his answer. Charlie hadn’t meant to show her cards. A sly smile spread across his face. Maybe she did like him, even if it was only a little bit. Either that, or she was just being honest with him—like a friend might be.

Charlie sent him an embarrassed look before quickly turning away. “Sounds like you’re perfect for each other.” It was a poor attempt at covering up her blunder, but he accepted it.

“Yeah, maybe,” he murmured, still watching her.

She tossed back the remainder of her drink and placed the mug on the wooden porch between them. Then she leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. She stared straight ahead, thoughtfully. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.”

He smiled but didn’t risk speaking in case she took it back.

“Your girlfriend is pretty lucky,” she mumbled almost wistfully.

“How do you figure?” he whispered, surprised at the turn of their conversation.

She swallowed audibly. “Not many guys would take on cooking lessons to impress a girl. I mean, I guess sometimes a guy might learn how to dance—but that’s usually for a wedding. And yet here you are, trying to learn a new skill so you can do something romantic for her.” She turned, looking up at the stars. “She’s lucky to have you.”

He was tempted to brush off the compliment, but he knew better. Couldn’t draw attention to himself.

“And the cherry on top?” She let out a mirthless laugh. “You’re trying to convince me to take some self-defense lessons.” A shake of her head was all she seemed capable of mustering.

“How’s that the cherry on top?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

“I’m just your friend’s kid sister. I’m nothing. I’m a nobody. You don’t owe me any?—”

Ash couldn’t take it any longer. This self-deprecating habit she occasionally let come through. He reached out and took her hand in his, forcing her to sit up a little straighter. He placed her hand between both of his, rather than holding it with any degree of romance. “I want to set something straight. Right here, right now.”

She stared at where he held her hand as if he were a bear trap and she wasn’t going to be able to escape.

He tugged on her hand gently, drawing her focus to his face. “You are perfect the way you are. I meant it when I said it then.” He swallowed hard. “And I mean it now.”

She blinked, her eyes brimming with emotion.

“Any guy would be lucky to have you, Charlie. Any one of them.” Ash made sure his words sunk in—deep to her core. She needed to know that she had value. She needed to know that whoever she chose to spend her life with—they were the lucky ones. Then he whispered, “I only wish it was me.”

It was slight, barely perceptible, but her eyes widened. Her lips parted and she exhaled a shaky breath.

Ash didn’t know what to do. While he remained calm on the outside, on the inside, he was scrambling. He might have blown his entire cover. If she asked him about his fake girlfriend in this moment, he might have actually told her the truth. If she demanded for him to explain what he meant about wanting to be that lucky man, he wouldn’t be able to hold back.

He jumped to his feet, nearly knocking the mugs from their places. “Goodnight, Charlie.” With that, he hurried down the steps and all but sprinted to his truck. He was quickly losing his grip on his self-control. The next time he saw her, he might have to apologize for what he’d said. He might have to explain himself and his actions.

Goodness!

Why couldn’t he have just stayed away?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Ash backed out of the driveway and headed home, berating himself for his mistakes, past and present.

10

Charlie

Charlie wrung her hands as she paced outside the gym. Ash had told her to come to this one specifically because there was a boxing ring in it. She had never boxed a day in her life. When he'd told her he was going to teach her self-defense, she thought he was going to teach her how to get out of a chokehold. But boxing?

She shook her head, hating every second she'd spent waiting for him. There was no way she was going to head inside without him. That was the last place she wanted to be alone.

While she waited, she couldn't help thinking back to two weeks ago when he'd said the one thing that had broken her heart.

It was the pain of having someone and losing them.

This pain was slightly different.

The ache in her chest came from knowing he was someone she would never have the chance to love.

She shut her eyes and leaned against the brick wall as people came and went. Some

of them had given her strange looks. Others looked concerned. But she ignored them all.

Charlie hadn't told her brothers where she was going. They would have told her to stay home while they had a word with Ash about overstepping. The ironic thing about all of this was that she wasn't really interested in learning self-defense. She'd agreed because she wanted to spend more time with Ash. The quiet moments they'd shared lately had lingered, had given her a high that she couldn't get anywhere else.

But he had a girlfriend and that's not something she'd want to come between.

"Charlie?" Ash's voice shattered her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to find him looking at her, concern in his eyes. He hadn't mentioned that conversation from a couple of weeks ago. Not during their lessons. Not when he came to visit her brothers. She had no doubt that he had zero intention of discussing it at all.

She gave him a weak smile.

"Are you okay?" he asked, stepping closer.

Charlie nodded. "I'm good. Just nervous."

He flashed her a grin. "Nothing to be nervous about."

She gave him an incredulous look. "You said that you were going to teach me boxing. Do you really think that's necessary?"

His boyish grin was all it took to unravel the tension in her chest. "I'm not going to teach you how to box. Not unless you want me to."

"But you said?—"

He draped his arm around her shoulders and wheeled her toward the door. “I said that this place has a boxing ring. That means it’s got a practice area that’s fenced off. And it’s got a padded floor.”

The way he touched her was perfectly innocent. It was one that was so blatantly between friends she had no way of interpreting it otherwise.

Still, being so close to him, just a few inches from being pulled into an embrace, she couldn’t help but imagine it was something more.

Ash whisked her into the gym, waving at the guys behind the counter and guiding her farther toward the back. Once they were at one of the two boxing rings, he dropped the duffle bag he had in his right hand. Then he nodded toward the ring. “Go on.”

Charlie glanced to the ring like it was a prison cell. Had she been so sheltered that she couldn’t bring herself to do something so simple as climb between some flexible bars?

His chuckle did little to ease her discomfort. But then he placed his hand on the small of her back, and she moved easily to her place. Ash followed her, all business. He placed her in the middle of the mat, and it was like he turned into someone else. “When someone attacks, their plans aren’t to incapacitate you. They will likely just try to grab you and move you to somewhere else.” Ash walked behind her, but he didn’t touch her yet. Instead, he spoke quietly, his words slipping into her left ear when he lowered his mouth closer to it. “They’re going to catch you off guard. You will always need to be on your guard.”

She nodded, her throat dry as she waited for him to make the first move. She’d always been taught that she couldn’t let anyone take her to a new location. She needed to fight to stay where she was. That wasn’t news to her. But the act of actually fighting back would be.

“I’m going to put you in a hold, okay?” His breath was hot against her ear.

Charlie nodded again.

He wrapped his arms around her chest, holding her tight. “First, you need to make sure you don’t panic. I know it’s hard to keep that in mind when you’re being held like this.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Ash had no idea. Charlie's pulse had already accelerated. She didn't dare move, her hands remaining at her sides.

"Now," Ash murmured, "you need to make sure to keep your head turned away from the closest arm. This is to avoid letting them choke you. Bring your hands up to hold my arms. That will help prevent it, too."

She did as she was told, her hands wrapping around his forearms. Still, she felt completely helpless. How was she supposed to get out of this hold?

"There are a couple things you can do next." The low rumble of his voice made it incredibly hard to focus. "If they're trying to pick you up, you can wrap your foot around their ankle. That makes it really hard to move you." He demonstrated it when she did just that. "Yes, see? This is all about making it difficult for the assailant. It isn't to overpower them."

Charlie smiled.

"You're going to want to get away, and the best way to do that is to hit them where they're most vulnerable."

She didn't have to be told what to do next, but he said it anyway.

"While holding one hand on my arm, use your fist to strike back at me. You can also throw your head back and try to break my nose." His voice, no longer husky, was full of authority. She could assume this was how he spoke to the men he worked with.

They went through the motions of several positions, from her arm to her hair being grabbed. A lot of it focused on making sure the assailant didn't want to put any more effort into taking her.

Ash made sure to remind her that she wanted to face them, if possible, as well. "Always be aware," he insisted. "None of this looking at your phone while you're walking down the street."

When they finished their lesson, they moved to a bench at the edge of the room. She could feel the sweat trickling down her back and down her temple, but Ash didn't look like he'd done a workout at all.

He caught her staring more than once as they cooled down. Each time, he gave her a funny look, and she ended up looking away. "You did a really good job today. I think with a few more sessions, you'll be as ready as you can be." Then he wagged his brows. "Unless you want to learn some boxing." That grin made it so easy to forget that he was off limits—especially when it was just the two of them.

"I'll think about it," was all she said. Her gaze shifted to the boxing ring where two women were sparring, and she watched with interest. Ash's voice was the only thing to cut through her intrigue.

He took a drink of his water, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I always thought self-defense should be a class girls were required to take in school." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Boxing would be nice, too. I'm surprised the concept hasn't taken root yet. I'll tell you this much. If I have daughters, I'm going to make sure they know how to defend themselves. There's too much anger in the world. I want them to have their best shot."

She stared at him with not only surprise but awe as well. Already he was thinking about his family and how he was going to take care of them—protect them. That day

in the park had been her first experience when she'd been scared for her safety. Chances were slim that she'd have to deal with something like that again, but it was nice to know she had options. "You want kids?"

He nodded. "Oh, if I had the choice, I'd have a big family."

She bit back a smile. "How big?"

"Well, maybe not as big as yours... but big." He nodded more to himself than to her. "Eight? Yeah, I could see myself with eight little ones running around."

Her eyes rounded. "Wow. You think you can handle that?"

This time his eyes locked with hers. "I just need to find the right partner." He made it sound so simple. Find the right person and anything was possible. "What about you?"

She let out a long breath. "Whataboutme?"

"What do you want? Big family? Small? Where do you see yourself?"

There wasn't even a degree of hesitation when she responded. "Oh, I know exactly what I want."

He waited, his gaze delving into hers with unyielding interest.

"I always thought I'd marry a cowboy who would buy me my own piece of land. We'd have a big house with a wrap-around porch and a family farm." She closed her eyes and smiled as the vision came to her mind. "Enough land for a couple horses, some goats, chickens... every animal you could think of. And we'd have a garden and some fruit trees."

Ash let out a low whistle, causing her to open her eyes and glance in his direction. “That sounds like quite the dream.”

Her smile faded slightly. “You think it’s crazy, don’t you?”

“On the contrary. I think it sounds perfect—a worthy dream to have.”

She gazed at him, studying him with new eyes. Her brothers would have put down her idea. They would have scoffed and told her that she was just fine to live at the family ranch for as long as she lived. She anticipated that her older sister, Annabel, would have done so if she’d wanted. But Charlie wanted freedom. It wasn’t that she felt trapped by her family. She’d always just been the baby sister. She was the kid who never had anything she could call her own—only hand-me-downs and whatever the others cast off. But it was what Ash said next that really gripped her heart.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind having the exact same thing.” His eyes locked with hers, and something sparked in them. What she wouldn’t give to be able to read his thoughts right at this moment.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She found herself leaning toward him, tempted to brush a strand of his hair from his brow. But then someone at the weights dropped a loaded bar to the floor and it clattered so loudly that she jumped back. Whew! She needed to remember to keep her hands to herself. They needed a distraction. “Really?” she smirked. “You want to marry a cowboy and settle down on a farm?”

He chuckled. “Smart aleck.” Ash nodded to the door. “Come on. I’ll walk you to your car.”

And that was that. They got to their feet and headed out of the gym. She still didn’t know what she’d tell her brothers or if she’d have to tell them anything. Maybe she’d just say she went to the gym and worked out. It wasn’t something she’d done before, but there was a first time for everything.

True to his word, Ash walked her to her car. He waited for her to dig her keys from her pocket and then again for her to start the car. He rested his forearm above her doorway and leaned his head down to smile at her. “See you for our next lesson?”

She nodded, the lump in her throat growing. Then she sucked in a breath and shook her head. “Actually, we’re going to have to postpone. Wade wants us to go on a big family picnic.” She rolled her eyes at how silly it sounded. “So, I won’t be available. But we’ll schedule one the week after.”

He nodded. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Charlie pulled her lower lip between her teeth, then watched as he backed away so he could shut her door. She gave him a little wave before she backed out of her parking

spot and then pulled away from the gym.

11

Ash

Ash reached for his backpack, then climbed out of his truck, a grin spreading across his face. He couldn't wait to see the look on Charlie's face when he showed up for their family picnic. Granted, when he'd been invited, Liam and Mason had asked him to see if his girlfriend could come into town for the outing.

She had a last-minute work thing.

Or at least that was what he would be telling them.

Ash sauntered toward the barn. Lots of voices and loud chatter came from that direction, indicating that they were nearing the time they'd be leaving. The trail ride was supposed to be two hours out and two hours back; Wade wanted to make a day of it.

There was no guarantee that Ash would survive the ride. Sitting in a saddle that long could be problematic. At this point, he was willing to get some sore muscles if it meant spending time in Charlie's orbit.

No one noticed him right away. The women were all circled around, talking to each other and laughing while the men grumbled about having to ready two horses. It wasn't until all twelve siblings were crammed into one space that Ash really got a feel for how large their family was. And with all but two of them married or engaged, it was an even larger group.

There were a couple of kids running around as well, and some of the women had

babies strapped to their backs.

The Keagan family had come a long way in the last six years.

Daniel caught sight of him first—likely because he was closer to the door. He held onto the reins of two horses. His eyes darted behind Ash and his brows furrowed. “I thought you were bringing your girl.”

The temptation to look for Charlie in the fray tugged at him, but Ash forced himself to stay focused on Daniel. “She couldn’t make it. Too last minute.”

Daniel lifted a brow.

“Work stuff,” Ash amended. He grinned and clapped a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “But between you and me, I don’t think she likes horses all that much.”

Understanding flickered across his face. Then he held up one set of reins. “I guess it’s just as well. We would have had to give her a horse that has a bit of an attitude.” At Ash’s incredulous look, Daniel chuckled. “She’s great with female riders, but there’s no telling with a group this big.” He turned to look over his shoulder. “I probably would have made Charlie ride her. We wouldn’t want to let your girlfriend get hurt.”

“No, we wouldn’t want that.” Ash laughed. He let his eyes scan the group of women and then they locked with a pair of pretty blue eyes. Ash held them for a moment, pinning hers with his own until she broke off their stare and tucked a wayward strand from her face behind her ear. “Where are we headed?” he asked Daniel. “Two hours is a long ride.”

Daniel nodded. “We’re going to head through the Callahan property. They have some fun trails and good picnic areas.”

Ash cocked his head slightly. "I'm assuming that's where some of the horses have come from?"

His friend nodded. "Yep. Mason brought a couple. And Brielle asked to borrow some from her dad." Someone called his name and he glanced over. "Here, hold this one too." He handed Ash the reins, then disappeared into the group.

One of the horses nudged Ash in the arm, and he chuckled before rubbing her nose.

"Do I even want to ask?" Charlie said quietly from beside him.

He jumped and glanced over at her. She was petting her own horse, not looking at him as if to hide the fact that they were chatting. "You don't have to pretend you don't know me." He snickered. "You're teaching me to cook."

She faced him then, suspicion in her gaze. "I don't find it a coincidence that after I told you about this trip, you suddenly showed up."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He laughed quietly. “I’ve known about the trip for two weeks. Liam and Mason thought I’d like to come along.”

Her brows lifted, and then she glanced toward his truck as if understanding who else her brothers might have invited.

“She couldn’t come,” he said stiffly, still hating the lie.

“Oh.”

He couldn’t tell if there was disappointment in her voice or if he heard a bit of relief. Either way, it didn’t matter. He was here to have some fun with his friends and spend as much time as he could get with a certain girl who lingered in his thoughts.

The ride wasn’t terrible, but Ash knew better than to expect the ride back to be pleasant. They arrived in a clearing with no picnic tables but plenty of flat ground to set up blankets. Surrounded by tall trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, it looked like an escape only dreamed of in fairy tales. Ash hadn’t thought something like this existed anywhere in Colorado—but then his experience in the wooded areas was usually wrought with smoke and flame.

A creek flowed along one side of the clearing, and a large open space allowed the horses to graze. It felt like they’d been deposited in the middle of nowhere—an escape from reality.

The first thing they did was eat. The children had been complaining about their hunger after only twenty minutes of riding, so it was no surprise that it was first on

the schedule.

Ash sat on a blanket shared with Daniel and Charlie while the others grouped up with their spouse or children.

Daniel pulled out three sandwiches, a carton of potato salad, a bowl of fruit, and a bag of chips. The second Ash saw the spread, he laughed out loud. “Is there someone else living in your stomach? How many people are you feeding?”

His friend threw him a dirty look, but it was laced with amusement. Everyone knew Daniel could put it away. He could probably compete in a hotdog eating contest and win without breaking a sweat. The funny thing was that he didn’t look like he had the ability to do such a thing. He was tall—the tallest out of his siblings, but he was also fit. There wasn’t an ounce of excess fat anywhere on his body.

Ash observed him while he finished the bite he was working on. “Have you ever considered being a firefighter?”

Charlie choked on her food, drawing the attention of her brother and Ash. She scowled at Ash and swallowed hard. “Absolutelynot.”

Daniel lifted both brows, then laughed out loud. “You’re ten years younger than me, baby sister. You don’t get a say in what I do with my life.”

“Nine,” she corrected. “And I have every right to tell you that you’re making a mistake or that you’re planning somethingunwise.” She shot Ash a warning look before turning her focus once more on her brother. “You should know better than to even consider doing a job that could get you killed.”

“Being a cowboy can get me killed,” he challenged.

She huffed and took another bite of her food.

Ash bit back the amusement he felt over her protective nature. It was cute, really. He knew better than to push the issue. Charlie wasn't going to accept her brothers being trained to be firefighters even if his boss was currently hiring.

After their meal, the guys got competitive. But Ash didn't expect anything less. Lucas and Henry started it. First, they placed bets on who could jump in the saddle the fastest. Then it turned into racing around the clearing. At some point they did a modified version of barrel racing but with trees and bushes. The ropes came out and they roped each other, timing themselves on how long it took to capture this brother or that.

Although he grew up around horses and used to ride quite a bit, Ash had no interest in any of it. His gaze continuously moved to where Charlie sat beside Emma. She seemed to be closest to the country star out of all her new sisters-in-law. That was surprising seeing as how Charlie had always been so introverted. He'd only seen her get out of her shell when she was with her family. Outsiders were more difficult to talk to.

She must have felt his attention because she glanced over her shoulder toward him. Again, their gazes locked. So many things could have been said during that span of time. Their surroundings fell away, and the desire to tell her exactly how he felt hit him like a punch to the gut. So many scenarios played in his head when he thought about what might happen if he finally got up the courage to say something.

He'd probably be lying in a ditch within twenty-four hours of the confession. He didn't doubt that her brothers wouldn't think twice about banning him from the Keagan farm—and that would be without discovering the truth about their first kiss.

Ash shook his head and shoved his hands into his pockets as if confining them would

also confine everything else he knew he couldn't do.

But when he caught her looking at him again, he couldn't help that wandering possibility. They were both older now. Yes, they were still six years apart in age, but it didn't seem nearly so bad now that she was in her twenties.

She leaned in and spoke to Emma for a moment. The woman nodded, giving her a smile. Then Charlie stood. She started walking toward him.

No. Not toward him.

Charlie pushed past him. He knew she didn't intend to let her arm brush against his, but one of her nephews darted along her other side, forcing her closer to Ash.

Even in that brief moment, he could feel how warm she was. He turned to watch her as she headed for the trees at the edge of the clearing. Did she want him to follow?

No. The look in her eyes didn't quite indicate that.

Charlie wanted some space—some peace and quiet.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Once again, Ash clenched his hands tightly in his pockets and turned to watch the festivities. About twenty minutes later, they were cleaning up. Emma was the one to take stock and commented, “Charlie isn’t back from her walk yet.”

Before anyone else could volunteer, Ash held up a hand. “I saw where she went. I’ll get her.” He turned on his heel and headed into the wooded area.

Charlie wasn’t hard to spot. While she was shielded from the others in the clearing, she was only just within the grove of trees. He caught sight of her hand first, wrapped around the trunk of the tree she leaned against.

He drew closer, not speaking at first. He wasn’t sure if she was resting or if something else was going on.

His boot snapped a twig, and her eyes flew wide just as he came into full view of her. She let out a soft laugh and placed her hand on her chest. “You startled me.”

Ash moved closer, studying her. She didn’t look like she was feeling very well. “You okay?”

She laughed again and nodded, breathing in deeply. “I’m fine,” she said on exhale. “Just a headache.”

He nodded, then jerked his chin toward the clearing. “I brought some aspirin if you need it.”

Charlie waved him off. “I’m fine. Is everyone getting ready?”

The answer didn't come right away. The more he studied her face, the harder it became to maintain control of his thoughts, his desires. His feet shuffled forward as if against his will. "Charlie," he murmured.

The whispered word caught her attention and she stilled, her back pressed against the tree. He was blocking the path of her escape, and he wasn't going anywhere.

"Yes," she rasped, her throat bobbing as she swallowed hard. "Did you need something?"

Ash let his gaze drift to her mouth, those lips that he'd kissed only once before. It had been the most innocent and yet exhilarating kisses he'd ever experienced in his life, and not for lack of finding something to compare. For nearly two years, he'd tried to find someone who could stir such feelings inside him. He'd had several first dates, but none of those women could compare to how he'd felt after kissing Charlie.

He'd berated himself for it, hated himself for how inappropriate it had been. He'd told himself the universe was punishing him for something he knew he shouldn't have done.

And yet here she was, unattached, free for the taking.

He moved in a little closer. She sucked in a sharp breath but didn't pull away to escape him.

"You find her, Ash?" Liam's voice called from the clearing.

Ash froze, half-expecting Liam to march into the area and explode with fury and indignation.

Before Ash could utter a word, Charlie ducked away from him and escaped.

What was he thinking? Where was his control?

Gone. And he wasn't sure he really wanted it back.

12

Charlie

Charlie scowled at herself in the mirror. She couldn't decide if she hated herself or if she hated Ash more.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw him. Every time she slept, he haunted her dreams. She could smell his cologne lingering in every room of the house he walked through. Her body reacted not only to his smile and scent, but also to his touch.

It wasn't often, but occasionally their hands would brush or they'd bump into one another in the kitchen. Teaching him was beginning to feel like torture. She couldn't take it anymore. She wanted to make him as miserable as he was making her.

He had to be taunting her, teasing her. That's what this was. Every look he gave her made her stomach flip. And whenever she caught him staring, it took all her strength not to tell him to stop.

Ash was dating someone, for heaven's sake. She didn't want to be the person blamed for him breaking things off with her. And she definitely didn't want to be with a guy who would cheat on his girlfriend.

Her scowl deepened.

"Be careful. You keep making that face and it's going to stay that way."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She glanced up and found Daniel leaning in the bathroom doorway. His arms were folded, and he smirked at her. Charlie stuck out her tongue at him, then reached for the door and flung it shut.

He stumbled back a step to avoid it, and she heard his grunt through the door. Then he knocked. “If Wade calls the house, tell him I’m out helping Ash learn how to lasso.”

Charlie scrambled for the doorknob and pulled it open. “What? Why?”

Her brother shrugged. “He said it looked like fun when we were at the picnic. But I think he just didn’t want anyone to outdo him the next time he’s invited.”

She fiddled with the doorknob in her hand thoughtfully. “Oh.”

He turned and headed down the hallway, leaving her to her thoughts.

Memories from the picnic hit her hard. It was strange to see Ash with her family and no longer view him like an older brother. He wasn’t just Mason’s, or Liam’s, or even Daniel’s friend anymore. He was Michael Ashton—hot firefighter who any girl would give their right arm to be on a date with.

She threw back her head with another disgusted groan. He’d never see her as more than his friend’s kid sister, which is why she knew that he was toying with her. He’d gotten a kick out of teasing her when they were younger. Why would it be any different now?

Charlie wanted to get him back. She wanted to fight fire with fire.

A wicked smile crossed her face as she turned to her reflection. She'd been paying attention enough to know that she had the ability to distract him. If she turned the tables on him, teased him, pretended to flirt with him—he'd panic as he had the other day when Liam had called them back to the clearing.

The last thing he wanted was to make her brothers mad. Not one of her brothers would put up with their sister dating one of their friends—especially Ash.

With quick, nimble fingers, she braided her hair into two braids.

His words echoed in her head. You're perfect the way you are. Never change.

Without another look in the mirror, she darted from the bathroom and into her room to grab her hat and boots. Then she headed outside.

Just like Daniel had said, he and Ash were working on lassoing. A large red replica of a bull's head had been positioned in the center of a corral. Neither Ash nor Daniel had noticed her approach, so she climbed up on the fence and perched on the edge.

"You're releasing too soon. You have to hold it a little longer, like this." Daniel demonstrated with the lasso in his hand and easily roped it around the bull's neck.

Ash nodded and swung his arm around and around. Just before he was about to release it, she said, "You want to keep your wrist loose, too."

He stiffened at her voice. The rope slipped from his hand and landed several feet to the side of his target.

Daniel glanced back at her. "She's not wrong." Clearly, he hadn't noticed the way

Charlie's voice had affected his friend.

Ash turned around and faced her, tugging the rope back into a coil in his hands. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment she thought she saw fire burning in them. But just as quickly those flames disappeared. He hadn't come over since their picnic last weekend, nor had they set up their next cooking lesson. Either he was busy, or he wanted her to sweat.

Well, too bad. He wasn't going to win this little game.

Charlie flipped her braid over her shoulder and nodded toward the bull. "Well? Aren't you going to try again? Don't stop on my account."

He turned forward, and Daniel demonstrated once more.

Her eyes locked onto the spot right between his shoulders, and she prayed he could feel her stare. She wanted him as thrown off as she'd felt in his presence. It wasn't fair that he could have such an effect on her and it not go the other way.

Once again, just before he released the lasso, she said, "Maybe if you get good enough, you can show your girlfriend how much of a cowboy you really are. Girls are suckers for cowboys."

She couldn't be sure, but she thought she saw him flinch when she spoke. Was he feeling guilty over toying with her when he had someone else? If so, she was happy to revel in his discomfort.

An eye for an eye.

He missed again. And again. And a third time before she decided to climb down from her perch.

Daniel muttered something about getting a drink and that he'd be back. Charlie smiled to herself as she headed for the barn. Maybe she'd go for a ride to get away from the ranch while Ash was around. She could only play the game so long before she started feeling guilty herself.

No one else was in the barn when she got there. Only a handful of horses were in their stalls, too. Her brothers had to spend the day rounding up the cattle to move them to a closer pasture, but one that hadn't been used in a while.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She trailed her fingers along the wooden doors that lined each stall and hummed to herself. The fact that Ash could cause this amount of upset probably meant she needed help—that, or she needed to find a guy who could distract her from him.

The problem was, there wasn't anyone who could compare.

He knew her more than she'd allowed any guy to get to know her. And she felt she knew him, too. He was a good guy. Someone who could be sweet and loving but firm at the same time. He'd helped her realize how silly it was to be upset over a guy who didn't deserve her time. To her, Ash was perfect, and no one would ever compare.

Charlie made it to the end of the row of stalls and reached inside to her horse. Rose had been a scrawny horse they'd rescued from a farm that had gone under. At times she was skittish, but not when it came to Charlie. She stepped forward, and Charlie rubbed her nose.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" Ash's low growl startled Charlie and she jumped, spinning to face him.

"What?" she asked, breathlessly.

He took a step toward her, his eyes flashing dangerously. "You're toying with me," he accused. "You're baiting me."

Her eyes narrowed. Good. She'd been successful. "I'm not doing anything," she said, her chin lifting. "Nothing that you yourself haven't already done."

Ash's jaw tightened and he took a step back, running a hand through his hair. "I knew I shouldn't have come today. It was too soon."

She frowned. "Too soon for what?"

He ignored her, and that familiar tension rose inside her, burning with irritation. She'd been dealing with keeping her own feelings at bay—feelings she had for him—because he was off limits. There were too many reasons he was out of reach, and each passing day only made her want him more.

Charlie balled her hands, her teeth clenched. "You're the one toying with me."

His gaze cut to her so sharply she could almost imagine it slicing right through her. Once again, he stepped closer, this time his body nearly touching hers. "Toying with you? Is that what you think it is?" There was not a degree of teasing in his tone. It was low, dark and guttural. The sound of it felt so familiar—like her own desires that had been squashed and suppressed and yet wanted to be set free.

She blinked, and her hands pressed against the wall of the barn. She wasn't scared of him. Not in the slightest. She was more afraid of what she might do if she lost control and just pulled him in for a kiss like he'd done to her all those years ago.

He hooked his finger under her chin, his eyes searching hers, the frustration easing and turning into something softer. "You don't see it, do you? You can't begin to understand the way you affect me."

Charlie swallowed hard, her pulse thrumming through her body—her chest, her neck, right down to making her legs weak.

Ash's scowl returned. "And the worst part is that it will never work between us. I will never be able to make you mine." He said the words more to himself than to anyone

else. They were quiet, a breath of a whisper, but she heard them. And they tore something free from inside her.

She wanted that, too. The desire to give her heart to him was so strong that she opened her mouth and tried to tell him as much. But the reality set in too quickly like claws digging into the warm flesh of that erratic beating heart. Charlie brought her hands around and pushed him back a step. “You have a girlfriend,” she spat. “You shouldn’t be saying stuff like that to me. Make up your own confused mind and figure out what you want, because I assure you, she wouldn’t want to know that this is how you feel.” The nameless, faceless woman who was probably better for him than Charlie would ever be seemed to choke her, making it difficult to say her next words. “Blaming others for what you can’t have isn’t going to work.”

Charlie shoved past him, her shoulder bumping him to the side as she stormed out of the barn. She got a few yards from the door before she bumped into a hard body. Daniel grunted, and she glanced up into his surprised face.

“Charlie? What’s the?—”

“I’m fine,” Charlie muttered. There was no way on earth she was going to out Ash. As much as she knew she needed to take a break from spending time with him, she knew her brothers needed his friendship. They were a close-knit group. They leaned on each other—even if it was for companionship. Daniel, above all the others, needed that friendship most. With all her brothers married or engaged, Daniel was left as the odd man out. She wouldn’t dream of taking away the one guy he was actually hanging out with.

At Daniel’s incredulous look, she repeated. “I’m fine, Daniel. I just have a headache. I’m going inside. See you at dinner.”

“Yeah,” he said. “See you at dinner.”

Ash

Ash had nearly lost control.

Again.

He put a hand on his lower back as he paced a few steps and shook his head.

Who was he kidding? He'd definitely lost it. He'd showed his hand. He'd tempted fate first at the family picnic, then again here. There was so much wrong with how everything was playing out.

Charlie was right about one thing. He needed to figure out what he wanted and what he was willing to do in order to get it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He went over what had just occurred, and he could pinpoint the exact moment he'd let his walls crumble. She'd brought up his girlfriend, not once, but twice. Just the mere mention of it was like a slap in the face.

Charlie had essentially called him a cheater. And if he actually did have a girl somewhere, then she would have been right. He'd never be so crass as to do that to anyone—least of all Charlie. His lies were muddying everything up.

He glanced at the door where Charlie had disappeared. Would she have allowed him to kiss her if she didn't think there was someone else? He'd wanted to. More than he wanted anything, he wanted to explore her lips with his own—just to see if what he remembered, what he craved, was still there between them.

Deep inside, he knew it was. He knew that it wasn't a fluke he felt this way about her.

Now he had a bigger problem.

Since he'd told her he wanted her, that she tempted him, there was no way she'd believe he could be trusted.

He muttered a curse just as Daniel entered the barn. He glanced over his shoulder—presumably where he could see Charlie, then he swung his gaze over to Ash and his brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

Ash shook his head, waving a hand. “Nothing.”

“Did she say something to you?”

Ash stopped still and stared at Daniel.

“Because I can talk to her if you want me to.”

“What makes you think I’m bothered by anything she has to say?” The words exploded from him in tight breaths. “I could care less what she thinks.”

Daniel shrugged, leaning against one of the empty stall doors. “You’ve been a little... off... lately.”

Ash huffed. “I’m fine.”

“Is it your girlfriend?”

Once again, Ash stiffened. His blood ran cold. So Daniel had noticed that bit. He’d heard the way Charlie had talked about his girlfriend like it would be enough to set him off. This could be his chance to ease out of that lie—at least with Daniel. It was as if the world had offered him an olive branch. “Things aren’t great.” It was all he could think of to say. It wasn’t one hundred percent incorrect, either.

Daniel offered a look of support. “I’m sorry, man.” Then his mouth set in a firm line. “I’ll talk to her.”

“No!” Ash blurted.

His friend remained grim but nodded. “If you ever want to talk about it...” He raised his hands with a shrug. “I’m here.”

“Thanks,” Ash murmured. It was nice to know that he had someone who would be up for that sort of thing—only it wouldn’t help him at all if he did miraculously find a way to win Charlie over.

Another nod.

They didn't finish their lasso practice, and that was just fine with Ash. He wasn't sure he wanted to be around when her other brothers came in for dinner. He didn't want to risk being invited to that meal and have to be in the same room as her until he could figure out a way to get his feelings across.

He was going to take what she said to heart—weigh the pros and cons of the options he had in front of him and decide.

Smoke made it hard to see what was right in front of him. Embers and ash floated through the sky like snow falling down around him and his crew. These were the men he could count on to watch his back, to make sure he didn't make a mistake.

But they weren't exactly the guys he could talk to about his romantic issues. Most of them were married. At twenty-eight, he was one of few he knew who didn't have either a girlfriend or was married with at least one kid. In other parts of the country, getting married before twenty-five was unheard of. But in this part of Colorado, he was the anomaly.

They fought the fire together as one unit, pressing in on it, forcing it to retreat.

And every step he took, his thoughts were consumed with Charlie.

She was like a wildfire in his head, his chest, his whole body. She consumed his every waking moment, fed his every desire. Whether she was smiling at him or glaring at him, he still adored her. Her words could be a balm or cut like a knife, and he'd still want to go back for more.

There was no rhyme or reason to why he couldn't get her out of his head, and at this point, he knew he didn't want to. It would be like cutting off a piece of himself. She

belonged with him, and he wanted no one else.

Something cracked loudly, a branch overhead. Ash caught sight of the large overhanging piece of wood, then dropped his gaze to Chuck at his side. He hollered at the man, then charged at him, knocking him out of the way just as the branch crashed to the ground.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Chuck was momentarily stunned, then Tad joined them and helped Ash to his feet. Ash held out his hand to Chuck, who grabbed it with a sharp nod of thanks.

It wasn't until after they again set to work pushing the licking flames back that Ash realized just how fast his heart was beating. It wasn't erratic in the same way that Charlie affected him. No, this was adrenaline fueled... and it mingled with something else.

Fear.

He glanced at Chuck a couple more times in the first twenty minutes after he'd tackled him to the ground. The man had two kids. He'd just had his thirtieth birthday a month ago. The branch might not have killed him, but it would have injured him. Had it been a larger tree, he would have been hospitalized.

Life was so short. In the blink of an eye, the man could have left his children fatherless.

Ash shook off the unsettled feeling that rose in his chest at that thought. He'd given it six years. Six years! Seventy-two months of telling himself that she wasn't meant for him and he'd made a mistake. All that time, he'd really tried to forget about Charlie, but it always came back to her.

Just her.

If he were to die today, in this fire, she would never know how he truly felt—how he'd never managed to find anyone to compare to her. He wanted her to

know,neededher to.

Not only that, but he needed to clarify that he never had a girlfriend, and the only reason he'd mentioned one was to avoid being set up by her brothers. Ash didn't know if any of that would make a difference, but he knew he had to try. He had to say something, or he'd regret it.

The fire continued to roar around them. They'd make progress and then have to step back when the flames were too hot. The work took longer than he'd expected, but that was what happened when old, dead trees were caught up in the fire.

Onward and onward they pushed into the fire. By the end of it, they were all exhausted, overheated, and looked like they'd walked through the devil's house and come out on the other side.

A helicopter picked them up in the middle of a burned field. He and three other men were the last to be lifted from the scene.

No one spoke on the helicopter. They all sat back with their helmets in their hands and rested. Today was a hard day. It was one of those days that made a man reconsider what the heck he was trying to do with his life.

Fires like the one today only caused burnout.

He turned his head and stared down at the ruined landscape. By this time next year, new plants would start to grow, but it would take years upon years for it to return to the beautiful forest it once was.

Death. That's what he saw down there. It hit him harder today for some reason. All of Charlie's complaints about being a firefighter floated through his mind. It was too dangerous. His life was worth more than the adrenaline rush he got from jumping into

the fray.

Ash glanced over to Chuck, noting his smooth features. He could be asleep for all Ash knew. But he was fine. He'd be sore in the morning after their tumble. But he'd live.

Had Ash not been there... he didn't even want to think about what would have happened. That was the reason he kept going. To save the lives of the men he worked with. To save the lives of those who couldn't put out these fires.

It wasn't about glory. Heck, it wasn't even about the adrenaline rush of jumping out of those planes so he could fight the fire from the right angle.

He loved his job because he was doing a little bit of good in a world that needed it.

Ash closed his eyes, and Charlie's face flooded his vision. He loved her, too. And he was going to tell her that. She might not be willing to accept it. She might not even be interested in him at all, but he could be patient.

Six years of waiting had taught him that. If he had to wait another six years, he'd do it. But hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

A small smile tugged at his lips as he imagined the possibilities—a future with her. Someone who loved with her whole heart, who could cook like a five-star chef, who could ride like a wild woman, and who didn't even know the power she held.

After a shower, Ash tossed his phone onto the dresser, not caring that it slid and toppled to the ground. He practically fell into bed. The fire had lasted a couple days. He'd gone back and forth between the station and the fire itself until they'd deemed it mostly contained. He wouldn't be surprised if he slept for two whole days after the ordeal.

Pulling up his covers, he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

14

Charlie

Charlie's hands shook. Her ears were ringing, and she'd barely managed to get to a seated position while the newscaster reported on the biggest fire of the season. It was close enough to Copper Creek that the sun had turned red in the sky. Taking one step outside was suffocating, and everything smelled of campfire.

Daniel sat on the edge of his seat, his eyes glued to the screen as well. She glanced at him, then back to the television, hating how much she wanted to ask him about Ash. There were others in the room watching, as well, stirring more tension into the house than she could stand.

She'd been harsh with him the last time they'd spoken, and she wouldn't have been surprised if she found out he never wanted to come by again just so he could avoid her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Heart sinking, she continued to listen.

“After three days, we now have sources telling us the fire is seventy percent contained. Those in the area were safely evacuated, and there have been no reported casualties.”

Daniel heaved a breath and leaned back in his seat, his hands laced behind his head. They were all visibly shaken. No one had heard from Ash in the last couple of days. That much had been clear when she’d entered the room.

She settled back in her seat as well, the buzzing in her ears slowly dying down. The phone resting on the cushion at her side seemed to scream at her to call him, to message him just so she could confirm he was okay.

Her fingers twitched in her lap while she stared at it.

“Someone should try to call again,” Wade said from the doorway. His gaze swept through the room.

“I’ve already tried five times,” Daniel offered. “It’s going straight to voicemail.”

“They said that there were no casualties,” Charlie said just above a whisper.

Daniel shook his head. “That doesn’t mean he couldn’t have been hurt.”

“You don’t think he’s in a hospital somewhere, do you? They would have said it on the news, right?” Charlie asked.

Her brother looked at her, curiosity leaking from his gaze. “I suppose that would make an interesting news story. People are suckers for heroes.”

She nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Maybe someone should stop by his apartment,” another family member offered.

Charlie didn’t pay attention to who had said it. She only continued to stare at her phone. Finally, she picked it up as she stood. Shoving it in her back pocket, she said, “I’m going to bed.” She didn’t care that it was barely dusk out. She needed some time alone to think.

That sinking feeling inside, though not as severe, was still present. Until she heard his voice, she wasn’t going to trust that he was okay.

Thoughts of him consumed her as she went through the motions of preparing for bed. Once she slid beneath the sheets, she pulled the phone out again to check for any messages.

Nothing.

She opened the messages app and her thumb hovered over the keyboard. What could she say to him that wouldn’t sound ridiculous?

Charlie let out a disgruntled sound and tossed the phone on the bed beside her. The darkened ceiling blurred above her as those thoughts of Ash consumed her.

His words to her clattered through her mind.

You don’t see it, do you? You can’t begin to understand the way you affect me.

Heat coiled in the pit of her stomach. His words were a caress along her cheek. They'd captured her breath and seized it, not allowing her to take even the smallest breath.

And the worst part is that it will never work between us. I will never be able to make you mine.

His.

Charlie closed her eyes and let out a slow, shuddering breath. She'd thought he was playing games. But the way he'd said those things to her, the way his voice had cracked when he whispered them so close to her face, she'd begun to wonder if she was wrong.

She'd never seen Ash so agitated.

Her heart thrummed, and she curled up on her side to ease the tension that had coiled from her stomach all the way up to her heart. Her body only grew more agitated, more restless. She couldn't just lay here when she didn't know if he was okay.

She sat straight up in her bed and threw the covers aside. Without giving it a second thought, she grabbed a pair of jeans, a hoodie, and her boots. Perhaps a ride would be enough to ease that spring of tension within her.

The second she emerged from the barn, she paused. Even as the sun crept behind the horizon, she could see the storm clouds moving into the valley. There was no telling how much moisture they'd receive from them, but hopefully it would be enough to give the men like Ash a reprieve from fighting fires this season.

With one boot in the stirrups, she hoisted herself into the saddle and urged Rose into a canter.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Wind whipped at her hair, and she regretted not pulling them into the braids she loved so much. She closed her eyes for brief moments, letting her other senses flood her mind with her surroundings. The sound of the wind through the trees. The crickets chirping in the brush. She could smell the fresh-cut hay in the field at her right and the barest hint of wildflowers that managed to survive year after year.

In this moment she could relax and push off any worry she had for the future. She had to trust that the news reporters would have mentioned if one of the heroes had been injured. She had to believe that Ash was okay, because if she gave up, then she didn't know how her heart would survive.

Time lost all meaning as she continued to ride. The skies got darker. Her horse grew more antsy, and when the first raindrop pelted her face, she knew it was time to turn around. The small drops splashed against her skin, goosebumps prickling along her arms. The closer she drew to the house, the heavier the rain became.

She couldn't even be mad. The rain was needed, welcomed, prayed for. Charlie turned her face to the sky and let out a laugh. It was beautiful.

Rose didn't seem to appreciate the change in weather though. She didn't even slow down when they reached the barn. Instead, she darted right into the shelter and skidded to a stop once she got out of the rain.

Charlie laughed again, leaning over to pat Rose on the neck. Then she climbed down from the saddle and made quick work of getting Rose brushed down and dried off.

Her hoodie was heavy with moisture and the cold bit into her jeans, making her legs

ache. Water no longer dripped down her face, but her hair was as wet as if she'd stepped out of the shower. At least the tension she'd been dealing with had eased up.

If Ash didn't call anyone by tomorrow, she was going to march over to his place herself and give him a piece of her mind.

She tossed one last look around the barn, lit only by a few dim lights so they could see their way around at night. Her hand trailed against the stalls, then the doorway itself. Charlie waited there for a moment, a memory tugging at the back of her mind.

It had been a rainy night when Ash had kissed her. It had also been a night wrought with tension and heartache.

She heaved a sigh and started jogging toward the house.

A figure stepped out of the shadow of a tree, and she clapped her hands over her mouth to stop from screaming. "Ash?" she hissed. She could barely see his features in the glowing light from the porch a few yards away. "Ash!" Instincts took over and she threw her arms around his shoulders. "I was so worried about you." She pulled back and frowned at him, tempted to slug him like her brothers might. "We were all worried about you!"

He wore a hoodie, but he hadn't covered his head. His hands were shoved into his front pockets and the expression on his face was pained.

She peered at him in the dark, her eyes squinting with worry. "What's wrong?"

Ash shifted, twisting and digging the toe of his shoe into the grass at their feet. "I'm fine," he murmured.

No, he wasn't.

Her first thought was that someone had gotten hurt and only he knew about it. Then upon looking at him closer, she disregarded that thought with a shake of her head. Her hand reached out, and she touched his forearm. “What’s wrong?” she tried again.

His eyes darted toward the darkened house. It looked as though her family had gone to bed. Not one light was on.

She glanced there as well, her concern growing. “Should I go get?—”

“No!” he said, sharp and quiet. Then his expression relaxed but only slightly. The rain was still coming down, but it wasn’t a downpour. It had lightened to that nice sort of rain that made her blink when the droplets hit her lashes, but it wasn’t unbearable. It was the kind of rain someone could sing and dance under.

Charlie reached for his arm. “Let’s get out of this rain.” She tugged him toward the side of the house, beneath the roof’s awning. She pressed her back to the building and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. An apology was already forming on her lips for the last conversation they had, but he spoke first.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Charlie.”

She didn’t think she heard him right. She glanced at him, confusion flooding her senses.

Ash pulled both of his hands out of his hoodie pocket, forming fists at his sides. His voice was low and serious, but it was his eyes that made her grow still. There wasn’t a drop of teasing. All she read there was desire and longing. “I’m in love with you, Charlie.”

She gasped, shaking her head. “No.”

“No?” he demanded, his voice hoarse, painful.

“No,” she repeated firmly. “We can’t do this. You said so yourself. Your girlfriend?—”

“She doesn’t exist.”

Her mouth fell open, then she dug her fingers into her hair, letting out a baffled laugh.

“You expect me to believe that?”

He opened his mouth, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“No.”

“You keep saying that?—”

“What else am I supposed to say?”

“You’re supposed to listen to me.” His hands reached for her, but she took a step back from him. His jaw tightened, and he shoved his hands into his pocket once more. “I made her up because I didn’t want Liam to set me up. He wouldn’t leave it be.”

Charlie let out a sharp laugh. “Do you hear how that sounds?”

“It’s the truth,” he insisted. “There’s only one person I’m interested in. What was I supposed to say? Gee, thanks, Liam, but I’d much rather date your baby sister.”

She flinched, not liking the sound of that, either. “And the cooking lessons?”

“An excuse,” he said quietly. “I... wanted to spend time with you.”

Her heart burst with his statement, and yet she was still having a hard time wrapping her head around what he was saying. She shook her head, unable to say anything more than she already had. She needed to think about what he’d said—what it would mean for the two of them, and for what it would mean to her brothers. She only got two steps into the rain before he stopped her.

In a movement that flashed by so quickly she barely had a chance to register what

was happening, one of his hands had slipped around her waist and the other cradled the back of her head. For one breath-stealing second, their eyes locked as her mouth turned into a smile and she nodded. Then his mouth crushed over hers.

Her legs nearly buckled, and she wrapped her arms around his neck in a desperate attempt to keep upright. This kiss wasn't like their first. That one had been a sweet, gentle caress—a whisper of a promise for her future.

This one was demanding, searing, absolute fire. The two kisses could barely be compared, and yet they were intertwined.

Beginning and end.

They'd come full circle from that kiss six years ago. Here in the rain, she couldn't help but believe everything he'd said. She got the feeling that if he'd give her access to his phone, his computer, she wouldn't find any evidence of a girlfriend. His stories had been all too vague.

And then another memory hit her. What he'd said about how he met his girlfriend.

She's related to a good friend of mine.

Is she from Copper Creek? Charlie had asked.

Yes.

Every question she could remember asking him—his answers could have easily been describing her. And that realization made it that much easier to give in to the desires she'd been fighting since Christmas. To throw caution to the wind and the rain just so she could enjoy this moment in his arms.

Their kiss deepened and a soft moan slipped from Charlie's lips. Her hands pushed into his hair and she clung to him like he was breath itself.

No, this would not be the end.

This?

This was only the beginning.

15

Ash

Ash sat on the couch in the living room. A movie played on the television. Daniel sat beside him, and on his other side, Wade and Brielle had squished together. Charlie was curled up on a chair in the corner with a book in her hands.

It was dark in the room, save for the one lamp that hovered over Charlie's right shoulder. Her lashes fluttered just enough for her to glance in his direction, and he winked at her.

Two weeks later and he still couldn't get enough of her. He couldn't be happier than he was in that moment. He had everything he'd ever wanted.

Had their timelines been a little skewed in the beginning? Absolutely. But his patience had paid off, and sometimes he couldn't believe any of it.

A smile curled Charlie's lips, and she dropped her focus to the book once again before turning the page.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

It had been incredibly difficult to hide their budding relationship. The constant worry that someone would walk in on him saying something they would deem inappropriate had his body constantly on edge. He still came for cooking classes, and every so often it would be just the two of them.

When it wasn't, all he got was the brief touches of his finger grazing hers where they rested on the countertop.

He kept coming up with excuses to see her for additional lessons, but no one seemed to be any the wiser.

Ash rolled his lower lip out from between his teeth and glanced at her again, not surprised to see her looking over at him. He was going to have to ask her out for an official date. He'd just have to figure out a way to get her there without her brothers catching on.

They'd both agreed that it was for the best—keeping their relationship a secret.

Charlie placed her book to her side and got to her feet. Both Daniel and Ash glanced up when she stood. He wasn't surprised when she didn't look in his direction as she moved toward the kitchen.

Daniel glanced over his shoulder at her. "Can you get me a drink, Charlie?"

She rolled her eyes. "You can get it yourself."

He pouted. "But I'm comfy."

“I’ll get you something,” Ash said and stood.

“Thanks, man,” Daniel nodded. “A cola?”

Ash clapped his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Sure thing.” He leaped over the back of the couch and followed Charlie into the kitchen. It was open to the entertaining room, and there would be no hiding anything if any of her family turned around to look at them.

Charlie was already at the cupboard where the cups were kept. She pulled down two and handed one to him. Ash accepted it, his fingers brushing against hers and lingering there before she released it.

“Thirsty?” she whispered.

“I’m craving something,” he whispered back.

The only light on in the kitchen came from beneath the microwave, but even in that dim lighting, he could see the blush that crept up her neck and into her face. She looked toward the living room, then back to him. “You’re positively shameless.”

He wagged his eyebrows and leaned closer to her. “You want to know what I’m thinking about?”

She arched a brow before she turned to the fridge and pulled out a two-liter bottle of cola. “I haven’t a clue.”

Ash moved closer to her. He lowered his mouth to her ear, then brushed the hair from the back of her neck. “I want to take you out.”

Goosebumps rose on her neck, and he smiled, so tempted to brush a kiss to it. She

turned and pushed the bottle into his hands. “Do you think that would be wise?”

“I think that I’m going crazy without being able to kiss?—”

“Hey, Ash,” Daniel called.

Jolting back a step, Ash turned to see that his friend wasn’t even looking in his direction. “Yeah?”

“Maybe some chips, too. We got barbeque.”

“Coming right up.” Ash ducked his head with a nervous smile at Charlie. Then he whispered, “This conversation will be continued.”

She hid her smile behind her glass, then moved around him to pour herself a drink. Then she slipped back to her seat beneath the light. The book returned to her lap, and she only snuck one more look before she dove into her story.

Ash intertwined his fingers with Charlie’s as they walked down the street. Colorado Springs was the perfect location for them to be themselves without worrying about prying eyes. Charlie leaned into him. Out here, no one would judge them.

They fit together.

They’d already had dinner, and now he wanted to take her for some ice cream. But as they strolled past the bookstore, Charlie tugged him toward it. Her eyes were bright, and he knew there was no avoiding it.

Three books later, they were back on the sidewalk and heading for the self-serve frozen yogurt place. He piled his chocolate ice cream high with Oreos and chocolate syrup, while she put strawberries and graham crackers on her cheesecake-flavored

dessert.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Moments later, they were seated on a bench outside in front of the shop.

Once again, she was leaning into him. “Tell me about what you were up to when you left town,” she asked between bites.

He tilted his head. “Like what?”

She shrugged. “Did you date a lot?”

He snorted. “That’s what you want to know?”

“What?” She laughed. “I’m curious. I won’t be mad.”

Ash sobered. He could hear the ever-so-slight note of worry in her voice. Draping his arm around her shoulder, he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Honestly?”

“Honestly,” she whispered.

“I stopped going out on dates around the time I left town.”

She stiffened, craning her head around to look at him. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head, not a degree of amusement in his gaze. “I’m not. After...” He blew out a nervous breath. “After that night, I tried to forget about you—about how it felt to kiss you.” He shut his eyes tight, trying to clear his thoughts. “I shouldn’t have kissed you then. The guilt ate at me for years. Still does.”

Charlie continued to stare at him, and he fidgeted beneath it.

He cleared his throat and turned his head to choke out a cough. “I tried to forget because I thought—Iknewit could never work between us. Our lives were like two shooting stars, never destined to line up.”

16

Charlie

Charlie rolled out the dough that had been resting for the last thirty minutes. Ash stood next to her with his own. They were shoulder to shoulder, quietly working. To say it had been difficult to keep their relationship a secret was the understatement of the century.

Ash had to maintain the friendship he had with her brothers and the amount of time he spent hanging out with them or they’d start asking questions—like if he’d broken things off with his girlfriend.

On a similar note, her family knew she wasn’t dating. She rarely went out with anyone—friends or otherwise. If she suddenly spent all her time taking trips to the city, they’d definitely be giving her the third degree.

It was her lot in life, she supposed. Being the youngest sister in a family of mostly men—men who were now married but few who had children—they needed something to consume theirtime. She had no doubt that the second she mentioned she was seeing someone, they would demand an audience.

Ash nudged her slightly, nearly knocking her off balance.

She laughed. “I’m trying to roll out the pasta dough, and you should be doing the

same,” she admonished.

He reached forward to pinch some of the flour from the pile they had and rubbed his fingers over the dough. He hadn’t needed anymore, and he definitely didn’t need the second pinch he reached for either.

“You shouldn’t do that?—”

Ash turned to her and rubbed his thumb down her nose.

Her mouth dropped open as she stared at him.

He snickered, then motioned to her face. “You’ve got a little something… just there.”

Her brothers had planned on being away for most of the day—none of them even coming home for lunch. It had been one of the reasons they’d done one of their cooking lessons on a Thursday rather than on their usual Wednesday of the week, and it was definitely the only reason Ash would have been so bold as to flirt with her like that.

Charlie reached for her own dusting of flour and tossed it at him, marring his black T-shirt.

He let out a low rumble of laughter. It might have even sounded menacing if she wasn’t so enamored of him. Ash shook his head. “You really didn’t want to do that,” he said.

“Oh, yeah? Why not?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Ash grabbed a handful of the flour without even looking at it. Charlie squealed and moved to dart away from him, but his arm reached out too quickly and ensnared her. It wrapped around her waist and pulled her against him. He held his hand over her head even though she pushed and shoved at his chest to be freed.

Laughter spilled from her lips as she shook her head. “Ash, don’t. You can’t?—”

Ash released the flour over her head, dousing her in a cloud of powder.

She gasped, blinking as the cloud dissipated. Preparing herself to lecture him on the wastefulness of what he’d just done, she lifted her eyes to meet his but only saw burning desire. His gaze pinned her like it had done so many times before. His arm tightened around her, making it impossible to slip away—though she wouldn’t have wanted to even if he’d given her the chance.

He brought his hand closer to her face, then rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. She tasted the flour immediately, and her tongue darted out to wipe it away. Without giving her a moment to make sense of his intentions, his mouth crashed down over hers, claiming her in a way she’d only dreamed about. He pushed his floured hand into her hair, and they clung to one another, giving up themselves in one of the rare moments they had alone together.

She soaked up his attention, the way he held her, the way she knew she’d never feel this safe or loved in another’s arms for the rest of her life. The blood in her ears roared like white water rapids. If she were to die in this moment, she would be content to have experienced the raw desire and passion that he’d given her.

Ash tore away from her.

No—he was torn from her.

In a flash of movement, loud voices, and broken dishes, Ash was yanked away from her. Daniel held his arms behind his back while Mason stood between herself and a surprised Ash. Neither one of them had heard her brothers come in while in the throes of their passionate kiss. And there were no words they could say to explain themselves.

Charlie screamed, “Daniel! Let him go!”

Ash wasn’t even struggling. He was only glaring Mason down. Out of all her brothers, Daniel would have been the only one strong enough to hold the firefighter back. He was taller and broader than Ash, but Ash made up for the height difference with all his training.

Charlie moved to get past Mason, but he threw his arm out to his side. “Go to your room, Charlie.”

She gaped. “What?”

He didn’t even bother looking at her. His voice was cool and menacing at the same time. “We’ll have a talk, later.”

She pushed his arm, but it remained immovable. “You’re not the boss of me.” It was likely a poor choice of words, but it was the only thing that came to mind. “Let him go, Daniel. Both of you need to leave right now.”

Daniel’s eyes darted from Mason to Charlie. There was a brief hesitation in the way he scowled—as if he might have had an inkling this relationship was taking place.

But it quickly left when Mason whipped his head toward her. “I said getout.”

Charlie folded her arms. “I’m not leaving. Whatever you’re going to do, you’ll have to do it with me present.”

Mason growled. She’d never heard him so angry before. He was usually the level-headed, quiet one. Was he going to forcibly remove her? She wouldn’t have a chance against him if he threw her over his shoulder to accomplish it.

Her eyes darted to Ash, who still remained stone-faced and unmoving except for his heaving chest. She wanted to tell him to escape from Daniel’s grip. He could probably do it. He’d shown he knew so much more than he taught her in those self-defense classes. And yet he didn’t budge an inch.

Did he want this to happen?

Had he heard her brothers enter the house and allowed them to be caught?

Her stomach bottomed out at the thought.

Mason’s arm remained out to keep her from interfering, but she couldn’t bring herself to move either. All she could do was watch Ash. He yanked his arms free from Daniel and rubbed his wrists, his eyes only flicking to her for a moment—but Mason didn’t miss it.

Her brother lunged forward and tackled Ash to the ground, knocking a nearby stool over and shattering its leg. Mason threw the first punch, and Ash’s head whipped to the side.

Charlie screamed again and bolted toward them, but it was Daniel who caught her around the waist and prevented her from interfering.

Ash could have fought back—could have knocked Mason on his backside if he'd wanted to, but he didn't. He managed to get out from under Mason and back to his feet. She recognized the fighting stance, the way he held his fists up so he could block any oncoming attack. Why was he just letting Mason knock him around like that?

“Mason!” Charlie cried out. “Stop.”

Mason stood straight, his fists at his sides as he breathed heavily. “How long?” he demanded.

Ash glanced at her.

“Don't look at her. How long have you been cheating on your girlfriend with my sister?” He spit the words, but Ash didn't react.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Charlie clawed at Daniel's hold on her, and he loosened his grip but wouldn't let her free. She growled at all of them. "Ash never had a girlfriend."

Mason let out a derisive laugh. "And you believe him?"

"It's true," Ash muttered. He wiped his bloody lip with his hand and winced. "I made her up so Liam would stop trying to set me up with people I had no interest in dating."

Another snort from Mason.

Slowly, Ash dropped his hands and stood straight. He shoved his hands in his pockets and, this time, avoided looking directly at her. "I've... this isn't new. I've liked Charlie for a while now—been interested in dating her..." He swallowed hard, and the bulge in his throat bobbed from the effort. He glanced at her briefly, the only warning he gave her before he said quietly, "Ever since I kissed her—just that once—six years ago."

It took a minute for the words to settle between them all. Charlie could see Mason doing the math in his head before his face turned bright red with fury. He took two steps and plunged his fist into Ash's stomach, making him double over.

Charlie hollered at Mason, thrashed in Daniel's grasp, and finally escaped her brother's hold. By the time she got to Ash's side, he was on his knees. She turned fury-sparked eyes to Mason. "Stop being a jerk."

Mason shook out his hand and said, "He had no right, Charlie. It was wrong for him

to do that.”

“I can take care of myself,” she snapped. Her eyes shifted to Daniel, who had remained silent the whole time, but his features were just as tight as ever.

“It’s okay, Charlie,” Ash groaned. “I deserved it.”

She snorted. “We’re both adults. We can make our own choices.”

Mason pointed a finger at Ash. “He was an adult. You were still a kid.”

“You weren’t there,” she bit out. “You don’t know what happened.”

“I know he kissed you when he should have been keeping his hands to himself.” There was going to be no changing Mason’s mind. She could see that now. He was furious with his friend, and no amount of rationalizing with him would change that. Mason took a step toward them, and she held up a hand. He stopped, but his voice did all the damage and more. “I want you to leave and never step foot on this property again.”

Ash stiffened.

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t have a say in what he does. This isn’t your home anymore.”

Mason glowered at her. “Then I’ll tell Wade what happened. I doubt he’ll argue, seeing as he has a little girl himself now.” He jerked his chin toward Daniel. “And Daniel still lives here. I’ll let him drag this sorry excuse for a?—”

“You won’t touch him,” Charlie snapped, her anger at its tipping point. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough damage?” She turned her gaze to Daniel, hating herself for

pleading with him. “We can’t change the past. And right now, there’s nothing inherently wrong with our relationship.”

Mason snorted. He knew Daniel better than Charlie did. They were closer in age.

Daniel’s features scrunched into something menacing, and he took a step toward Ash, who surprisingly didn’t even flinch. “If you hurt her?—”

“Seriously?” Mason said. “If you think he’s going to treat her?—”

“I’ll make it my mission to hunt you down and deal with you myself.”

Chills rippled through Charlie’s body at the threat. Her blood went cold as ice as she watched Daniel turn and attempt to push Mason from the room. Mason jerked out of his brother’s path and sent another withering glare in Ash’s direction.

Then they were gone.

Ash groaned as he shifted to get to his feet, and Charlie scrambled to help him. He steadied himself against the countertop, not looking at her. His eyes remained locked on the place between his hands where they gripped the edge. “I’m sorry,” he rasped, finally.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” she whispered. “It’s Mason who should apologize.” She hurried to grab a rag and ran it under the cold water at the sink. Then she returned to his side and turned him to face her.

With a gentle touch, she pressed it against his jaw and his bloodied lip. “You didn’t have to tell them the whole story, you know.”

His eyes found hers, and he reached up to wrap his hand around her wrist. “Yes, I

did. I couldn't risk it coming out later and becoming a problem." He took the rag from her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm, then he winced with the movement.

"You didn't even fight back," she whispered, emotion burning in her throat. "And now you're hurt."

His bright eyes found hers once more. "It was worth it."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

When she gave him an incredulous look, he chuckled.

“Because now, maybe we can actually make this thing work.”

17

Ash

Ash knew it was probably a mistake to show up at Mason’s home without calling him. But he knew better than to believe that Mason would even pick up the phone if he didn’t try to call.

The year after Ash had stolen that kiss from Charlie, Harriet had come to visit her uncle for the summer. Mason had been so wrapped up in that new part of his life, that it hadn’t seemed to bother him that Ash moved away.

There was a sort of understanding that their lives were moving in different directions. Neither one of them made a huge effort to stay in touch, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t pick up where they left off when he came back.

Unfortunately, the rift between them now couldn’t be blamed on the miles between them. It was solely Ash’s fault.

While he stood beside his truck in the driveway, he considered what Mason might do to him when he noticed Ash had just shown up. He’d already ignored all the text messages that Ash had sent him. Daniel also avoided him. And all the other Keagan men threw him dark looks. Nothing was secret anymore.

The only person to continue being somewhat cordial was Carter. Ash didn't know the whole story, but apparently the twin had issues of his own. Caleb hated Ash, but Emma was nice.

Ash pushed away from his truck, opting to not dwell on the fact that he'd basically put a wall between Charlie and those she cared for.

If he could get Mason to give him a chance to explain, then maybe all of that would change. A few minutes ago, he'd seen Mason head into the barn. It had been a quick glimpse, and he hadn't come out yet. This might be the only chance that Ash had to get back into Mason's good graces. He'd let things settle for a week. That should be enough time, right?

There was a distinct feeling of nausea that roiled in his gut. Mason had only confirmed all the thoughts that Ash had about himself over the years. At least Daniel had seen that he couldn't fight Charlie about who she chose to spend her time with.

He shook his head again, letting those thoughts go. He was here to see Mason.

Ash turned the corner to find Mason brushing down a horse. It was tied up and prepared to go through all the stages of grooming. There was a stack of fresh horseshoes nearby and some tools that looked as though they'd be used to adhere the shoes or clean out the hooves.

Mason was so focused on his work that he hadn't noticed Ash entering the barn until he was right up close to him. His head snapped up, surprise darkening into something malicious. He straightened and faced Ash, his voice sharp. "Get. Out."

Ash lifted his hands, palms outward. "I'm only here to talk about Charlie."

Mason flung a finger toward the door. "I might not be the head of the household

where I grew up, but I have authority here, and you're trespassing."

"There's no chance for us to... try... to fix our friendship?"

"Friendship?" Mason seethed. "What friendship? Last I knew, guys don't date their friend's baby sisters."

"She's not a baby anymore, Mason. She's grown up, and she can make her own decisions."

"Yeah, so she said," Mason spat. "You knew better than anyone that Charlie was off limits. Heck, even more since she wasn't even an adult yet." His lips curled into a look of disgust. "I can't believe you did that."

Ash's shoulders slumped. "It wasn't planned. I—she—" He shook his head. "Charlie was going through a tough time. A guy who asked her out had bailed on her."

"So you thought you could just kiss her? Dude, do you even hear yourself?"

"It was bad, I know... That's why... I left."

Mason halted, and his eyes narrowed.

Ash shrugged his shoulders, praying that this was the sign he needed to keep going. Mason was listening, at least. "I moved away. I did everything I could think of to forget her. I wasn't going to be that guy—who crossed the line?—"

Mason let out a sharp huff. "Oh, but you are that guy." He shook his head again. "I mean it, Ash. Leave. What you did was unforgivable. You—you should go." The last few words were said quietly as if the fight had left his body.

That was it then.

Their friendship was officially severed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Ash had known this might be a possibility. Back then, he'd practically been one of the family—like Mason's brother. He'd observed from within the family hierarchy the rules that the Keagans had made when it came to letting guys date their babysister. Of course they hadn't told her any of this. And they didn't start enforcing them until she got to be the age where she was interested in that sort of thing.

All in all, Ash had known better. He nodded, his whole body feeling as though it was crushed by the weight of everything that had happened. Then he turned and left the barn.

Charlie wouldn't allow him to walk away just because her brothers didn't approve. She'd made him promise to keep coming by and spending time with her. He couldn't tell if she was just trying to shove her relationship in her brothers' faces or if she legitimately felt uncomfortable leaving her home. It didn't really matter. She had made a couple of good points, and he wasn't going to turn into the coward her brothers likely thought he was.

Over time, her brothers could forgive him.

He had to have hope in that, at least.

Ash pointed to Charlie's stance. "You need to put your feet wider apart. If you stand like that, they're going to be able to knock you to the ground. They could even push you or drag you to a waiting van."

She groaned, rolling her eyes. "My feet are as far apart as they've always been. Are we going over self-defense, or are we working on preventing my abduction?"

“Both,” he said coolly. “Just because you’re an adult doesn’t mean you’re not a target. If you ever decide to travel out of the state to somewhere that crime runs rampant, you’re going to want to know this.” He gestured once again. “A little farther. Lower your center of balance.”

She huffed but did as she was told. He walked around her, noting the way her body was positioned from every angle. He’d never tell her that their self-defense classes were his favorite part about spending time with her. There were several reasons. The first was, of course, the quality time they got away from her brothers. Then there was the pride he got from watching her learn and improve from what he’d taught her. Lastly, but certainly not least, he could enjoy looking at her, getting close to her.

He needed no excuse when they were in the boxing ring. “Okay. I’m going to grab at you. Use what you’ve learned to stop me.”

She snickered.

Ash hesitated. “Take this seriously. I mean it. For someone who is so against the risk of losing the people she loves, I’d think you’d want to make sure you are capable of taking care of yourself.”

She frowned. “Your job is nothing like this.” She turned to face him fully, her hands on her hips. “You’re choosing to have that job. If I were to be attacked, it wouldn’t be my fault.”

He twirled his finger in a motion for her to return to her stance. The mood was broken. She was no longer cheerful and flirtatious. Probably for the best because she needed to be ready.

Ash reached for her. An arm around her neck and her waist. She threw her head back, nearly breaking his nose. It threw him off enough that his arm around her waist

loosened. She held onto his hands and yanked with her whole body, turning her head as she did so to get out from his hold. When she was free of him, she whirled around, triumphant.

“Good,” he nodded, not intending to show even a hint of a smile—but it came anyway.

Charlie breathed heavily, her eyes bright.

“Again.”

She moved into position again. This time when he pinned her to his chest, he brushed a kiss to her neck. Her attention faltered, though her hands tightened on his wrists. He trailed a line of kisses to her ear and whispered, “Aren’t you supposed to try to escape me?”

“What if I don’t want to?” she whispered.

He smiled into her neck. “I’d say good. Because I don’t want you to.”

Flashes of the conversation he’d had with Mason flitted through his head, but he ignored them. There was nothing wrong with dating Charlie right now. He wasn’t going to let Mason or anyone else tell him they weren’t a good fit. Charlie made him happy.

She must have noticed his own distraction. In a flash of movement he wasn’t prepared for, she knocked him off his feet. He landed on his back with a grunt. She pinned him to the ground—something she wouldn’t have been able to do without the element of surprise and the fact that he’d been so infatuated with her.

She leaned over him, strands of her hair falling loose from the braid she wore. Her

eyes shined with desire, hovering only inches from his own. He reached up and clasped his hand behind her neck. Charlie resisted at first, for only a second, then she lowered her lips to his.

It was moments like this one that he could only see just how good they were together. His adoration for her continued to grow with each passing day. He'd been able to see parts of her that she never showed anyone else.

She was funny and smart, but most of all, she was kind and forgiving. Charlie was everything he wanted and everything he knew he didn't deserve.

Their warm breath mingled together as she deepened their kiss.

"You two done?" a gruff voice asked.

Charlie's lips broke into a smile as she pulled away from him. Already her cheeks had gotten more color to them. She scrambled to her feet and glanced up at two men who looked ready to jump in the ring. "Yeah. It's yours." Then she turned to Ash and held out her hand.

He got to his feet with a grunt and offered the men a sly smile. They didn't respond. By the time he and Charlie had slipped out of the building, they were both chuckling.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Maybe we should stick to cooking classes,” Charlie said with a laugh, tossing her gym bag into the back of his truck. “You need more practice with that than I need at the gym.”

He scoffed, throwing his own bag into the back. “I take offense at that.”

She shrugged. “When you can make a whole meal without any direction from me, then we can talk.”

Ash only chuckled.

18

Charlie

Charlie sat on the front porch. She scowled at the clear blue sky. Not a single cloud, gray or otherwise, floated by. Each day that passed without rain had begun to put her on edge.

She hadn’t meant to let it get to her. Normally the weather had no effect on her mood.

But that was before she’d started dating Ash—before she’d started dating a guy who thought it was fun to jump into the middle of a fire.

“You keep scowling like that and your face is going to stay that way.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “So I’ve heard.” Her gaze dipped to where Carter was

moving toward her with Daniel at his side.

The older of the two was still just as stone-faced as ever. He'd always been quiet, thoughtful even, but now he seemed to be in a bad mood just like the rest of them.

Well, except Carter.

Daniel pushed past her without a single word, but Carter stopped a step from the top and glanced upward toward the sky. "What's your problem?"

Charlie motioned to the sky. "Just look at it."

He glanced upward again, then tilted his head when he turned his focus to her once more. "Looks like a beautiful day."

"Exactly," she ground out.

He pulled his hat from his head and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to explain why that's a bad thing."

She leaned her elbows on the porch railing and placed her head in her hands. "No rain. It hasn't rained since that storm over a month ago."

"I'm sure we'll get some rain soon," Carter offered, still sounding just as confused as ever. "The crops will be fine."

"I'm not worried about the crops," she said softly. "I'm worried about Ash."

Carter grew still and understanding flooded his countenance. "You're worried about the fires."

She nodded. Her concern was more than draining. She'd been having a hard time sleeping, and any time she saw a fire announced on the news, she couldn't help but worry that Ash would be called into action. That fear was all-consuming no matter what she did to try to forget it.

"Charlie..." Carter's voice was calm, laced with empathy but also a hint of something that made her feel like he thought she was overreacting.

"Don't talk down to me, Carter. We both know that Ash's job is dangerous."

"Well... yeah, but?—"

"No buts!" She wanted to scream, but she knew he'd probably think she was crazier than he already did. "Ash has one of the most dangerous jobs out there. Did you know that there have been thirty-two smoke jumper deaths?"

His brows shot up. "This year?"

She blushed and looked away. "Well... no..."

His expression flattened. "In how long, Charlie?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Charlie chewed on her thumbnail. “In eighty-four years,” she said quietly. “But that’s beside the point.”

Carter sighed. “Okay.” He climbed up to the top of the porch and sat down. “I’ll humor you. Yes, his job is dangerous. And so are other jobs. How many rodeo cowboys die in a year? Have you looked that up?”

She shook her head. “Because it doesn’t matt?—”

He pulled out his phone and held up a hand. She watched him look up the stats on his phone. “One to two die a year, Charlie. You’re aware that we compete in the rodeo occasionally, right? We’re more likely to die from an accident on a horse than he is from his job.”

Her brain had a hard time processing what he was trying to say. She didn’t want to listen to him. She didn’t want to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Ash has a tough job,” he said. “No one is going to tell you otherwise. But it’s something he’s been trained for. It’s not like he’s going off to war or something.” He turned to his phone again, then lifted it to show her the screen. “See? Look at the job with the highest fatality rate.”

She dipped her gaze to the screen. “Logging?” she said, her eyebrows raising.

He nodded. “Farming and forestry have high numbers too, but I don’t see you yelling at me to stop working here.”

The knot in her throat lessened somewhat. She'd grown up on a ranch. She was familiar with death and the risks involved with the job. Somehow, they didn't seem nearly as bad as Ash's job.

Her stomach still churned, however. While Carter had seemed to help settle her heart, he couldn't completely take away the fear. Ash was good at his job. She had to keep reminding herself of that. He'd never been hurt before.

Charlie nodded and offered him a small smile. "Thanks, Carter."

"No problem." He got to his feet and gave her another worried look. "It's already tough enough to keep a relationship strong. Don't let your fears get in the way of something good."

She watched him while he studied her. Then she finally asked, "Why are you okay with Ash and me dating?"

He shrugged. "You're an adult, Charlie. Maybe it was my own issues that I dealt with, or maybe it's because I moved away when you were younger, so I didn't have to see you start dating. Either way, I don't see how it's any of my business who you want to date. Now, if he was abusive..." He frowned. "Then you can bet I wouldn't let that continue."

She bit back a smile. "He's teaching me how to protect myself."

He startled. "What?"

"Self-defense."

"Why?" he said abruptly. "Did something happen?"

Charlie looked away.

“Charlie,” he said, darker this time. “What happened?”

She glanced at him quickly, then looked away. “There was a guy at the park who wanted to take me out... and he wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Charlie didn’t miss the way Carter’s hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“Who is he?”

“He didn’t do anything, but it was enough to make Ash worry.” She lifted a shoulder as a smile tugged at her lips again. “So he’s teaching me how to protect myself.”

Carter relaxed but only slightly. He surveyed Charlie for a moment, then nodded. He didn’t say anything more before he slipped inside. She wouldn’t be surprised if he told everyone else in the house about what she’d said. And at this point, she didn’t care. All she wanted was for them to see Ash the way she did.

Charlie pulled up to the firehouse in town and parked her car. She’d only been here once since she’d started dating Ash. He’d needed to come pick up his paycheck, and since his boss oversaw this station, too, this was where he needed to be. Occasionally he took shifts on call, and that was why she was here tonight.

She tugged at her sundress, smoothing her hands down the front even though there were no wrinkles to be seen. She’d paired it with her favorite cowboy boots. He’d said he wanted her to visit—a sort of impromptu date.

At first, she’d told him they should take a raincheck. She didn’t mind if they had to get together another time, but he’d insisted.

Charlie moved to the front of the fire station and then opened the door. The first thing

she noted was the savory smells of meat, vegetables, and spices. Her stomach growled. Wherever he'd gotten food from, it smelled divine.

She moved farther inside and came across a man lounging on a chair near some stairs that presumably led up to where the firefighters slept. He glanced up, then did a double take and rose to his feet.

He had dark hair and dark eyes. He wasn't as built as Ash was, but he looked like he could drag someone from a burning building if he had to. In his hand was a book that he'd snapped closed. "You Charlotte?"

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

A smile stole across her face. “You can call me Charlie.”

He thumbed over his shoulder, matching her smile. “Ash told me you’d be coming. He’s upstairs.”

“Thanks...” she drawled, her voice expectant as she waited for him to introduce himself.

“You can call me Blaze.”

She cocked her head.

“It’s a nickname.”

“I figured as much.” She pointed to the stairway, and he nodded. “It’s nice to meet you, Blaze.” With each step she took, the smell of the food got stronger. By the time she’d crested the top, she realized why.

Ash hadn’t simply ordered food for them to share in their small firehouse kitchen; he’d cooked it.

Charlie gasped and moved with quick steps toward him. Ash’s back was to her, his focus on whatever he was finishing up at the counter. She tapped her finger on his back, not sure if it was appropriate to give him a hug at the fire station. “Hello, handsome.”

He jumped, and then his shoulders relaxed. “There you are,” he said.

All her concerns melted away when she was with him. He made her feel safe despite the fact that he had a job she hated.

Ash turned to face her. Then he smiled and reached for her hands to hold them. She leaned forward and kissed him with her whole heart. When she pulled back, she tilted her head. “I missed you today.”

He chuckled, dragging his knuckles along her jawline. “Not any more than I missed you.”

She shivered from his touch, and he bestowed one more kiss to her lips. “I’m never going to get used to that,” she whispered.

“Good. Because I’m never going to stop.”

She kissed him back, reveling in this moment just like she had the rest. Then she glanced around them at the small table that had been covered with food. There was a salad, some rolls, and a steak with steamed vegetables and a baked potato. It looked and smelled mouthwatering.

“It’s... not what you’ve been teaching me... but it’s what I do best.”

Charlie smirked at him. She could hear just how nervous he was, and she wanted to throw her arms around him and tell him that this meant the world to her—that he’d fixed her something special.

“Idid...” he started, then chuckled. “I used some of the information I’ve learned from you—when it came to the rolls and how to cook the vegetables. I hope it will taste as good as it smells.”

She placed a hand to his cheek. “It’s perfect. I’m sure of it.”

He moved to the table and pulled out her chair. Then he returned to the counter to retrieve their drinks. Ash placed a tall glass of lemonade before her, then took his seat.

Candles flickered on the table—something she hadn't immediately noticed. The whole setup was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for her. Sitting on the edge of the chair, she stared at him, realizing just how much she loved him. Part of her had wanted to bring up his job—what with the lack of rain lately. But she didn't want to spoil their date.

Ash had pulled this whole thing together, and she was going to enjoy every last second of it.

He reached for her hand and grasped it tightly. "I love you, Charlie. I want you to know that."

She blinked. While she knew she loved him, and she'd figured he felt the same, this was the first time he'd said it so pointedly. "I love you, too," she rasped. "I think I've loved you since that night in the rain."

He smiled. "Me too." Ash shifted in his seat and settled back against it. "When I look to the future, I can't see anyone but you."

Nothing could have made this night more perfect than it was right now.

This time he leaned forward, his expression serious. "I've waited for you this long, and I'll wait as long as you might need. But I plan on marrying you."

She sucked in sharply. It was a confession that should have scared her. She hadn't even dated anyone seriously before to think about marriage.

And yet all she could feel was a solid warmth that caressed her, protected her. Yes, it seemed to say. She could see him in her future as well. Charlie leaned forward and touched his face, placing her palm to his cheek. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

His eyes danced, and his teeth flashed in the biggest smile she'd ever seen him wear. "Good," he whispered. "Now, eat up before it gets cold—or Blaze comes up to steal your plate. He's threatened as much more times than I can count."

19

Ash

Ash wasn't clueless. He'd noticed Charlie's demeanor changing just a little bit every single day. She'd grown more antsy. Her phone calls became more frequent. She avoided talking about her brothers, too, unless pressed for information. Mason still had an attitude, and Carter was her only advocate in the house.

He hated seeing her so distraught. While she was clearly trying to hide it, she was failing. Her eyes had lost their luster, and he hated that he'd been the one to contribute to it. More than contribute—he was the only source.

While that knowledge weighed on him and put him in a difficult position, he'd been avoiding pointing it out. His reasons were twofold. He didn't want to draw more attention to it because she'd either confirm his suspicions or she'd be offended. If he knew anything, it was that Charlie didn't like it when she was caught keeping things from him. She was a people pleaser. And they'd both fought so hard for this relationship. Admitting she was unhappy would prove her brothers right.

It was just one of those things that they were going to have to work through. One day at a time. That's what he continued to tell himself.

As the summer days continued to pass, though, Ash became just as antsy as Charlie. There were moments when he couldn't help but expect that she would finally break things off. Maybe letting things come out in the open had been a bad idea. Maybe he should have pulled away from Charlie when he'd heard her brothers enter the house.

He'd been prepared to get a beating. He knew they wouldn't take the news well. And he hadn't been lying when he'd told her that it was worth it. But Charlie hadn't been aware of his decision; he'd made it without her input.

It was a secret he'd kept from her, and even as small as it was, it ate at him.

Today was his day off, and he'd opted to spend it at the ranch. He'd hoped that the more time he spent with Charlie's brothers, the easier it would become for them to accept him as their sister's boyfriend.

So far, no luck—except for Carter. But he'd been moderately accepting from the beginning.

Daniel still hadn't spoken a word to him since everything had come out. The giant of a man only quietly judged him. Ash could see it in his eyes—the way he watched him as if expecting that he'd ruin everything and hurt Charlie. It would give Daniel the perfect excuse to rid the world of someone he despised.

Ash sat with Charlie on the porch swing, his hand in hers. Back and forth, they slowly swung in a rare moment of peace. He brushed his thumb over the back of her hand. "You wanted to go riding tonight, right?"

"Isabelle is coming over to go riding with us," Charlie replied.

He stifled his disappointment. So, it wouldn't be just a night for the two of them. "Oh?"

She shifted but didn't turn her face toward him. "Apparently, she has a cousin in town. She's tired of hanging out with Mateo and Sophia and wants to get out of the house. I hope that's okay."

Ash rested his cheek to the top of her head. "As long as I'm spending time with you, that's all that matters." He could almost feel her smile against his shoulder. Then again, it could be all in his head.

She wasn't happy. While anyone else might say that she simply sounded tired, he knew better. Charlie's thoughts were consumed with other, deeper issues.

It didn't matter how much he wished he could ignore how her attitude had declined. He knew he couldn't. It wouldn't be right.

Ash heaved a sigh as he brought his other hand around and traced circles on her hand. "Do you want to tell me anything?"

She didn't react. No stiffening. No sighing. Nothing. "No," she said simply.

He frowned as he shifted, tilting her chin upward so he could see her eyes. They were just as clouded over as ever. There was a pain in their depths that made him angry—not at her, but at himself. He'd done this to her. "Charlie..." he murmured. "I can tell something is bothering you."

If he hadn't been watching carefully, he wouldn't have noticed the way the muscles around her mouth tensed. It was the only indication that he was right in his assumptions. Charlie stared right into his face and said, "Nothing is bothering me."

Lies. But he couldn't say such a thing. It might start an argument that he wasn't prepared to have. His brows furrowed. "You know you can tell me anything, right? I'm here to listen—to help you through whatever is weighing on you."

Charlie shrugged, and her eyes darted away. “I’m good. Just... tired.”

Yeah, right.

He sighed again. “Charlie, I?—”

“I’m fine, Ash,” she said.

This time he couldn’t stop the words from slipping out. “No, you’re not.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Her gaze whipped to meet his. “Yes, I am.”

He snorted. “You know I love you, so remember that when I tell you that I can see more than you think you’re letting me see. Your body is tense. Your eyes have lost the light I’ve grown to love so much. You’re dealing with something alone, and you don’t have to because I’m here. We’re a team.” He pressed his lips together briefly, and then he tried again. “Is it your brothers? I know they’ve been giving you a hard time. They’re not giving you the cold shoulder, are they?” To have one person do it would have been bad enough, but for the whole family? He would have been willing to burn everything down just to make sure she was being cared for, and that included getting her brothers back on her side. “It’s me they’re mad at.”

She waved a dismissive hand through the air and looked away. “My brothers are jerks sometimes. But eventually they come around. You should have seen the way they treated Carter when they found out what he did. They’re uncomfortable, but that’s on them.” It was the first time he could hear the normal Charlie in her voice.

“Then what is it?”

Her eyes darted to meet his briefly, then she dragged them away and heaved a sigh. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”

She groaned. “Because! Isn’t that a good enough reason? I don’t want to mess up what we have.”

His heart lurched. That was the closest she'd ever gotten to telling him that their relationship wasn't going to work. She might not have said it outright, but she hadn't needed to. She was struggling, and no one wanted to stick with a relationship where it was more work than it was worth. Ash pulled back from her, facing her fully. His whole body felt tight, and his heart ached as it banged against his ribs. "Talk to me," he pleaded. "I can't help you if you won't say anything."

Moisture pooled in her eyes and a single tear escaped before she swiped it away. "It's dumb."

"Nothing is dumb if you're bothered by it," he coaxed.

She let out a laugh that almost sounded like a sob. "Really? Because I'm still having a heck of a time dealing with what you do for a living."

He knew this topic would come up sooner or later, but he had no idea this was what she was upset about. All he could do was listen to her vent and tell her that he would always be there for her. He swallowed, waiting for her to go on.

"The more time that passes this summer without rain, the more I let it get to me. I keep waiting for you to be called out to a fire. I have nightmares of getting a call from your boss that you're not coming home. I'm scared to go to sleep."

He blinked.

"You seem surprised," she said derisively. "It really shouldn't surprise you at all. I've never kept my opinions about your job a secret."

"No... you haven't."

She gazed at him with those eyes that were capable of staring right into his soul.

“And I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to take feeling this way.” Those words hung in the air with a sort of finality. He could feel himself scrambling. He needed to convince her that it wasn’t as bad as she was making it out to be.

Ash reached for her, cupping her face in his hand. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t make that promise,” she whispered.

“I can tell you that I’ve been doing this for several years and I’ve never gotten anything more than aching muscles. I know what I’m doing. Nothing is going to happen to me.” He ducked closer, his voice firm. “I won’t leave you.”

Her hard expression wavered.

“It’s no different than what some of your brothers do for work. I’m sure their jobs are just as dangerous in certain circumstances.”

“I’ve never liked what they do, either,” she admitted.

He chuckled despite himself. “Well, then I guess this must be your lot in life.”

She scowled at him, and he laughed again before pressing a kiss to her lips, drawing a small smile out from behind it.

Ash touched his forehead to hers, waiting for her to look up at him through her lashes. Then he murmured, “I know I can’t tell you that you shouldn’t worry. But I can tell you that there are many safeguards in my job. We have procedures put in place to make sure that we come home every night.”

“Really?” she whispered.

He nodded. “Really.”

Charlie’s reservations about his job were crumbling in real time. Ash needed to take advantage of it.

“I know it’s hard for you to understand, but this job is everything to me. It’s more than the adrenaline?—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Adrenaline is like a drug, you know that, right?” she said.

He chuckled in an attempt to brush off that comment. “Like I said, it’s more than that. When I get called to a fire, it’s up to me to help save lives. I’m the one who stands between people and loss.” It was hard to put into words how it was when he was in the thick of it. There was nothing that compared to it.

Thankfully, Charlie seemed to accept what he’d been trying to say at face value. She nodded. While she didn’t look completely at ease, she did appear to be slightly more relaxed. “I’m not going to say that I’m happy. But I can live with it. You’re right. There’s no evidence that you’re going to be hurt. And even though it terrifies me, I can admit that.”

Ash couldn’t help the sigh of relief that burst from his chest. He studied her, noting she wasn’t done yet. There was still something on her mind.

“I can’t say it’s not going to be hard, though.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“But I guess what I’m trying to say is that I won’t make you choose.”

In that moment, Ash felt all his own concerns fall away. She wasn’t telling him they needed to take a break. She didn’t feel that his job was worth a fight. And that meant more to him than she’d ever know.

Ash took her hands in his and brought them to his lips. “Do you know how much I

love you?”

A smile flitted across her face. “How much?”

“More than words.”

She snickered. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Or maybe I’m just in love with the girl of my dreams.”

20

Charlie

Still no rain in the mountains. No rain in the valley. And now there was smoke in the sky from some area up north. No matter how many times Charlie had reminded herself of the conversation she’d had with Carter, and with Ash for that matter, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

Ash had done a great job of talking her off a ledge, but he wasn’t present in her dreams. And sleep was still hard to come by. It wasn’t fair to bring it up to him again, so she did her best to hide her worry whenever they were together.

His concern only added to the guilt she felt over her insecurities. He was a literal hero, and she couldn’t scrape together enough courage to support him in his happiness.

“What’s your problem?”

She jumped and looked up from her horse. Mason rested his folded arms on the stall door. His brows were furrowed, and his eyes dipped to her horse. “Nothing,” she

ground out. This was one of the few times he'd spoken to her in the last couple of months, and he didn't look at all pleased about it. "What are you even doing here?"

He ignored her question. "If you keep brushing her like that, she's going to go bald."

Charlie's hand stilled. She'd just come back from taking her horse on a quick ride. Normally it was soothing to do a brush down while she allowed herself to ignore all her concerns, but this time that hadn't happened. "I'm fine," she said.

"No, you're not."

"Why do you all keep saying that?" she snapped, tossing her brush into the grooming basket at her feet with more force than was necessary. Thankfully her horse didn't seem bothered by her mood.

Mason lifted a brow. "You wanna talk about it?"

She snorted. "Not with you."

Mason rolled his eyes. "Can't say I didn't try." He turned to leave, but she stopped him.

"Try? Is that what you call this? Is that how you would describe the last several weeks? You have either been entirely absent or you've ignored me completely. You only come here to hang out with Daniel, and I get the feeling that's because you two are exactly alike."

Mason shrugged. "Could be worse."

She wanted to smack him. His nonchalant behavior grated against her last nerve. "You want to know what's bothering me? Fine, I'll tell you. The brush out there..."

She flung a hand in the general direction of the fields surrounding their property. “It’s all dried out. The only green you see is the stuff we water from the well.”

“Okay...” Mason drawled. “And?”

She dug her fingers into her hair. “And... have you forgotten how bad those fires were at the beginning of the season? That was when everything was still at least a little wet. The news says this is the worst year for rainfall that we’ve had. It’s like a ticking time bomb. All that needs to happen is one idiot dropping a cigarette in the wrong place or a loose chain dragging against the asphalt for disaster to strike.”

His flat and yet smug expression softened. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” She shook her head before throwing her hands into the air. “And no one seems to be worried that Ash will inevitably be called into the fray. No one cares that this could mean he gets seriously hurt.”

“Charlie—” he said softly.

“No! No. You can’t stand there and pretend to care when you haven’t cared for at least a month. You severed your friendship, and for what? Because you didn’t like that we found love?”

Mason grimaced, and his lips curled with disgust. “Please don’t say that.”

She folded her arms. “I love him, Mason. I care about him more than I’ve cared about anyone. And if he wasn’t your friend first, then you wouldn’t have cared at all.”

“That’s not true,” he ground out. “I’m mad because he took something from you that wasn’t his to take. When he kissed you?”

“It was wrong. I know. But it’s in the past, and nothing else happened. It wasn’t even as bad as you’re trying to make it out to be. He barely even touched me.”

“He shouldn’t have touched you at all!” Mason’s voice rose, and then he sighed and ran a rough hand through his hair before he started pacing. “You’re too close to the situation for you to understand?—”

“I understand, Mason,” she said quietly, cutting him off. “I really do.”

“It sure doesn’t seem like you do.” His voice remained hard, and his agitation only grew. “When it happened, you should have told me.”

“And what would have happened? Would you have turned him into the sheriff? Would you have beaten him bloody? Because you already did that!” Charlie’s self-control was slipping again. She had to take a deep, steadying breath in order to get back on track. “That’s not the point of this conversation. I’m not going to rehash what happened in the past. I didn’t feel violated. If I had, I would have told you.”

He shook his head, making it clear this was a hill he was prepared to die on.

She stared him down, unwilling to change her opinion as well. They were at an impasse. “Look, whether you want to rekindle the friendship you had with him is up to you. Regardless, you’re still a good guy, and you should be worried about him just like I am.”

Mason’s hard expression faltered. It was in that small moment she could see there might be a chance for the two friends to return to what they used to be—in time.

“I know that I shouldn’t be overthinking this,” Charlie said. “But I can’t help it. There’s this poisonous feeling I have in my gut, telling me that something bad is going to happen. I can’t explain it, and I don’t know what to do.” There, she’d said it.

He was probably going to think she was crazy for her fears. Maybe he'd even suggest she get medicated for it.

And maybe that was her only option.

But at least she'd gotten it off her chest.

"Have you talked to Ash about this?" Mason asked.

Charlie's sharp eyes narrowed, then she relaxed and sighed. He wasn't being judgmental. This was Mason's attempt to help her through whatever it was that she couldn't shake. Nodding, she glanced away. "I did."

"And what did he have to say about it?"

She shrugged.

"If you don't tell me, I can't say whether he was being full of it," Mason said flatly.

"He said that he's been trained. That there are protocols in place to ensure they don't lose anyone. He also said that if he were to ever get seriously hurt, then it would be because he'd broken those rules."

Mason snorted, and she gave him a concerned look.

"Was he lying?"

Her brother dragged a hand down his face. His muscles weren't as tight as they'd been before. It was as if he'd told himself he had to accept what was going to happen between her and Ash whether he liked it or not. "He was telling the truth—about the protocols." Mason gave her a side-eyed glance. "But Charlie, there's no way to

guarantee someone won't get hurt on the job. Yes, they're going to put those rules in place to help, but it's not a sure thing. Accidents happen. That's why businesses have worker's comp insurance."

Her stomach dropped, and he must have seen her reaction to his words because he sighed again.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Sis, there’s nothing you can do about it short of asking him to find a new career. Is that something you’re willing to do?”

“Of course not,” she snapped, her defenses rising again.

“That’s what I thought. As long as I’ve known Ash, it’s been obvious how much he loves the work he does. And he’s never gotten hurt. I think that’s a pretty good sign that he’ll be fine—both of you will.”

“But I’m literally sick to my stomach whenever he gets put on call—whenever he has to go out for even something small.”

“I know.” Mason nodded. “It’s going to be hard. It probably always will be. But if you care about him like it appears you do... then what other choice do you have?”

That was the million-dollar question right there, and she hated it. She hated that it always came back to her fears of losing him. It was irrational, right? Was it healthy for her to power through it like she was? Fires happened all year long. It was only the summer ones that seemed to have her drowning in her own fears. Only a few months out of the year. Maybe it would get easier over time.

“You gonna be okay?”

Her gaze dragged back to where her brother stood. He was watching her again. The look on his face was reminiscent of the way he used to look at her before Ash had become a variable in their family dynamics. Concern etched his handsome face. Her soft-spoken, sweet bookworm of a brother still loved her—though that was never a

question. He didn't offer her a smile, however.

"You think you might ever forgive him?" She didn't have to say his name. There was only one person Mason seemed to despise lately. To her, this whole thing was rather silly. Mason was a grown adult. He should be able to let something go when it had nothing to do with the events currently going on.

"I don't know," Mason finally answered. "He was my friend, and he betrayed my trust."

That line of thinking was what really frustrated her. Once again, Mason was making this about him. She couldn't help but wonder if it would even matter if the man who had kissed her wasn't his friend at all. Would he have even cared that she'd been kissed by someone who was six years older than she was?

Mason shoved his hands into his pockets and peeked at her. "Have you heard from him today?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know if he got called out to that fire up north?"

Her stomach knotted. She didn't want to think about it. The effort it had taken to ignore the smoke had practically drained her. Again, she shook her head. "But he would have told me, right? He would have let me know he got called in."

By the hardened expression on Mason's face, she wasn't so sure she would be able to keep convincing herself of what she'd just said. His worried gaze was enough to make her second-guess everything.

"He would call. Or message. Surely, he wouldn't just go off and fight that fire

without telling me he was heading out that way.”

“I don’t know,” her brother finally said. “Based on how antsy you are, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was trying to shield you from it.”

He was right.

Oh no! There was a big chance that Mason had hit the nail on the head. Ash was the kind of guy who didn’t want to give her any unnecessary worry. He was the kind of man who would jump into that fire and when he came out unscathed, he’d be grinning wide and telling her he was right that she had nothing to worry about.

“Charlie!” Daniel barreled down the aisle of the barn, panting. His eyes landed on Mason, and he careened to a stop. Then glanced to Charlie again. “There’s been a casualty.”

For a moment she couldn’t register what he was talking about. Then, all at once, it hit her, nearly knocking her to her knees.

“Daniel—” Mason warned, but Charlie burst from the stall she’d been in, barely managing to shut the stall door with shaking fingers.

“The fire?”

Daniel nodded.

“What happened? Do we know who it is?”

Daniel glanced to Mason again and moistened his lips. “The news just said that there was an incident on the ground. They’re still getting details, but one smoke jumper has lost his life.”

Her heart exploded with pain. It was all she could do to cling to the stall door so she didn't crumble. It wasn't Ash. It couldn't be. She refused to accept that Ash would let this happen, that he'd do this to her.

"Charlie," Mason whispered, "it's probably not him."

"You don't know that," she snapped. "We don't know anything."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“What do you want me to do?” It was Daniel who asked. “Whatever you need, I’m here.”

She lifted her eyes to him, but before she could answer, Mason’s phone rang.

They all jumped and then stared at the phone when Mason pulled it from his pocket. He answered without hesitation and lifted it to his ear. “This is Mason Keagan.”

21

Ash

Smoke filled the air, thick and unyielding. The mask Ash wore almost felt more suffocating because he could barely see anything around him. His chest heaved. He needed oxygen. It didn’t matter that he was getting what his lungs needed; it was his brain that was playing tricks on him.

He’d been in this position before. He’d fought fires worse than this one.

Except this wasn’t the same.

Something was wrong. The heat was getting to him. His muscles ached. And the man he dragged behind him wasn’t moving. An enormous tree had buckled and come crashing down onto the group of men who were fighting to keep the flames at bay. It had crashed down and knocked two of his fellow smoke jumpers to the ground.

Ash spent too much time trying to move the tree from Marcus. He’d taken the brunt

of it. Something deep inside Ash told him he wouldn't be waking up. Cooper was the one who Ash was currently dragging toward the scorched clearing where the fire had already ravaged the earth. Marcus was already there, waiting, lifeless.

He'd already sent out his distress call, but with the smoke, he wasn't sure they'd find him. He couldn't see any sign of the helicopter that would be picking them up.

His lungs burned with each breath.

Something was wrong.

Ash stumbled, nearly losing his footing altogether, but he kept pushing forward. He wasn't going to leave either of these men behind. They deserved to be brought back, dead or alive.

Sweat poured from his face. His heart raced painfully. His vision swam. Then the ground rose up to meet him, and everything went dark.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The darkness continued to swirl around Ash in every direction he looked.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Where was that incessant sound coming from?

Every muscle in his body ached. He couldn't move. Hushed voices echoed in the darkness, but he couldn't decipher any of the words that were spoken.

The beeping continued. Something soft and cool brushed against his brow, but he couldn't open his eyes to see what it was. Footsteps shuffled, moving farther away. The screech of metal against linoleum made him flinch. Where was he?

Then everything came rushing back with a vengeance.

The fire.

Marcus and Cooper.

He groaned, forcing himself to open his eyes despite how much his body protested. The main lights in the room were off. The only light in the room came from a tubular fluorescent bulb overhead. It flickered and buzzed, and he grimaced even though it wasn't at full brightness. Ash shut his eyes again. This time he was slower in opening them and taking in his surroundings.

The hospital room wasn't large by any means, but there weren't any other patients he had to share it with. The obnoxious beeping sound came from the monitor to his left, and he knew if he lifted the blankets covering him, he'd find a cable connected to his body somewhere.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

It was the person seated in the chair to his right that he hadn't expected.

Mason was asleep, his chin resting on his chest at an awkward angle.

Ash attempted to sit upright, but pain sliced through his muscles again. Dizziness made it impossible to do anything more than lay back on his pillow. It was the middle of the night, based on the dark window.

He turned his head again toward Mason and flinched when he found his friend's eyes open and staring at him. "Geez," Ash croaked. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Fury laced each and every word Mason spoke. "What's wrong with you?" He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his legs and dropping his head. His hair was mussed, and it looked as though he hadn't slept in days. "Do you have any idea..." His voice trailed off, and he shot to his feet.

With one hand on his hip and the other one dragging down his face, Mason paced the small hospital room.

Ash watched him, the trepidation in his body only growing. If Mason was here—the one guy in Ash's life who likely despised him—then what did that mean for Charlie? Had she been here? Did she know?

Of course she knew. Mason wouldn't tell her.

His chest heaved and his pulse accelerated, causing the machine to do the same. "Where's Charlie?" He didn't think Mason was capable of sabotaging his relationship

with his sister, but he wouldn't put it past his old friend to nudge Charlie into a position where she wouldn't be able to cope with what had happened.

Mason froze and glowered at Ash. "She's at home. Hopefully sleeping. I made Daniel take her back."

So she'd been here. That thought filled him with joy and worry at the same time. Ash instinctively shrunk back from Mason's stare. The anger that was carved into his features was from more than simply dating his sister. There was an anguish in them that Ash hadn't expected to see.

"Do you have any idea how worried we were?" Mason rasped.

Ash couldn't bring himself to maintain that stare. He looked down at his hands on the white hospital bedding. "I could guess," he said.

"Apparently you saved someone's life."

His head snapped up so hard that a sharp pain erupted in the back of his skull. "Marcus?"

By the look on Mason's face, Ash knew. His head dropped back on his pillow, and he shut his eyes as he pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. He'd known Marcus's condition was bad. Cooper was going to be okay; the tree had only landed on his leg. But Marcus had taken the brunt of it.

Mason's footsteps approached, but Ash couldn't look at him, not with the tears slipping from his eyes. He felt his friend's hand on his shoulder, but Mason didn't say anything. Marcus was gone. While Ash had been telling the truth that casualties were rare, that didn't mean they were impossible.

His throat was too raw for him to let out an anguished cry, so he just let the tears slide down his cheeks. Time slipped away until a faint light filtered into the room. At some point, Mason had moved his chair a little closer. Their stilted conversation about the fire and how Mason had found out where Ash had been admitted could only last so long.

The room grew quiet with an awkward sort of heaviness, and Ash knew what was coming next.

Mason sighed and raked a hand through his disheveled hair. “I don’t like what you did, Ash.”

He flinched. Yep. Here it came.

“I will always think it was wrong. There’s no way to rationalize it.”

“I know,” Ash muttered. He felt the same, but that likely didn’t matter to Mason at all.

“But that being said...”

Ash lifted his head to look at Mason with a question in his eyes—and maybe a degree of hope.

Mason shrugged. “You’re always going to be my brother.”

The tightness in Ash’s chest stole the oxygen from his lungs. Even with the tube running to his nose and around his ears, Ash found it hard to breathe. “Thank you,” Ash croaked.

His friend gave him a sharp nod. For a moment it felt like the conversation was over,

and then Mason shifted in his seat again. “I will beat you into an early grave if you hurt her, you know.”

A smile tugged at Ash’s lips unbidden. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.” He waited for Mason to look at him again. “How is she?”

Mason’s expression faltered. The peace they’d felt in the quiet room immediately dissipated. He blew out a long breath and fidgeted in his seat, no longer able to get comfortable. “She’s been beside herself.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

A pit opened up in his stomach—like a black hole that threatened to suck everything into it. “Was she mad?”

“I don’t think I’ve seen her cry this much in her whole life.” He raked a hand through his hair again. “You don’t know how hard it was to get her to agree to walk out to the truck with Daniel. I thought I was going to have to get a nurse to sedate her so Daniel didn’t have to throw her over his shoulder and take her out kicking and screaming.”

That didn’t sound good at all. “How long have I been here?”

Mason didn’t miss a beat. “You’ve been out for two days.”

“Two days!” Ash didn’t know what he was thinking as he moved to toss aside the blankets and climb out of his bed. He ignored the sharp pain behind his eyes as he tore the oxygen tube from his nose. “I can’t?—”

Mason’s hands were at Ash’s shoulders almost immediately. “Don’t.”

Ash stared up at him with what was probably a wild look in his eyes. “I need to see her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back later today.” Mason gave him a gentle shove just as a nurse entered the room.

Surprise, relief, then irritation moved across her features. “Mr. Ashton, you can’t remove the oxygen. You’ve sustained some injuries, and your lungs aren’t working as well as we’d like them to. If you don’t put the oxygen back on, the oxygen level in

your blood is going to drop too low.”

“I have to leave. I need to?—”

Mason’s hand squeezed his shoulder, putting an end to his statement.

Ash didn’t miss the grateful look that passed between them. She righted all the equipment, then typed something into the computer near his bed before slipping out.

Mason didn’t return to his seat. It was as if he expected Ash to make another escape attempt. Ash scowled at him. “I’m sure you know as well as I do that Charlie isn’t in a good place.”

“Yeah? And who’s fault is that?” Mason demanded, his voice sharp. “You’re supposed to take care of yourself. I heard the fire chief talking. The only way you got both of those men to the clearing was by breaking protocol.”

Ash flinched. “Does Charlie?—”

“No. She wasn’t there when they were talking about it. But that doesn’t mean a dang thing. You might not want to accept it, but you’re part of our family whether or not you and Charlie work through this.”

Ash stiffened. Was Mason saying what he thought he was saying? Was there a chance that the two of them wouldn’t weather this storm?

“You have to make a decision.” Mason sighed, shaking his head. “I would never ask you to do this if it wasn’t important.”

The room was spinning, and it wasn’t because Ash had tried to get up too quickly. His thoughts had shifted to Charlie. She was his whole world. She was the bright spot

in an otherwise dreary existence. And Mason wanted him to choose. Before Mason even uttered the words, Ash knew what he was going to say.

“As much as I care about you and understand what this job means for you—how much it’s made you happy... I can’t help but think about Charlie.” Mason gave him a firm stare. “She’s my sister. I have to look out for her. I don’t think she’d survive it if she found out that you didn’t survive the next one.”

“That’s not fair?—”

“No, it’s not,” Mason interrupted. “But is it fair to ask her to trust the job? To ask her to sit at home with your future children, not knowing if you’re going to come home? Do you think it’s going to be healthy for her to live her life sitting in front of the television watching the news for any indication that everything is okay? Because I don’t.”

Ash turned his scowl to his lap. He could feel his resistance to Mason’s words even as he said them. Charlie was overreacting.

“She’s lost too much already,” Mason said quietly.

Slowly, Ash lifted his gaze to his friend.

“I know it’s not the same, but when our parents left...” Mason shrugged, letting his words hang in the air unfinished.

“I don’t know if I can do what you’re asking,” Ash finally admitted. “I love her, Mason. I really do. But this job? It’s... it’s my life.” He didn’t miss the disappointment in Mason’s gaze. His friend didn’t understand. He never would—at least not until he was asked to give up something that he’d worked his whole life to attain.

“Then maybe...” Mason’s jaw tightened, and he turned away as if he couldn’t look Ash in the eye while he finished his statement. “If you love her as you say, maybe you should let her go.”

22

Charlie

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Charlie's feet felt like lead. Each step she took down the hallway toward Ash's hospital room felt like she was getting closer and closer to the end of something she didn't want to relinquish.

She couldn't explain it, but she could sense him slipping through her fingers. It wasn't even logical. The doctors had assured her that Ash would make a full recovery. He'd been given the all-clear; his body was just working through the trauma from what had happened in those mountains.

Ash's name was now synonymous with heroism. There would have been two casualties instead of one if Ash hadn't been quick on his feet and known how to get his friends out of there.

The family of the other man—Cooper—had come to visit and check on Ash a couple times. Cooper had even asked for Ash once, but they'd had to tell him Ash was still out.

Her emotions had gone haywire. One moment she was crying, holding his hand, and begging him to return to her. The next she wanted to yell and scream at him for letting this happen. She'd wanted to accuse him of being a liar when he'd told her he'd be okay.

Technically, he was okay.

Daniel walked beside her. He pulled out his phone and then glanced at her with something akin to relief. "He's awake."

Charlie didn't register anything that happened next. The hallways were a blur. She must have been running, and thankfully she hadn't collided with anyone on her way to Ash's room. She barreled into the room and stopped when her eyes landed on him.

He sat up in his hospital bed, looking haggard but alert. His cheeks were sallow, but other than that, he had no visible injuries.

Charlie gasped and lunged for him, only vaguely noting the way Mason slipped from the room with Daniel in tow.

She threw her arms around him, holding him, clinging to him as if any second he might slip away. His hands came around her back and he rubbed them up and down. Charlie didn't realize she'd been crying until she pulled back and noted the dampness on his hospital gown.

Letting out an embarrassed laugh, she swiped at the tears that continued to spill down her cheeks. When Ash reached up, she stilled. He placed a palm to her cheek and rubbed his thumb along the dampness. There was moisture in his eyes as well.

Charlie couldn't do anything else but hug him again in that moment. He was alive. He was alert. And he...

She pulled back, frustration overtaking the relief she had in seeing him. "Do you have any idea how terrifying it was to hear that there had been a casualty? That there were two smoke jumpers who were injured? And when no one would tell us?—"

Ash placed a finger on her lips, and she stiffened. "I'm sorry."

A mixture of emotions rippled through her. She hadn't expected him to apologize. Logically, she knew it wasn't his fault. It was silly to blame him for something he had no control over.

His eyes scanned her face, and he smiled weakly. “I love you, so much, Charlie.”

“And I love you...” she whispered. “I don’t think I would have been able to survive if you hadn’t made it.” Charlie’s voice cracked and she looked away from him. “I don’t think I can do this again.”

Ash went still, and his hand dropped from her face. Without looking at him, she knew he understood the meaning of her words. She didn’t want him doing this job anymore.

Charlie knew it wasn’t fair to ask such a thing, but she couldn’t see another option. The way she’d suffered for the last couple of days made it clear there had to be a change. And if he wasn’t willing to change his career? Then she’d have to be the one to make a change, if only for her own sanity.

“Charlie...” he whispered.

She turned her eyes on him. This had to be the most difficult thing she had to do. And she wasn’t sure she’d be strong enough to follow through. “Please... don’t. Just...” She shut her eyes, then let out an unsteady breath. “I’m not strong enough to sit through another one of your speeches where you tell me that this is a random occurrence.”

“But it is.” Exasperation already laced his tone. “This is the first time?—”

She shook her head and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. “Ash, I can’t,” she pleaded. “Your job might not feel dangerous to you, but my imagination runs wild every single time you get called to a scene. I can’t help but think about the worst-case scenario, and this time... it was real.” Her voice cracked. “The whole drive here—every single minute of that long drive—all I could think about was if you’d make it through. When I closed my eyes last night, all I saw was your limp body.”

“Charlie—” he said desperately. “You can’t?—”

This time she held up a hand to stop him. “You don’t need to be a hero. It wouldn’t kill you to find another job. I need you. Be there for me.” She was well aware of how selfish she sounded. She could hear it, and with each word, she grimaced inwardly. Charlie had never wanted to be that person. She’d never dreamed it would come down to setting out an ultimatum.

His face had filled with color, but it wasn’t the healthy glow she’d wanted to see. He was mad. She’d pushed him into a corner, and the only way out was for him to do something he didn’t want to do.

It was for his own good. And for hers. She would allow herself to become the villain if it meant that he would be safe.

She sought out his hand, but he removed it from her reach. Charlie tried to ignore the hurt that came from his dismissal. Instead, she focused on what she had planned to tell him. “I love you so much, Ash. I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you—not to this.”

Ash shook his head, but he didn’t speak. She couldn’t tell if he was holding back something or if he was simply too angry to utter a word.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

As much as he probably hated her for making such a request, she hated herself even more. Hadn't she told him that she wasn't going to make him choose? She'd broken that promise. Everything had changed when he'd gotten hurt.

Everything.

The air turned cold without the conversation continuing. She nearly got up and walked out, but then he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Charlie."

That could mean anything. He could be repeating his apology for getting hurt.

But she had a feeling that his apology had nothing to do with his injuries—nothing to do with putting her through this nightmare.

"I can't do that," he said so quietly that she could barely understand. It was his eyes that made it clear where he stood. They were dark, and the light that had been in them when she'd entered had dimmed to nearly nothing. "I can't walk away from being a firefighter because..."

"Yes, you can," she insisted. "I'm sure there are other places that would love to have you. My brothers?—"

He let out a derisive laugh. "A cowboy? Do you even hear what you're saying? I'd be leaving one job for something just as dangerous."

“I hardly think riding a horse is as dangerous as skydiving into a fire,” she snapped. Then she immediately regretted what she’d said and shut her eyes tight. “What I’m trying to say is that you could do something else, and I wouldn’t have to worry?—”

“You’ll always have to worry, Charlie. Don’t you get it? There isn’t a career out there that doesn’t have at least some degree of risk. Heck, driving in a car means I could get in an accident. One second I’d be here, and the next I’d be in a crumpled, metal heap on the side of the road.”

She flinched at the description he wove. “I get that.”

“Do you? Because it really seems to me that you have no idea what you’re asking. I’m not going to walk away from my job because it’s everything to me.”

“And what about how I feel? What about my future—our future? This isn’t just about you anymore.” They’d not discussed their future—not really. They’d touched on subjects like kids but never where they saw themselves in five or ten years.

The sad part was that up until this moment, she had been able to envision a life with him. She’d been able to see what it would be like to be married to him. And she’d wanted it so badly.

This time Ash took her hand. He held onto it tight and waited for her to meet his gaze. “I love you, too, Charlie. And I wasn’t lying when I said I’d do everything in my power to make sure I come home safe. But to ask this... to ask me to walk away from something that is practically related to my identity...” His voice trailed off, and he shook his head.

Ash couldn’t do it. Not for himself and not for her.

She pulled her hand from his grasp and got to her feet, knowing if she stayed by him,

he might be able to coax her into changing her mind.

“Charlie?”

Spinning away from him, she shook her head. Her arms wrapped around herself. “I’ve had a lot of fun with you, Ash.” Her voice sounded hollow even to her.

“Charlie,” he said firmer this time.

“And I will never forget what we found this summer. It was...everything.”

“Charlie. Don’t.”

Tears stung her dry eyes, making them itch even more. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to keep seeing each other.”

He shifted in his hospital bed, and for a moment she thought he might try to climb out of it to come to her. But he didn’t. She glanced at him over her shoulder, not surprised to see the anguish written all over his face. It broke her heart into a million pieces to see him like this, to know that, in part, she was the one to blame. “I will always love you, Ash.”

His hands clutched into fists. “You can’t be serious.”

She wanted to go to him, to wrap him in her arms and tell him that she would stay. She wanted to believe that she’d eventually get over her fear of losing him. But she couldn’t. Her legs wouldn’t work. Her feet refused to budge. The pounding in her heart was only matched by the pounding in her skull. Charlie’s hands shook. “I have to think about my own mentalwell-being. I have to think about my future children. I was raised without parents, Ash. I’m not going to let my children be raised without a father.”

“You’re being unreasonable. You’ll learn how to handle it.”

She wanted to cry at the desperation in his voice, at the tear that slid down his own face. But she fought it. As if by a will that was not her own, she moved toward him—not to give in to him, but to say goodbye. She ran her fingers through his hair, then trailed her touch down the side of his face until she palmed his cheek. Slowly, she lowered herself closer to him and brushed a soft kiss to his brow. “I hope we can still be friends.”

Those words were not her own. She had no idea why they slipped from her lips. Charlie knew she wouldn’t be able to handle being in the same room with him and not feel her heart breaking—just knowing he’d chosen his job over her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

And yet she didn't think she could walk away from him completely without a big part of her heart dying inside.

He didn't move. He didn't reach out for her or tell her to stay. All he did was watch her leave.

Mason and Daniel were in the hall, and based on the looks on their faces, she knew they'd heard everything she'd said. Thankfully, they didn't breathe a word to her. She turned to Daniel, her voice breaking. "Take me home, please."

Daniel glanced to Mason, who nodded. Then he motioned down the hall, and she led the way.

23

Ash

Bright red and yellow flames clung to every surface of the building. The black smoke was such a contrast to the light they emitted. The heat seared through Ash's uniform as if he wasn't wearing any protective gear at all.

There were shouts from other firefighters around him, but he couldn't make out any words. The house creaked overhead and Ash glanced upward, his chest tightening with fear. A beam could fall. It'd be just like the tree that had crushed Marcus. He had to be careful. If not for him, then for Charlie.

A scream erupted from another room, and he spun around toward it. The house was

familiar. He'd been here before. Ash moved through what could only be the living room, and the scream pierced the room again. It rose above the crackling of the fire, the shattering of glass.

He whirled toward it, and that's when he recognized the house. How many times had he walked through that archway into the kitchen? How many times had he looked forward to seeing her?

Without thinking, he charged for the doorway, but the ceiling overhead collapsed. He lifted an arm to block the explosion of embers and sparks.

"Ash!" she screamed again. A shadowed figure moved through the kitchen. He wanted to yell out her name, to tell her to escape through the door that led to the backyard. But his throat closed up. Another crash of something behind him had him jumping out of his skin.

Ash sat up in his bed, sweat pouring from his body. His T-shirt clung to his shaking frame, and he groaned as the oncoming headache hit him with full force.

It was dark in his bedroom, with no sign of the morning over the horizon. It'd been two weeks since Charlie had walked away from him, leaving him in that hospital bed.

The chief had insisted Ash take a few weeks to regroup. And he didn't want Ash jumping for at least a month. That led to a lot more downtime than Ash was willing to have.

He spent most of his days pacing his apartment, not able to focus on even the most interesting shows that television had to offer. The gym wasn't cutting it, and he could only run so many loops around the track at the park.

He shoved his blanket from the bed and swung his legs over the side. Putting his head

in his hands, he went over the familiar nightmare. No matter how many times he had it, the outcome was always the same. He didn't realize it was Charlie's home until it was too late, and he never got her out of there.

No resolutions.

Ash didn't like the idea of Charlie dealing with similar fears. Was this what she'd been referring to when she said she couldn't sleep? No. He wouldn't accept that.

He got to his feet and wandered through the darkened house.

Two weeks ago, Charlie had done the unthinkable. She'd spoken to him calmly and made a request—one she'd promised she'd never ask of him. He'd been in shock for a good hour after she left. Mason had stayed with him, not speaking—just... watching him.

Eventually, Ash told him to leave. He didn't want Mason's pity. Besides, he got the feeling that Mason would have sided with Charlie anyway.

No one came to visit in the handful of days he had to stay at the hospital. His parents did call him, but when he assured them he was fine, they left it at that.

Now he felt alone.

Utterly alone.

Ash stopped his pacing and moved to the window. He stared out at the parking lot for a moment, not seeing. His mind shifted to that moment in the hospital room when he'd realized everything would change. It felt so final and yet not. He couldn't shake the feeling that their story wasn't over yet.

Maybe what he needed to do was show Charlie that he was strong. He hadn't been able to fight for her while in the hospital bed, hooked up to oxygen. He couldn't convince her that he was going to come out of this better than before when all she could see was his weaknesses.

What he needed to do was convince her. He had to do something. He couldn't just let her walk away. Perhaps he was in denial. His friends would likely tell him as much. But they didn't know him. They couldn't see what he'd overcome over the last six years while he'd waited for his moment with her.

If he had to wait another six years, he would.

Except there was a problem with that. He couldn't control Charlie. Her stubbornness could be adorable at times, but at others, it was hard as stone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Still, he knew he couldn't just let it go like this.

"No. You can't be here." Mason came out of the house as if he'd been waiting for Ash to show up. He pointed at Ash's truck as he hurried down the steps. "You can't come around here and talk to her."

Ash's steps faltered, and he glanced at the house with confusion "What do you mean? I can't come around here anymore?"

Mason shook his head. "You can't be here," he repeated. "You should go."

Ash chanced another look at the house, finding Daniel emerging. The largest of all the Keagan men folded his arms and stared hard at Ash. If Mason was a buffer between the two, Ash wouldn't have been surprised if Daniel was finally willing to make good on his threats. Ash's jaw tightened as he brought his focus to Mason expectantly.

"Look, I get that you think you can just waltz over here and try to fix things, but it's not going to happen. It's over, Ash."

"No, it's not," he argued. "The last time we spoke, emotions were high. I was in a hospital bed. She probably hadn't gotten much sleep?—"

"Because of you." Mason sighed. "It's not going to work. She's finally coming to terms with the decisions both of you have made." He gave Ash a pointed glare when he emphasized the words.

“You know as well as I do that making important decisions like this one shouldn’t happen under duress. She needed time to think. I gave her some. Now would be a good time to just... talk.” Ash couldn’t help but shift his focus to the house. If he wasn’t mistaken, he might have thought he saw the drapes shift in the front window. They had an audience. It might have been Charlie, but then again, it could have been anyone else who lived there. “Just let me talk to her,” Ash pleaded. “I need to tell her something.”

“Unless it’s about finding another job, you don’t need to say anything to her,” Mason said.

Ash frowned. “She still wanted to be friends.”

Mason snorted, and Daniel shifted where he stood, moving to block the doorway as he folded his arms.

Ash exhaled sharply and turned his focus to him. “What do you think I’m going to do? Rush you? I just want to talk, Daniel.”

No response.

Frustration burned through him. He wasn’t going to let this end here. He started toward the porch steps, but Mason’s grip clamped onto his arm.

“I’m not going to ask you again, Ash. Right now isn’t a good time. You need to let her come to you.”

Ash met his friend’s steady gaze, hating the desperation he knew Mason could read in his eyes. “I just want to talk.”

“Not gonna happen,” Daniel said, voice firm.

Ash's jaw tightened. "You can't stop me. I'll come every single day until she tells me not to."

Mason's grip held firm. Ash glanced to the side, weighing his options. If he could get past them, maybe?—

No. He wasn't going to fight them. These were Charlie's brothers. They were just looking out for her.

He took a steadying breath and made a split-second decision. Without warning, he twisted free of Mason's grip and took off down the porch steps, veering around the side of the house before either of them could stop him. A sharp curse rang out behind him, but Ash didn't slow. He rounded the back corner, his boots kicking up dust, his heart pounding harder than it had in any wildfire he'd jumped into.

He reached the back steps in a rush and grabbed the door handle, yanking it open.

Charlie gasped, a hand flying to her chest. She stood at the counter in the middle of rolling out what could only be cookie dough. Her hands and apron were covered in flour. Her hair had been pulled up by a clip, a few loose strands framing her face.

For a split second, he caught a glimpse of what his future could be.

Momentarily dazed by the vision of it, Ash took a step toward her.

Her eyes found his, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to cry. Then she straightened her shoulders and put her rolling pin on the counter. She glanced at Daniel and then at Mason, who had materialized in the doorway. "It's fine," she said quietly.

Both of her brothers hesitated. Then Daniel motioned to the door. "We'll be just out

there. Holler if you need anything.”

She nodded.

As soon as they were outside, Charlie moved around the counter. She wiped her hands on the apron, drawing his attention to them. Maybe she was cleaning them, but it sure looked like she was just nervous. “What do you need, Ash?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He cleared his throat, moving closer to her. “I need you.”

“Are you willing to consider my terms?”

Ash shook his head. “That’s not a fair request?—”

“It’s more than fair, Ash. I heard you out. I gave it a chance. I let you talk me down before because you’d assured me that everything would be fine.”

“And it is.”

“But it wasn’t,” she said softly. “When you were out for those two days, it felt like an eternity. I didn’t know if you would wake up. Not really. It didn’t matter how many times the doctors and nurses assured me that you would come out of it. There were no guarantees.”

“There’s never a guarantee?—”

“I know. But that’s just it, isn’t it? There will never be a guarantee that you’ll be safe. The fact that I can’t mentally handle the worry—maybe that’s just an indication that I’m not ready to be in a relationship.”

“But you would be if I quit my job,” he said bitterly.

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

His breathing was getting heavy, and it wasn’t because he’d had to sprint around the

house in his effort to get to her. Ash rubbed at the spot just above his heart. “So that’s it then? No compromises? Nothing I can say or do to convince you?—”

Her smile didn’t reach her tear-filled eyes. Slowly, she shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Ash could feel his heart breaking. Each crack and fissure from her words only went deeper. How could she ask him to pick just one? To lose either felt like he was losing a piece of himself.

“You’ll always be my first kiss,” she whispered.

He couldn’t bring himself to look at her then. Anywhere but at those beautiful eyes.

“And my first love.”

Ash shut his eyes tight and wished he could go deaf. He couldn’t bear to hear the finality of it.

“I’ll always love you for it.”

He clenched his hands tight, digging his nails into his palms. “Please reconsider,” he rasped. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, Ash.”

Time lost meaning. He lost track of how long he stood there. It could have been seconds. It could have been minutes. Heck, if an hour had passed, he wouldn’t have noticed. Finally, he nodded. There was no way he could go out the way he’d come. To have to look Mason and Daniel in the eye after the scene he’d made would only make things worse.

His heart was in shambles. His last spark of hope had been stamped out. There was no other way to salvage what had just happened.

Ash turned around and headed from the kitchen to the front door. She didn't call after him. She didn't ask him to stay. And he wasn't going to push. He'd already taken more than he had a right to have.

24

Charlie

Charlie nearly collapsed on the floor. It took everything she had to remain on her feet. Daniel and Mason came inside shortly after Ash left. Daniel only looked at her with concern. Mason was the one who made it worse.

“You did the right thing, sis.”

How was she supposed to respond to that? How was she supposed to look herself in the mirror and not see a coward? Because that was exactly what she was.

There was no other way around it.

Perhaps she'd always been a coward. From the beginning she'd been under her brothers' wings. She'd done what she'd been told. She stayed close to home. She cooked, cleaned, and took care of them as much as a mother might have, but that was all she could do.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

She'd never gone out and chased after a dream besides going with Caleb to Emma's concert. In all her twenty-two years of life, she'd only done one thing that could be construed as brave, and most everyone she knew wouldn't even call it that.

Falling in love hadn't been scary. It was what had come after. She'd loved Ash so deeply that she got physically sick when she thought she might not see him again. How was that healthy? It wasn't.

That's why she'd made this decision.

"Charlie?" Mason's voice shattered into the thoughts swirling and swirling in her mind.

Her head snapped up and she stared at her brother with surprise. "What?"

"Were you listening?"

Those worry lines between Daniel's brows deepened.

Mason pointed to her hand. She glanced down to see her skin had turned white with the pressure. "You don't look like you're doing okay. Do you want to sit down?"

She released the counter and rubbed her fingertips over her leg. "I'm fine," she insisted.

He didn't argue. Neither one of them had the poor sense to do such a thing since she'd broken things off. She knew why, of course. They didn't want her dating Ash

from the very beginning.

They should be thrilled rather than concerned. The source of their contention was officially gone. She didn't need to worry about either one of them making a snide comment about Ash or giving her a look whenever she said she was going to spend time with him.

Happiness could reign in the Keagan household once again.

Carter entered the kitchen and then froze when his eyes took in everyone. He didn't say anything either. He'd been the type to prefer staying far away from this drama.

Charlie let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm not as fragile as you think I am. I'm fine. I've made my choice, and as an adult, I'm going to live with it." She returned to the counter where she could reach the rolling pin and start working on the cookies again.

Five minutes went by, then five more and none of her brothers moved from where they stood. She wanted to issue each of them a glare and a warning to get on with their lives, but she couldn't bring herself to do even that.

There was a hole in her heart—one she had known would appear. The second she'd walked out of that hospital room, she'd felt it get drilled into her.

It was like she'd told Ash. He was her first kiss and her first love. A person who fulfills that role in anyone's life will end up leaving a mark. Eventually, it might go away.

And if it didn't?

She let out another sigh, but it didn't ease the ache in her chest. Her lungs were fine, she reminded herself. The pain in her chest came from something else entirely.

Charlie peered through narrowed eyes toward the house as the sun started its descent. Her hand shadowed her vision but only slightly. She'd gone out for a ride right after lunch, and it had turned into something a great deal longer than expected.

She'd known she needed to head back home about an hour ago if she wanted to get dinner started and put it on the table for those who still lived in the house.

And yet she couldn't get the energy to do it.

Her horse had been content to keep walking, and she'd let her.

Right about now, everyone would be showing up in the kitchen. They'd see that there was nothing on the stove or in the oven. They might look in the fridge for something they were to reheat. But there'd be nothing.

She didn't even have the energy for guilt at this moment. All she could feel was the intense need to get away from everything that reminded her of Ash. And memories of him ran rampant at the house. In the barn. Outside.

She shut her eyes as the memories of their first kiss came to the forefront of her mind. Her throat tightened, and her hands shook.

Depression wasn't something she'd ever experienced, and at this point, she wasn't sure if that was what she was dealing with. Getting a good night's sleep was still hard to accomplish. Food had lost its allure. Her stomach still growled, reminding her that she hadn't put anything of substance in it for over a week.

For the most part, her family was leaving her alone. She couldn't tell if they were giving her space because they thought she needed it or if they simply didn't want to deal with her.

She couldn't blame them for the latter. She'd brought this on herself, after all.

What did she expect when she'd started dating someone her family didn't approve of?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Her horse pawed at the ground, and she leaned forward to pat her neck. They weren't going to go back for another hour at least. She didn't want to look anyone in the face and tell them why she didn't feel like making a meal.

Cooking had completely lost its allure as well. She knew the reason had more to do with those cooking lessons she'd given Ash than anything else.

Charlie sighed and pulled the reins around to head back to a trail she hadn't traveled in a while. Hopefully her family would get the hint and fend for themselves for dinner.

The coffee swirled with the cream as Charlie stirred it. Emma and Bailey had practically dragged her out for coffee that morning after Carter had told Bailey that Charlie had skipped cooking dinner last night.

It wasn't entirely unheard of that Charlie would do such a thing. At least that's what she told herself as she sat across from the two women she could call sisters. Bailey wasn't married to Carter yet, but she'd gotten pretty close to Emma over the last several months.

Sal's Diner was quiet this morning. Either people weren't quite awake yet or the regular late morning rush hadn't quite arrived. Charlie didn't mind the quiet. She could escape into her thoughts and be perfectly content.

Emma nudged her cup, and Charlie lifted her head to find both women staring. "What?" Charlie demanded, forcing a smile. She pulled her spoon from the mug and lifted it to her lips.

The women looked at each other. That same concern that Daniel had worn was etched into their pretty faces. “Something’s wrong,” Bailey said. “And we’re not the only ones who have noticed.”

Charlie shrugged. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m good.”

“Sweetie, I know you. And this?” Emma gestured a wave in Charlie’s direction. “Isn’t good.”

Charlie did her best to hide her disappointment in the statement. She adored Emma. She valued her opinion, but the woman didn’t know what she was talking about. She’d been out of the loop for the most part when it came to Charlie’s dating life. She had her own home and life with Caleb. Bailey was busy, too. She had a daughter, and she was working on completing nursing school. Neither one of them had been available to vent to when Charlie was struggling with her concerns over Ash’s safety.

Alone.

The word was getting so tiresome, and yet that was exactly how she felt, even though she was surrounded by nearly two dozen people.

Emma took a sip of her drink and gazed over at Bailey with raised eyebrows.

Bailey nodded.

Charlie groaned. “Look, I’m fine. Ash didn’t break up with me. I wasn’t dumped.”

“That doesn’t mean you didn’t have your heart broken,” Bailey pointed out.

“But it means that I was the one who caused this feeling I’m experiencing,” Charlie said with exasperation. “And I can’t even be mad at Ash because he didn’t do

anything wrong.”

“He chose his job over you.”

Charlie shut her eyes, hating the pain that sliced through her at that statement. She’d noticed that fact from the very beginning, and it was a selfish one. She refused to acknowledge it now. “Ash made a choice that would make him happy. I can’t fault him for sticking with something he’s spent his whole life cultivating. I was just his girlfriend.”

Her voice sounded weak. She could hear her determination to remain happy falter. It wasn’t fair that she had to defend him to her friends. She wanted to push his name into the mud and stomp on it. She wanted someone else to blame other than herself.

But there was no one.

“He’s moving on. I’m going to do the same. We’re both going to be happier with this situation as long as...” She didn’t know what to say. As long as what?

Again, the women exchanged looks.

Charlie was getting tired of it. They needed a change of subject. If she couldn’t get them onto something else, she was going to scream. If she made a scene, then she’d have to leave, and that would be a shame because all she wanted right now was to enjoy her coffee in peace. “I’m going to the bathroom. If you guys really love me, then when I get back, there will be a large slice of apple pie waiting for me.”

Emma let out a laugh. “It’s not even lunchtime yet.”

“And you’re Emma Hart. Are you telling me you can’t convince this place to serve us pie for breakfast?”

Bailey snickered, and Emma gave her a look.

A smile tugged at Charlie's mouth, but it slipped away just as fast. One day at a time. She could do this if only for the brief moments of happiness she could find.

Those, she would treasure.

25

Ash

Ash couldn't sleep. Not at his apartment, not anywhere. Sleep eluded him, so he spent most of his time at the firehouse. At least there, he could be distracted by the fact that he'd been dumped. He'd thought girls loved a man in uniform. Back in the day, his job would have easily been the only thing needed to help him pick up a girl at a bar—not that he'd ever done it. But he'd seen his buddies do it plenty of times.

Cooper was still a little antsy, too. Both of them had lost someone. Marcus's picture was now displayed in a place of honor in the main lounge area. Seeing it every day only added to the pain they were both enduring.

Ash sat at the table in the kitchen. A few months ago, Charlie had sat here and he'd fixed her a meal. They'd talked of their future. It was yet another reminder of what had happened to him, and at this point in time, he wasn't so sure his apartment was a bad place to be.

"I'm not paying you today," the chief said as he moved past him. "You don't have a shift."

"Is it against the law for me to hang out?"

Something akin to pity flickered across the chief's face, and he shook his head before moving down the hallway to where his office was located. There were four guys on call today. One sat on a cot near the wall where a window overlooked the back

parking lot. Two were in the kitchen fixing something to eat. And Cooper sat at the table across from him.

“Still thinking about her, huh?”

Ash stiffened. Cooper was the only one he’d told. Everyone he worked with knew about his relationship, but Cooper knew that it had officially imploded after Ash had been deemed a hero by the city.

“She’ll come around,” Cooper insisted. “They usually do. Take my wife, for instance. She might not have cared about my job when we were dating.”

At Ash’s incredulous expression, Cooper chuckled.

“Oh, she liked my job for the clout. She bragged all the time about dating the guy from the fireman’s calendar we put out every year. But the second she got pregnant? That was a different story.”

Ash listened with interest. If Cooper’s wife had dealt with and come down from her issues regarding her husband’s job, then maybe there would be a clue as to how Ash could convince Charlie to do the same. Then again, a pregnant wife wouldn’t go so far as to tell her husband to quit. If they were expecting, then she’d want the security of a stable job. And just like that, Ash’s hopes fizzled.

“Anyway, she was terrified that I’d leave her a single mother.”

“But she didn’t make you quit.”

Cooper shook his head. “No, but she didn’t like it either. It put a huge strain on our relationship for a while. Honestly, there was nothing I could do except be there for her.”

The difference between Cooper's story and Ash's was blatantly obvious. Charlie hadn't locked in her relationship with Ash yet. She didn't have to stick it out because they had children or they'd committed to one another before God.

Ash didn't have anything he could say to her to get her to see his side of things. And she didn't have to change her perspective.

"I see that look, and I'm telling you that she'll come around."

Ash huffed. He wanted to argue with Cooper—to remind him that their situations were very different. He wanted to lash out. But he couldn't. Cooper didn't mean anything by his words. He wasn't trying to brag about his own situation. His words simply weren't helping like he thought they might.

"Can I ask you something?" Ash said.

"Shoot."

"If your wife had asked you... to leave your job. If she couldn't sleep and thought she was losing her mind over worrying about your safety..." He couldn't bring himself to finish the question. Cooper would know what he was getting at.

He proved Ash right when he nodded. "Would I have quit?"

Ash raised his eyebrows, making it clear that was exactly what he was asking.

"Without question," Cooper said, no hesitation.

Ash didn't speak. Hearing that his friend would have given it all up for his family hit him harder than he cared to admit. Maybe Ash really was the selfish one all this time. Now, all he could do was nod. He didn't want to think about what he'd lost—how

he'd clung to something he'd thought was important.

He was a firefighter, a smoke jumper, a hero. If he didn't have this job, then who was he? That was the biggest and worst question that seemed to linger in his mind.

Who was Michael Ashton?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Over the next couple of days, that question plagued him. He thought he'd been secure in knowing who he was. He'd been able to stand for convictions that had been deeply ingrained in his soul. He'd never questioned what he wanted out of life.

Falling for Charlie changed a lot of that.

She meant so much to him. Even now, he could see a future with her—raising a family with her. He still wanted that for himself. And it made him wonder if he was being too stubborn.

Ash loved his job. He loved being able to help others. He loved the thrill of it.

But he loved Charlie too.

These two competing feelings were ripping him apart from the inside out, even though they should have been able to work together in tandem.

Ash found himself working out more—if only to expend the energy that seemed to plague him lately. Charlie refused his calls. She wouldn't see him, and her brothers had become glorified gatekeepers. How was Ash supposed to convince her that they belonged together when he couldn't even see her face-to-face?

He ran laps around the park, and every time he passed that bench where he'd rescued her from the tennis player, his muscles seized up. A cramp formed in his side, and he slowed his pace to catch his breath. With a hand on his side, he walked a few paces before he glanced at the bench again. Everywhere he looked, he saw her. Every memory of her continued to weigh him down.

Ash was miserable. There was no denying it. Since she'd broken things off with him, he couldn't get his head on straight. His conversations with the guys at work—all their reassurances—didn't help either.

He tossed his head back and closed his eyes, taking in several breaths. Maybe it was time to stop fighting it. Perhaps he should just accept that he couldn't have everything. What was more important? The love he had for Charlie or his job?

Ash didn't have to ask himself that question twice. If phrased that way, he already knew the answer. Charlie was more important. The only issue was that he couldn't seem to accept that someone who loved him would ask such a thing from him.

"Ash? What are you doing here?"

He stilled and turned to see Daniel a few feet away. Ash was rooted to the spot. They hadn't spoken to each other since that day when Daniel had tried to keep him from going into the Keagan residence. A part of him wanted to clock his friend—to blame him for the distance that had formed between himself and Charlie.

But that wasn't logical.

The other part of him wanted to plead with Daniel to convince Charlie she wasn't being realistic. So many thoughts whirled in his head, knocking against each other and adding to his desperation.

Realizing he was staring, he swung his arms around and stretched his shoulder muscles. "I should ask you the same thing. I wasn't aware you came to this park."

Daniel glanced away, then shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't."

Ash would have laughed or poked fun at Daniel for that response, but the amusement

wasn't there. Clearly the man had tracked him down. But for what purpose? Did Charlie want to see him? He didn't dare hope. He flashed Daniel a wry smile. "You want to tell me why you're here, then?"

Daniel shrugged again.

Frustration mounted. "Look, I'm not really in the mood to play a game with you. Is this about Charlie?"

The way his friend flinched made it clear that was the reason he'd come.

"Is she okay?" Ash took a step toward his friend, his voice tight. "Is she?—"

Daniel frowned, shifting. "I mean... she's fine. But... she's..."

"She's what?" Ash demanded. "What's wrong?" Every nerve in his body demanded he sprint toward his truck and drive over there right now. He wasn't going to let anyone stand in his way of helping her—not even Charlie herself. He took a step in that direction, but Daniel's words stopped him.

"I know we gave you a hard time—about dating her." Daniel shoved his hands into his pockets. "But even I can admit that I saw how happy you made her."

Made.

Past tense.

Ash's heart stumbled. Was this Daniel's last-ditch effort to ensure that Ash didn't make any further attempts to see her? He could admit that he'd begun contemplating trying to have one more conversation about his job. It appeared that Daniel wanted to put a stop to that before it happened. Jaw tightening, he waited for Daniel to continue.

“She’s pretty miserable, Ash,” Daniel said. “I thought she’d get over it, but...” He shrugged again. “I don’t think it’s going to be so easy.”

“And you’re here to what? Tell me to leave her alone so she can finally figure out what she wants? So she can move on?” The questions left a bitter taste in his mouth. He hadn’t expected this conversation to feel so raw—how it grated against every nerve in his body. If this wasn’t proof he hadn’t completely given up, he didn’t know what was.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Daniel shook his head. “She’d kill me if she knew I tracked you down. She didn’t want any of us to interfere.” He released a dark chuckle. “But most of them don’t live at the house anymore. They don’t have to deal with her moods. Is it selfish to admit that her food doesn’t quite taste as good as it used to?”

Ash huffed. “Probably.”

Daniel sighed. “You know me. I don’t particularly like getting involved with anyone’s business. People are going to live their lives the way they see fit.”

“Then maybe you should leave it where it is.”

His friend sighed. “That’s just it. I don’t like seeing her hurting. She’s my baby sister.”

“She asked me to quit my job. You know that.”

Daniel nodded, scrubbing at his face. “Yeah, I know.”

“Would you quit your job if the girl you loved asked you to?”

His eyes cut to Ash’s, and without looking away, he nodded. “If I loved her? I’d move heaven and earth to make her happy.”

His statement was like a slap in the face. If he loved her. Ash loved Charlie. He didn’t doubt that. He wanted to make her happy. He wanted to be the one person she could count on beyond all others.

And he had failed.

“Anyway, I thought you might want to know that she misses you. And maybe there’s a chance that things could change. Maybe enough time has passed that Charlie...”

Ash laughed without humor. “You think your sister would change her mind about this?” He laughed again. “If you think that, then you really don’t know her. She’s a Keagan. And she’s probably the most stubborn out of the lot of you.”

Daniel’s lips twitched. “She was practically raised by ten brothers. She had to figure out how to hold her own. What did you expect?”

Ash bit back his own smile. She was strong. And she cared. Her reasons for asking him to quit his job were selfish only in the sense that she wanted to keep him safe. How could he fault her for that?

“I suppose you have to ask yourself one big question,” Daniel murmured. “What are you willing to give up in order to make her yours again?”

“You’re seriously trying to get me to try showing up at your place again?” Ash shook his head. “I’m pretty sure you all but banned me from every coming to your house again.”

Daniel grimaced. “Right. Well, if you choose to show up again, I’ll make sure that no one stands in your way. Just...” He sighed. “Think about it.”

26

Charlie

Summer had started to cool off—especially closer to the mountains. Even though the

bigger fires were no longer roaring, Charlie couldn't help the continued anxiety any time she heard of a fire that started anywhere within a couple-hundred-mile radius.

She still watched the news for updates, holding her breath until she heard that there were no casualties. Statistically speaking, Charlie had to admit that Ash should be okay. After he'd gotten hurt, she'd gone down the rabbit hole in researching everything she could about his job.

Charlie had wanted to prove herself right. She'd wanted to show Ash that he was being too cavalier about the whole thing. Unfortunately, she only ended up discovering that she'd been in the wrong.

Were there still risks for his job?

Absolutely.

But not nearly as much as she'd originally thought.

Now she was alone, hurt, and embarrassed—unable to bring herself to call Ash and tell him as much.

Charlie stared with unseeing eyes at her larger-than-life family. With the summer coming to an end, Wade had insisted that they needed to have one more picnic before it got too cold. The leaves hadn't started changing colors just yet, but there was a distinct nip in the air when dinner rolled around.

Her nieces and nephews played in the field. Her brothers tossed horseshoes. Her sisters chatted while seated on one of the larger blankets. And somehow, Charlie didn't feel like she fit in with any of them.

She was the youngest. Even though she was twenty-two, they still viewed her as the

baby of the family. Why else would Mason, Daniel and Liam care so much about who she wanted to date?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Daniel caught her eye from where he stood with their brothers. He didn't move toward her, though he had that look on his face—the one that said he wanted to say something, but he didn't know how to say it.

None of her brothers had apologized for how they'd inserted themselves into her life. Even now, she couldn't deny how much she hated that they'd done that. Her relationship with Ash had been tumultuous right from the beginning.

Maybe it was doomed from the get-go.

“Uh-oh. I know that look.”

Charlie dragged her gaze from Daniel and looked at Emma. She'd turned from the conversation she'd been having with their other sisters-in-law. A frown marred her pretty face. Though she was still very much the country music star that she'd been when she'd arrived in Copper Creek, she was looking more and more like a Copper Creek native with each passing day.

Her skin had a natural glow from being out in the sun, riding or helping Caleb with various jobs he had over at Mateo's place or working on her own property. She completely fit in with the family now, clad in worn jeans, a hat, and dusty boots.

She placed her chin in her hands and rested her elbow on the picnic table that Wade had brought out this past summer. The expectant look on her face made it clear she wasn't going to say another word until Charlie admitted that she was struggling.

Tempted to brush her off, Charlie glanced once more to her brothers. She was nearly

successful until Daniel snagged her gaze again. Irritation flooded her being. “They’re jerks. And you married one of them.”

Emma snorted. “Who? Your brothers?”

Charlie gave Emma a dark and yet pointed look.

“What can you expect? Brothers are always going to be really protective.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “I think it was less about being protective and more about being controlling. They didn’t like that I was dating their friend.”

She’d garnered Bailey’s attention at some point, the most recent woman to fall in love with one of the many Keagan men. She hid a smile behind her hand and merely glanced at Emma before taking a sip of her drink. Charlie wanted to demand to know what that look was for, but she resisted. The woman was likely going to say something similar to what Emma had said.

“So, your mood is about Ash, right?”

Charlie heaved a sigh before folding her arms in front of her and resting her head atop them. “Yeah, it’s about Ash.”

“You miss him.”

It was obvious. There was no need for her to confirm anything of the sort to Emma.

“Have you called him since his visit?”

Charlie’s grimace was hidden by her arms. No, she hadn’t called him, though she’d lost track of how many times she’d nearly done just that. It had been torture to hold

herself back from calling or texting him. She was second-guessing everything these days.

“Caleb says that you broke it off because of what happened to him when he was out fighting fires.”

Charlie tensed. Of course her brothers would tell their wives what was going on. Not that her brothers necessarily cared about the why of it all. But her sisters-in-law would. Now that Charlie’s life was on full display, she could expect that everyone would eventually know it all.

She peeked over at her brothers. Daniel wasn’t looking in her direction anymore. She hadn’t thought he would tell any of them her reasonings. No, it would have been Mason. Daniel was too quiet, too private. Out of all of them, he was the one most likely to keep these things to himself.

“Let me guess,” Charlie said. “You think I’m in the wrong.” Sitting up, she glanced over at Emma, not surprised to see that Bailey was giving them her full attention as well. They’d gotten close when Bailey helped Emma purchase her house. Bailey was nice enough, but she wasn’t as close to Charlie, and it was mildly uncomfortable to have her take an interest in this conversation.

Emma glanced at Bailey as if the two of them were of one mind. Then she shrugged. “I didn’t think that his job was a big deal.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have to worry about your husband not coming home after being called out to work.”

Emma offered Charlie a sympathetic smile. “You’re right. I don’t have to worry about that in the same way you would. None of us do. But that’s not why I think his job shouldn’t be the deciding factor.”

Charlie cocked her head, her brows knitting together. “So, you don’t think it’s dangerous?”

Emma chuckled. “Oh, I know it’s dangerous. I just have a different view of things, I guess.” She looked over to Bailey as if nudging her to comment.

Bailey shifted in her seat and offered Charlie a smile similar to Emma’s. “I was married to a man who wasn’t completely honest with me. He did things to put my family in a different sort of danger. It might not have been a physical one, but he put us in situations where we could lose a lot. I still loved him despite it all. And I will never regret that relationship because he gave me my daughter.” Bailey’s eyes shifted to where Anya was playing with the other children. “For all the stress and pain there was, I would never want to lose the chance of having her in my life.”

Charlie had the hardest time trying to understand the connection her sister-in-law was trying to make. How did dating Ash compare to the husband who had ruined his own family with his debts and drinking?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Then I met Carter.” A flicker of sadness moved across Bailey’s face, but it mingled with a bittersweet smile. “It terrified me that he might be the same as my late husband. If he was willing to put me in that situation, I knew what I would be signing on for, and I wasn’t sure I could do it.”

“So why did you?” Charlie demanded. “If Carter was such a risk, then why...”

“Because I didn’t want to lose the good we had when we were together. And I could see that he was trying to be a better man.”

Face scrunching with confusion, Charlie shook her head. “I guess you’re a lot more understanding than I would have been.” Her face flushed, and she looked away. “I didn’t mean...”

Emma placed a hand on Charlie’s. “It’s okay. I can see why you would say that.”

Bailey nodded slowly. “Fortunately, your brother has done a lot to be better. He has realized that his behavior hurts more than just himself, and he’s working on it.”

“But Ash isn’t dealing with personal growth. It’s his job. He’s putting himself in danger every day when he knows that I can’t handle it.” Charlie’s voice trembled and she flushed deeper. She hated how selfish her words were making her out to be.

“Let me ask you one thing,” Emma said softly. “We all know that Ash is a good man. He’s not going to do anything to hurt you intentionally, right?”

Charlie nodded, her thoughts inadvertently running through several memories of

them together. Their first kiss in the rain. Ash telling her she was perfect the way she was. He'd made himself absent during the remainder of her teenage years to protect her from himself. Then there was the time he'd saved her from that encounter with the stranger at the park. He'd taught her how to protect herself. Every single thing he did for her was out of love.

Her heart constricted.

She knew he loved her. He just hadn't been able to leave his job for her—his only imperfection—and it could barely be called that.

Charlie forced herself to look Emma in the eye. She sighed and nodded again as she murmured, "He's only ever made me feel safe."

Emma nodded. "And you love who you are when you're with him, right?"

It was getting even harder to fight the emotion that threatened at the back of her throat. She didn't want to break down in front of these women. There was no way for her to escape if she did. Charlie would have to get her horse from where it was tied up in order to avoid that embarrassment.

Emma squeezed Charlie's hand this time. "Let me ask you this, then. Let's pretend that Ash agreed to quit his job, but something else tore him from your life. If you could only have him for five years—if you could only have him for a decade, would that make any difference? Knowing your lives would be cut short due to illness or an accident, would it change the way you feel about him? Would you push him away then?"

Her questions cut through Charlie like a sharp blade through flesh. Her whole body reacted, and she sucked in sharply. Her eyes darted to Bailey, whose first husband had died in a car accident. Bailey watched her intently.

If Charlie knew that Ash's life would be cut short due to something out of his power, she'd still want to spend as much time as she could with him. She'd want to enjoy her life with him in whatever capacity she could. She let out a shuddering breath and a tear slipped from her cheek.

"I think I made a mistake."

Emma's smile didn't tear at Charlie like she thought it might. It almost offered a degree of comfort as Charlie came to her realization.

Charlie swallowed hard and looked away. "I would still want to be with him," she whispered.

Emma squeezed her hand once more. "I thought as much. There are certain people who come into our lives and make such a big difference that we can't go on living without them. They leave their marks in any number of ways. I don't want you to regret anything. If you feel that you can't handle being with a man who might not come home, then perhaps you're simply not ready for a relationship."

Her words stung in spite of being the most truthful thing she might have said to Charlie during this conversation. Hadn't she said this very thing herself? Somehow it felt different coming from Emma. Charlie was still young. She'd always considered herself more mature than those around her. But in this moment, she couldn't deny that she'd made some very immature decisions.

The heat in her face threatened to set her on fire, and she couldn't escape from it. She let out a sorrowful laugh. "What do I do now?"

Emma shrugged. "I guess that's up to you and what you want. I can almost guarantee that you still have a chance to make things right with him. The worst thing that could happen is that Ash turns you down, right?"

Charlie nodded, a lump forming in her throat. Part of her wanted to believe that Ash would never push her away due to holding a grudge, but she couldn't deny that he had every right to be wary of her. She swallowed again and again, but the lump wouldn't go away.

She pulled her hand free of Emma's and reached for her phone, disappointed to note that it had died. She hadn't realized the battery was low when she'd gone on this trip. Emma didn't miss the movement. She pushed her own phone across the table. "You can use mine."

Charlie shook her head. "I'll call him when we get back. It'll give me a chance to organize my thoughts." She forced a smile. "Thanks, though."

27

Ash

Ash couldn't believe what he was about to do. He had to be crazy. That's what he would have called anyone who was about to do what he was doing right now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He stood outside the closed door of his boss's office with heavy hesitation. There was no telling how this conversation was going to go. Tanner could tell him he needed to think it over. Technically, Ash could just walk away from all of it if his requests weren't met, but he didn't want to do that, either.

His heart ached in his chest, each beat striking a pain through him that he wasn't prepared for. This was the right thing to do. He knew that to some degree. The problem was that the rationalization of it all wasn't helping.

There was no use putting this off. He had to do something. It was now or never—before he lost his nerve completely.

Ash pushed the door open slightly and poked his head into Tanner's office. Tanner had only just arrived at the station to get to some paperwork after some of the guys put out a barn fire on the outskirts of town. Just as expected, Tanner's head was buried in a pile of paperwork. He held a handful of pages in one hand while he stared down at a document on his desk, a pen in the other. He only glanced up for a moment when Ash entered before dropping his gaze.

"What do you need, Ashton?"

"Do you have a moment?"

It must have been something in Ash's voice that clued Tanner that this wasn't going to be just a run-of-the-mill conversation. His whole body seemed to still except for his eyes—those drifted up slowly to meet Ash's face.

Once their gazes locked, Tanner placed the paperwork on the desk along with his pen. He settled back in his chair with his hands on the armrests. “I was wondering when you’d be coming to talk to me about this.”

Ash gave the man a wry smile. “You don’t know what I’m here to talk to you about.” He couldn’t possibly know. The man was good at reading people, but Ash was still fairly new compared to some of the other guys who worked here.

Tanner arched a brow and nodded toward the couch that was situated against the wall. He didn’t speak right away. His gaze followed Ash from the moment he shut the door to when he took his seat on the edge of the cushion. His boss finally tilted forward in his seat, resting his forearms on the desk. “I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I didn’t pay attention to the moods of those who work for me. This job can be precarious not just because of its very nature, but because of the moods of those in my employ.”

Ash forced out a chuckle. He had been one of those moody individuals ever since he’d returned from the fire that had stolen his friend’s life.

Tanner didn’t laugh with him. He didn’t even crack a smile. The older man had years of experience in this field; the proof was in every line of his face. He had seen more than most, and he still came to work every day. He was the kind of guy Ash looked up to—the kind of guy Ash could trust to give it to him straight.

Ash chuckled again, but this time it sounded more strained than before. “Okay. Sure. You might know what I came here to talk to you about. But that doesn’t mean you know where I stand.”

Tanner’s studious expression didn’t falter. He continued to stare at Ash thoughtfully. Then he nodded curtly. “Okay, you tell me what you’re here for.”

Ash squirmed under Tanner's stare. As hard as he'd thought this was going to be, it was infinitely worse. He felt like he was giving up on something.

But that wasn't true. He'd been thinking about this decision ever since Charlie had asked him to quit. She was more important to him than anything—including his job.

"I want to phase out of being a smoke jumper." There. He'd said it—or rather spit it out. Before he could lose his nerve, he continued. "I don't want to quit entirely. I'm not sure if you have room for me in another position, and I'm willing to wait until you do?—"

"I'll make room."

Ash stiffened, then relaxed almost all at once. "Sir?"

Tanner settled back in his seat once more. "You're one of our best, Ash. And I can't exactly let you go after you saved the life of one of our own, now can I?" A half-hearted sort of grin touched the man's face. "I don't know the full story, but I've heard a couple rumbles."

Ash grimaced. He'd tried to keep his personal life more or less secret from the others. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to speak poorly of Charlie. He could handle the looks of disappointment they might give him if they found out he was bending to her will. He had his reasons.

But for them to judge Charlie when they didn't know her? He wouldn't stand for that. She'd lost so much in her life. He'd seen the effects of those losses first-hand, and he wasn't about to let her feel like she was going to lose another person. He wanted to protect her in any way he could.

Tanner appraised him, that thoughtful expression still plastered on his face.

Ash looked down at his hands, unnerved by his boss's scrutiny. Before he could try to explain himself, Tanner continued.

“Love is hard, isn't it?”

Ash's head snapped up.

Tanner tilted his head, his eyes full of sympathy. “But then, it was never meant to be easy. There's a great deal of sacrifice that has to be made in order for it to survive. I like to compare it to a plant. Rather than food, water, and sunshine, Love needs sacrifice, patience, and selflessness to survive. Love isn't about getting something in return. It's about prioritizing someone else.”

Ash swallowed hard. Tanner's words were a balm to his soul. A lesser man would have said that Charlie was being unreasonable and selfish—that she didn't have any right to ask him to leave his job. He would have walked away from that sort of relationship, dusting off his hands and calling “good riddance.” Ash himself had fought against those thoughts and feelings in the beginning. He'd bounced from wanting to throw a tantrum to a pity party when he didn't get what he wanted.

But Tanner's words only solidified that Ash had come full circle. He'd made the right decision. While he wasn't rolling over and walking away entirely, he was making a compromise he prayed Charlie would accept.

Swallowing hard and shifting in his seat, Ash nodded. “Sacrifice. That's a good way to put it.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“There’s a thin line between being a doormat and wanting to give the person you love everything they desire. I know from experience it can be hard to toe that line.” Tanner heaved a sigh. “If anything changes, you be sure to let me know.”

Ash nodded once more. He didn’t think there would be any chance of his decision changing. At this point, he wasn’t willing to completely walk away from the career he’d built for himself. And if the sacrifice he was making wasn’t enough, well, he wasn’t sure he was up for another jump. It wasn’t that he didn’t still love it. But something about being a smoke jumper had lost its appeal. When he was gone for a couple days at a time, he missed everyone he left back home. He’d finally put down some roots here in Copper Creek, and he was excited to see just how much he could flourish.

He got to his feet, as did his boss. They shook hands, and Ash moved toward the door. He paused, his hand on the door frame, then he glanced over his shoulder toward Tanner. “Thank you.” There was so much more he wanted to say, so much more he felt he needed to say to the man who’d only had to validate his decision to put Ash at ease.

Tanner nodded, then picked up his pen and papers he’d discarded at the beginning of their conversation. No more words needed to be spoken.

Ash didn’t waste any time after his meeting with Tanner. He headed for the Keagan ranch immediately afterward. It was a Saturday, which meant he might be running into more than just the handful of those who still lived in their childhood home.

Charlie might not even be available—or she might not be willing to speak to him.

He'd avoided calling her, knowing she might ignore his attempts at reaching out. She'd told him to leave that last time he'd come by.

If Daniel was around, Ash had the feeling he might be willing to convince Charlie to come out of hiding. All Ash needed was for Charlie to give him a chance to speak—to be willing to hear him out.

When he showed up at the house, there were more cars parked out front than usual, which meant his previous assumptions were correct. It looked like the whole family was doing something together.

Well, that was just great. Ash hadn't wanted an audience. He couldn't decide if everyone being present would make his attempts to get Charlie back easier or near impossible. As far as Ash knew, Daniel was the only one who was slowly creeping back to his side on the situation. Mason hadn't reached out, nor had anyone else. Carter might still be willing to stand up for him, but even that was beginning to feel unlikely.

An uphill battle was what Ash could expect.

He climbed out of his truck and moved slowly toward the front of the house. He could turn back now. Maybe he should.

Call her. That would be a better segue into resuming the relationship they'd had with one another.

Ash shook his head. No. He wasn't going to run from his decisions. He was going to walk right up to that house, knock on that door, and demand to speak with Charlie. He'd refuse to leave if he had to. What would they be able to do to him? The sheriff wasn't likely to remove him from the premises, and even though Charlie wasn't thrilled with him, she wouldn't allow her brothers to beat him into the ground.

He straightened his shoulders as he climbed the steps to the house. He knocked on the door.

No sounds came from within the house. No shuffling, no voices.

He frowned and stepped over to the window. Through the blinds, there wasn't any movement, either.

Ash glanced over to the multitude of trucks and other vehicles that lined the oversized dirt area between the house and the barn. He might have thought they were in the back of the house, but no sounds came from that vicinity, either.

He started down the steps and headed for the barn. If the horses were there, then they had to be on the premises. But if they were gone, then they were likely out for the afternoon. His stomach tightened. If they were gone, he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle waiting for her. He already knew he could talk himself out of seeing her again. All it would take was reminding himself of how their last encounter had gone.

Shoving aside that thought, he rounded the corner to find the barn completely void of life.

His shoulders sagged. She wasn't here, and there was no way of knowing when she'd return. Maybe he should call Daniel. Ash grimaced. After their conversation at the park, the idea wasn't entirely a bad one, but it didn't mean Daniel would care to help, either.

Ash turned from the barn in time to see a handful of riders coming into view from the east. His heart exploded, and the muscles in his body went weak. His chance to escape without being caught had slipped from him.

He should probably be grateful for that, but in this moment, he was beginning to

realize he was simply terrified.

Even from this distance, he could tell Charlie was in the lead of the large family coming back from their ride. His eyes immediately found her, locking on her, tracking her as she drew nearer. He couldn't tell if she realized he was the one waiting for her, but it didn't matter. He'd stay right where he was until she arrived.

It was now or never.

28

Charlie

Charlie saw the lone figure the second her home came into view. Her initial excitement of seeing Ash immediately shifted into anxiety. He was here to see her—again. The last time he'd come, he'd tried to convince her that they should work things out.

She should have listened to him.

Her hands tightened on the reins she held.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

“Is that...” Emma came up beside her.

“Yeah,” Charlie said quietly.

Emma grinned almost wickedly. “Well, if that isn’t kismet, I don’t know what is.”

Charlie snickered despite herself.

“You wanted to talk to him, right?”

She glanced at her sister-in-law. “Yeah.” That seemed to be the only word she was capable of saying at the moment.

Emma glanced over her shoulder at the rest of their group, then swung her focus back to Charlie. “You might want to ride ahead. There’s no telling what the others might do when they notice him.”

She made an excellent point. Ash showing up when everyone was present wasn’t exactly a good idea. And yet she wasn’t sure she was ready to speak to Ash as it was. To ride ahead would only make the inevitable conversation take place sooner. She hadn’t prepared what she wanted to tell him. Chances were high that she would end up falling all over herself and acting a fool.

Perhaps she deserved to make a fool of herself after she’d been so blinded by her own fears. It felt like a fitting consequence.

Charlie nodded. “Maybe you’re right.” Without waiting for a response, she nudged

her horse forward, leaving all the cowboys in her family in her wake. Her heart rate accelerated more than it probably should. It felt like she was that teenager six years ago as she neared him.

But she wasn't that teenager anymore. And she'd been miserable enough without Ash in her life for the last couple of weeks to know that she was willing to risk a great deal more just to get him back.

By the time she reached the barn, her hair was windblown and her cheeks flushed. She pushed aside the dismal thoughts of what she must look like and slid from her saddle. Ash stood in the barn doorway, his eyes locking with hers.

Charlie resisted the instinct to glance back to where her family approached. She could tell Ash right now that they should leave to have this conversation, but she didn't want to lose her nerve.

"Charlie, I know you might not want to see me?—"

"We need to talk."

They both froze after speaking at once. Charlie blinked, trying to compute what he'd just said to her. Then she offered him a shy smile, relieved when he gave her the same. She laughed and looked away.

"Charlie," he whispered this time, taking a step toward her. He reached a hand out to touch her but then pulled it back.

Her heart stuttered. She'd made so many mistakes when she'd told him she didn't want to see him again. So many regrets from their past conversations. "Why are you here?" she whispered back.

Ash searched her eyes. “I wanted to see you. I couldn’t...” his voice broke. “I tried, but I couldn’t leave everything the way it was.”

She knew exactly how he felt. Heat seared her cheeks, the embarrassment of the apology she needed to give him flooding her chest. Now was as good a time as ever. “I need to apologize.”

He stilled, his eyes raking over her as he waited for her to speak.

Charlie closed her eyes tight, not caring that a tear slipped out from one of them. “I was wrong.”

Still, he didn’t move. He didn’t speak. She’d caught him off guard.

When she opened her eyes, another tear slipped down her cheek. “I shouldn’t have asked you to quit your job. It wasn’t fair. You’d been working toward that career long before we ever became an item. I... it was selfish... to ask.” Her lip trembled no matter how hard she attempted to keep it in check. “I should have never tried to take away something that brought you joy. I want you to be happy—even if it means you’re doing something as dangerous as you are.”

Simply making this confession eased the pressure in her chest. She sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. This wasn’t to say that she was okay with his career choice. She knew she’d have to deal with a great amount of anxiety, but it would be worth it just so she could have him back.

If he wanted her back.

Ash brought his hand forward to gently palm her face. “You’re too late.”

Once again, she felt like she was falling, her heart stumbling and crashing within her.

“I... what?” she asked in a whisper.

“You’re too late. I already told Tanner I want to quit being a smoke jumper.”

“Ash,” she blustered. “You can’t. You love that job. It’s what you’ve always wanted to do. You can’t just quit. Call him back. Tell him you changed your mind.” She moved closer to him, her hands shaking as she reached for his back pocket, where he usually kept his phone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He grasped her hands in both of his and held them firmly, lowering his head so it touched hers. His eyes locked on hers, forcing her to slow her desperate movements. “I’m still going to be a firefighter.”

She blinked and pulled back to get a better look at him. “You are?”

Ash nodded. “I told him I want to stay local. I can help out with house fires, car accidents, and other emergencies just as well as I did as a smoke jumper. It’s still dangerous...” he hedged, “but it’s not as bad as jumping out of a plane and into the fray.” He watched her. It was almost as if he were holding his breath as he waited for a response. He hadn’t quit his job. He hadn’t completely given up what he loved for her.

Relief crashed into her. She would have never forgiven herself if she’d been successful in forcing his hand with such a request. She loved Ash for who he was. She didn’t want anything about that to change, and she got a feeling if he walked away from being a firefighter, something would.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel conflicted about what he was giving up. “But you love being a smoke jumper.”

“I love you more.”

Her lips pressed together. “Ash?—”

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s okay, Charlie. Really. I’ve had plenty of time to think about what I want and where I want my life to go. I’ve realized

something really important. I don't want to do any of it without you."

She blinked back the tears. "Are you sure?"

He nodded with a chuckle. "I haven't been surer about anything in my life. You were right about one thing."

Charlie tilted her head as she peered up at him. "What about?"

"If I want a family... if I plan on being a father... I need to make sure I do everything in my power to make sure I'm there for them. I need to be present. I need to be safe. I can't be any of that if I'm traipsing off to other parts of the state to fight fires."

She didn't miss the way his voice had softened when he mentioned starting a family. Her stomach swirled with a new sort of delight. She might be young, and she was still learning how to communicate better. She wanted to improve in putting Ash first, too. She didn't have the words to tell him as much. Anything she might be able to say would likely fall flat.

Instead, Charlie pulled up against him and wrapped her arms around him. "That's... a great plan," she whispered.

His arms slipped around her, slowly at first, hesitantly, almost. He pulled her tight against his body and rested his chin atop her head. She could feel his heart beating in his throat as she snuggled closer to him. He ran his hands up and down her back, setting off a fresh wave of shivers. "I'm starting to realize that I need to prioritize things a little differently. I don't want to be a single bachelor forever."

She smiled into his neck at that. A man like Ash wouldn't remain single for long—not if he wanted to settle down.

“I love you, Charlie,” he whispered. The sounds of hoofbeats drew closer. Her family would be at their sides in a matter of seconds. Ash’s arms tightened around her as if he feared that someone would take her from him. “I’ve loved you longer than you will ever believe.”

She withdrew just enough to peer up at him, question and amusement in her gaze. “Oh? I seriously doubt that.”

The corners of his lips quirked upward, but then they faded as his gaze shifted to what could only be the arrival of her family. Charlie wasn’t sure she wanted to turn around and face them. She’d caused so much drama in the last couple of months, and she wouldn’t have been surprised if any of her brothers told her she was making a mistake. Nor would she be surprised if they sent Ash on his way.

“Ash,” one of them said low enough that she wasn’t sure which one it was.

Ash’s short nod preceded his response. “Daniel.”

No one else spoke. Shuffling sounds of those dismounting were followed by voices growing quieter as half of the group headed for the house. The other half led the animals into the barn. Charlie only caught sight of Mason’s curious gaze briefly before he disappeared, holding the reins of two horses.

Daniel grabbed her horse’s reins and gave her a firm stare. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was trying to warn her—or perhaps he was trying to push her to some outcome she wasn’t aware of. He didn’t say anything. Instead, he too disappeared into the barn.

Charlie looked up at Ash, marveling and in utter disbelief over what had just happened. “They didn’t tell you to leave.”

Ash shook his head. “No, they didn’t.”

She grinned. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

He turned his eyes to her, his smile matching her own. “That your brothers are finally staying out of your business? I wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t see it for myself.”

Charlie chewed on the inside of her cheek. “So, what now?”

Ash pulled her close again, his grip so strong she knew she wouldn’t be able to escape even if she wanted to. “We’re going to try this again.”

“Try what again?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

He lowered his face to hers, his warm breath brushing against her cheek as he whispered close to her ear. “I’m going to make you fall in love with me.”

She exhaled. “I’m sorry, Ash, but you’re too late.”

He stiffened, drawing back and staring at her with a new sort of ache in his eyes.

Charlie placed a hand to his cheek. “I’ve loved you since before I can remember. I don’t think I ever stopped loving you. And I don’t think I ever will.”

Ash didn’t move for a few moments. It was as if he needed to take a moment to soak in what she’d just said. Then he let out a laugh and scooped her into his arms before spinning her around. When he placed her on her feet, he leaned down to kiss her. It was a deep, scorching sort of kiss—one that demanded all of her.

She wasn’t naive enough to believe she was ready for marriage. She needed to grow and mature a little more before she’d trust herself with that sort of commitment. The mistakes she’d made had settled deep in her heart. A small part of her knew that the memories would linger there, reminding her of how close she’d come to losing the one person who had loved her when she didn’t even know who she was yet.

“I love you, Charlie,” he said.

Her smile broke their kiss. “I love you, too,” she whispered.

“And I hope you know that eventually, I plan on making you mine.”

Her brows lifted. “Ash?—”

He placed a finger to her lips. “It doesn’t have to be today. Or this year even. I waited for you for six years, and I’d happily wait for six more—just so long as I never have to go another day without being able to kiss you, to hold you like this.”

She wanted to laugh and cry and dance all at once. But all she could do was nod as she placed both hands on either side of his face to kiss him one more time.

EPILOGUE

Nine Months Later

Ash

Blossoms bloomed on the trees everywhere Ash could see. Floral scents clung to the air. The Keagan family had expanded by one more baby, and now Emma was expecting. Ash stood back with Daniel. He still struggled with the loss of the friendship he’d had with Mason.

Charlie had told him more details about how their first kiss had gone down, but Mason wasn’t about to budge on his morals. If he’d had his way, Ash got the feeling he would have been arrested for that brief peck.

His eyes swept over to where Charlie sat on a picnic table beside her friend Isabelle. Beside them, Isabelle’s older cousin Aria laughed at something that had been said.

Daniel, ever the quiet observer, seemed to be watching the women, too.

Ash glanced to him and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, not sure how to go about asking what he wanted to know. A stiff breeze rustled through the branches

of a nearby tree, tugging with it some blossom petals. Ash glanced up at the sky, which had started to darken.

“You might as well say it. We’re not getting any younger,” Daniel said, his eyes never leaving his sister and her friends.

Ash chuckled, bringing his focus back to his friend. “Am I so transparent?”

“More,” Daniel admitted.

He chuckled again. His friend was right. “I have a question, but I don’t know how to ask it.”

“Just ask.”

If only it were so easy. He swallowed hard. “I’d like to ask Charlie to marry me.”

“And you don’t know how to do it?” Daniel arched a brow, confusion in his gaze. “I’m sorry, Ash, but if you don’t know how to pop the question?—”

“I know how to pop the question,” he muttered with exasperation. “I’m just not sure how it’s going to be taken—by everyone here.”

“You’re going to ask herhere?”

Ash dragged a hand down his face. “What I mean to say is that I don’t know how your family will take it. A few of you are on board with our relationship. Tensions have lessened, but they’re still there. I could ask Wade. Or maybe I need to ask Mason? I just don’t know the protocol...”

Daniel huffed. “You ask Charlie.”

“But—”

“Look, while I appreciate that you want to do this the old-fashioned way, sometimes fathers aren’t in the picture. We all sort of helped raise her. We all look after her. But in the end, Charlie is going to make her own decisions. None of us could stop her when she wanted to date you. None of us stopped her when she broke things off over your job. And none of us?—”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.” Ash continued to fidget. “So, you don’t think he’ll be mad?”

Daniel shrugged. “I don’t know what Mason is going to think. Frankly, it’s not up to him. He’s got his own family to worry about now.” He shifted his focus to the women. “Charlie is young, but she’s grown a lot over the last year. She’s learned a lot. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with knowing what you want and going for it.”

Ash nodded. “That makes sense.” Before he could thank Daniel for his little pep talk, Caleb, Mason, and Mateo moved over to their little group. Mason gave Ash a curt nod. Mateo had been in a grade older than Ash had been. Lately, Caleb had been helping out at the man’s ranch, where he raised farm dogs.

Right now, both Mateo and Caleb were as somber as the gray sky overhead. Ash got the feeling that they’d all be moving this party inside in a little while. From the looks of it, something was wrong. He didn’t know what it was, but he could sense it.

“Daniel, Caleb thought you might be able to help.” Mateo glanced among the men standing in their group. Ash wasn’t sure if he should slip away, considering the fact that he didn’t know Mateo as well. Beyond being the oldest of six and raising those dogs, the man ran in different social circles. Just by looking at him, it wasn’t hard to imagine that he was a charmer.

Daniel tilted his head, his curiosity piqued. No longer was he focused on Charlie. “What’s going on?”

Mateo blew out a long breath. “I hate to ask this of you, but we’ve already checked with the others.”

Daniel huffed. “And I’m the only one without a family to worry about. Is that it?”

Mason rolled his eyes. “No, you’re the one who doesn’t have any big events coming up. Some of us have an auction out oftown. Those of us who are staying will be working to keep up with what’s going on here.”

“No one has told me what it is I’m available for,” Daniel said. “Maybe I’m not as available as you all think I am.”

Caleb forced out a smile.

Ash took in the conversation with curiosity. These brothers were all the family he had ever needed once upon a time. To this day, he could still see himself inserted in their lives.

Mateo sighed. “Sophia and I have to go out of town for a week. There are some family issues we’re resolving, and I don’t know that I can trust Rowan and the others to handle our place.”

“What makes you think I can?” Daniel snorted. “I don’t know anything about dogs.”

“The dogs will be taken care of. It’s the horses I’m worried about. Sophia is the head wrangler. She oversees all the horses and their feeding or grooming schedules. I need someone who’s good with horses to cover her shifts.”

Ash could sense Daniel considering the request before he glanced at Caleb. “You can’t do it? Aren’t you training over there most days?”

“Emma and I are going to LA next week.”

Daniel sighed. “So, you just want me to look after the horses,” he said. “For a week.”

“It might be more.”

Daniel’s head snapped up, and Ash bit back a smile. He should have definitely slipped away. In fact, he was going to do just that. The first plop of rain hit the back of his neck. Those around them had started to pick up their things, and just as Ash predicted, they were taking their chairs and tables to the side of the house.

Ash backed out of the group, patting Daniel on the shoulder just as he heard him agree to the request. He glanced over to the table, but Charlie wasn’t there anymore.

“Looking for Charlie?”

He turned toward the unfamiliar female voice.

A woman with long, dark hair, tanned skin, and full lips cocked her head as she looked him over. The wind had picked up and the strands of her dark hair whipped around her face.

“Aria, right?”

Her smile broadened. “That’s right. You must be really good with names if you can keep everyone straight.” She glanced around the space. “There are so many of them.”

“Yeah,” Ash chuckled. “There are.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:45 pm

Her arms were folded, her painted fingernails tapping her arms as she surveyed the group.

“You know where Charlie went?”

“Inside, I think. She said she wanted to make sure there was enough space for everyone to be in the kitchen. If not, we might be moving to the barn.” She wrinkled her nose, then laughed. “I should have known better than to assume my cousins weren’t the hicks my siblings made them out to be.”

He gave her a funny look just as he got pelted by another drop of rain. “Thanks.” Ash made it to the kitchen door just as the rain started coming down in sheets. Squeals of surprise and laughter erupted as people rushed past him. He barely made it to the side of the doorway before he was crushed by their stampede.

Charlie laughed, and his head swiveled to find her smiling at him from where she stood a few feet away. The whole room was filled to the brim with the Keagans and their growing family as they overflowed into the living room.

He moved toward Charlie and took her hand in his. “Follow me,” he whispered.

“What? Ash! It’s pouring out there,” she blurted as he tugged her toward the still-open doorway.

“Humor me!” He laughed. “Just this once, humor me.”

Her eyes sparkled as he pulled her out into the pouring rain. She flinched at first, then

turned her face up to the sky and let out a strangled laugh before lowering her gaze to him. “You’re crazy.”

He shook his head, not bothering to tell her he was simply in love. Around to the side of the house, he continued to tug on her until he pulled her under the roof’s awning and toward his body. She shivered, and he wrapped his arms around her. “Do you know what day it is today?”

She smirked. “May tenth.”

Ash nodded. “Seven years ago. On this very night, you and I stood out in the rain.”

Charlie blinked, the amusement in her eyes sobering. “Ash...” she whispered breathlessly. “You’re not serious.”

“I would never forget, Charlie.”

She stared at him, wonder in her expression. “You remembered the actual date?”

He nodded. “I remember everything about that night. The way you looked. The way you smelled. How angry I was at myself for what I’d done. And how terrified I was that I’d ruined your life. I thought for sure I’d be a dead man walking if you?—”

Charlie placed a finger to his lips. “None of that. Regrets can live in the past as far as I’m concerned.”

Ash stared at her, amazed by every aspect of her. “I told you then, and I’ll say it again. You’re perfect. You were perfect the way you were then, and you are today.”

She snickered. “And yet I’ve changed.”

“And I still love you.”

Her hand pressed to his cheek. “I love you, too.”

“And I still want to marry you.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’m ready when you are.” It was something she’d said to him a lot over the last couple of months. Ever since New Year’s Eve, she’d teased him about them getting married and officially starting their life together. Only tonight, he wanted to make it official.

Slowly, he lowered himself to his knee. Her eyes widened. “Ash,” she blurted, “what are you?—”

“Charlotte Diane Keagan, I’ve known I wanted to marry you since I came back to Copper Creek just over a year ago. I knew I wanted to share my life with you long before then. Don’t make me wait any longer. Be mine.” He pulled a ring from his pocket; one he’d purchased last fall after they’d gotten back together. Ash lifted it upward, and Charlie gasped. “Be mine, forever, please?” he repeated.

She nodded, her hands covering her mouth as a happy sob escaped her lips. When she lowered her left hand toward him, he slid the ring on her finger. She only glanced at it for a second before she threw herself into his arms, her momentum causing them to stumble back into the downpour. Charlie’s lips crashed against his, and they sealed their promise in the rain.