

Her Choice, Forever

A Her Choice Story

By

Megan McCoy

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Chapter One

“Hello, this is Candy Lyon, thank you for calling Rose’s Ranch. How can I make your day better today?”

A way too cheerful voice chirped in Elizabeth’s ear, but she smiled despite herself. Could this woman help her kid get better grades, lose his teenage attitude, her money problems go away and... “Hello, I’d like to make a two-week reservation please.”

“Great news!” the woman gushed again. “Two weeks will give you a great Rose’s Ranch experience. What times are you wanting to come visit us?”

She was very perky, wasn’t she? Elizabeth thought. “Do you have available reservations for 6, five adults and one almost teenager for last week in June, first week in July?” she asked.

“You know what?” The Candy person almost chirped. “We have a brand new cabin the guys are finishing up, that will be open that very week. It has four bedrooms, three bathrooms, overlooks the lake and you would be the first people staying there. How does that sound?” She then quoted a figure that was in the budget she’d been given.

“It sounds perfect,” Liz sighed happily. She was hoping she didn’t have to share a hotel room with her brothers and their women. She loved them, but really, there was only so much love to go around.

Her two brothers had called her and said if she set up a vacation and did all the busy work and details, they would pay for her and her son to go on vacation with them.

Family reunion, big brother style.

Liz didn’t think an hour on the Internet looking for a laid back retreat, then a five-minute phone call, was worth a two-week vacation but she never argued with her big brothers when they wanted to gift her or Ben something. Apparently they wanted their company on a vacation with them. Why, she wasn’t sure. Liz laughed, well, they hadn’t been around Ben for a while. Two weeks of him and his major teenage attitude would be more than enough for them not to want another visit to happen again too soon. She loved the boy desperately, but he was all she could take some days.

Yet, a couple weeks on a working ranch with his uncles and some cowboys might be good for whatever teen angst the kid was going through. This past year, twelve-year-old Ben had

just gone off the wall. She thought moving him to the private school would help, and it had, marginally. He still was making borderline grades, but he was doing it in exclusivity with a butt load of money being thrown at it and him.

Liz dubiously guessed that was better.

The teachers said his attitude was okay at school, but made it frowningly clear they expected much better than an okay attitude. For what it costs she did, too. It was how to get that better attitude that seemed to be the issue. She just hoped it wasn't drugs. He was too young for drugs, she assured herself. Where would he get them, anyway? Liz didn't know.

All she knew was that there were four more weeks of school and then two weeks of summer vacation for him to be home alone while she worked before their now booked vacation where she hoped her brothers or something would help. Or just maybe they would give her a real break and a fresh attitude that she so desperately needed.

She could do this! She just hoped Benjamin—who now insisted on being called Ben—passed all his classes and would move up a grade. Who knew her goals would be so small at this point in his life? Didn't most kids pass school? What was she doing wrong? Silently, she wished things were different.

When her husband, Troy, was alive, there weren't these worries. Of course, Ben was younger then, and easier. She only worked part-time, not time and a half, and he was around to help with life.

No one helped with life now. Her brothers were great. Eric paid for most of Ben's fancy new school. She insisted it was a loan. He insisted it was a write off he could afford. Ethan sent him a computer and then came to teach him how to set it up and play. She loved her brothers.

Ben used to love them too. Now he seemed to care less about much of anything, but his phone, the computer, and pushing any boundaries she tried to set to the limit.

While her brothers were great, they weren't her husband and she really missed one of those husband things, in her life and bed. Just when she thought she was ready to date, explore options again, for the first time she since was a teenager, and maybe have a bit of a private life, Ben decided to implode his world. Hers.

Sighing, she looked at the clock. Lunch hour was over. Time to get back to work.

* * *

“Holly!” Eric called from his office. “Could you come here a minute, please?”

Smiling, he heard her lilting voice call back, “Of course!” A minute later she almost danced into the room. He loved to see happy again, after their rough patch last summer. Anything was better than that much sadness and stress. “Yes, love? What can I do for you? Fetch your pipe and slippers? Slip into something naughty?”

“How about you slip your butt on my lap, I want to show you something,” he patted his legs invitingly for her.

“Do you have pants on behind that desk? No one told me it was no pants Thursday!” She headed his way, delighted grin on her face. “But I have seen it before, you know. Sometimes I open my eyes and view the eye candy!”

“It’s Monday and get over here,” he pretended to growl, pushing his chair back for her adorable butt to plop down in comfort.

“Man. Here I thought Friday was coming,” she complained, and settled on his lap. “You want to be coming?” She wiggled hard on his lap.

“Woman, is sex all you ever think about?” he said, putting his arms around her to mouse click.

“What else is there?” She nibbled his ear.

“Vacation,” he said, triumphantly, finding the link he wanted despite her distraction.

“Yes! I love a vacation! Where are we going and when?” Suddenly her mouth left his ear, and her focus turned to the computer.

“There!” He pointed to a rustic cabin in the woods, and she reached over and scrolled, reading quickly. “Okay, it has hot water and indoor toilets. Sounds great! Honeymoon time! When are we going? What?” She asked, as he tensed.

Eric felt a bit unsettled, which was of course ridiculous. “Well, there’s something I didn’t tell you.”

“You bought it and we’re moving to the boonies forever?” She moaned.

He knew his city girl wouldn’t like the country forever. “You think I’d buy a house without discussing it with you?”

“Oh, who knows what you do. You just do anything your little ol’ heart desires and all I can do is go along and you know it,” she leaned back in his arms. “So?”

Tentatively, he said, “We’re taking the family with us.”

“Ethan and Elizabeth?”

“Liz and Ben, Ethan and Meredith,” he confirmed. “For two weeks.”

“That sounds fun?” she asked, cautiously, as if she weren’t sure of his answer.

“Yes,” he said confidently. “Actually, I think it will be. The ranch has lots of activities, horseback riding, boating, fishing, swimming, four-wheeling, hiking. Apparently there is a theater of some kind, or a media room where we can watch movies. St. Louis is a manageable drive away, you girls can go shopping a few days, maybe spend the night in a fancy hotel there, do the spa thing. There’s sightseeing, and,”

“Oh,” she interrupted, squealed and bounced on his lap. “Eye candy! Look!”

Eric looked and saw a line of men, Bonanza style, on horseback with cowboy hats, up on his screen. “The Lyon’s. Jeb, Matt, and Blaze” he read aloud. “What the hell kind of name is Blaze?”

“It’s probably a nickname,” she assured him. “They own it. The ranch, I mean. Okay,” her huge gray blue eyes looked into his innocently. “If you insist and demand, I’ll suck it up and pretend to have fun on a ranch with hot guys on horses.”

“You go flirting with a cowboy, and I’ll blister your butt like it’s never been blistered before,” he said, sternly.

“Oh, promises, promises,” she jumped up from his lap, and called over her shoulder, “Bet I get to the bedroom before you do!”

“Dibs on the hairbrush,” he called, giving her a three second head start and headed up after her, listening to her giggle.

* * *

“What are you up to, Matt?” Harry asked, wiping the bar down and then refilling a guy’s beer that sat two stools down. He then poured and handed him a beer, without asking what he wanted. “Waiting on someone to show up?”

“Nope, just needed to get away from the house awhile,” Matt took his drink from the old bartender and took a big swallow. Icy and sharp. Just liked he needed.

Harry nodded. “Know how that feels. It’s why I work two jobs

“You got a dad chasing his wife around the living room, too?” he asked, dryly.

Harry snorted. “Bastard. Who would have thought Jeb would get him a young city girl? Figured it was Blaze driving you nuts.”

“Blaze is fine. Smarter than me. He moved out to the bunkhouse after he walked in on his grandpa and his step-grandma making out in the kitchen,” Matt rolled his eyes. “I’m waiting till the long term renters move out of my old cabin at the end of the week and I’m moving back in. Then dad and his wife can just have themselves a high old time, any old place, and I won’t have use bleach on my brain at night.”

Everyone knew that Matt had moved in with his dad, Jeb, after Matt’s wife had left him when Blaze was little. It was a small town. Most people knew a lot of things, simply because other people were interesting. No other reason.

Blaze had left with his mom, during the divorce, but came home to visit his dad at the horse ranch, every holiday and summer, and the summer he turned twelve, he simply refused to go back to St. Louis to live.

Luckily his mom accepted that Blaze knew where he needed to be. Jeb and Matt had their hands full with him for a few years, but he seemed to have settled down now. Or had learned to keep his escapades under cover. Either or. In retrospect, nothing Blaze did seemed as hard as what his dad was doing now. Or as embarrassing.

Harry shook his head. “Didn’t think he’d ever get married again.”

“None of us did, but I’m sure mom is looking down and laughing her butt off. He has his hands full with Candy, but seems to love it. Glad she stayed on as general manager. Took a lot of pressure off us. She can handle about everything going on, in the business side of the ranch,” Matt took another sip of his beer, and looked around. “Not very busy tonight,” he observed.

“Not everyone keeps rancher hours. People will be coming in soon. Couple hours there won’t be a place to sit, as usual,” Harry said, wandering down the bar to take care of other customers.

Matt decided to have one more beer, and then go back home. Maybe Candy had his dad worn out and they were both sleeping. It was the best he could hope for. He sure didn’t want to see what he’d seen earlier ever again.

After another beer, though, he smiled. All he could hope for was to be as lucky as his dad got with Candy. Jed had been a widower for many years, and as far as Matt knew, had barely dated. If he had, he kept it under wraps.

Then he met Candy and boom. Love at first sight, it had seemed. Who knew the old fart still had so much get up and go?

He, on the other hand, had been divorced a lot of years, and dated constantly. Often. Regularly. Yet, he'd never come close to love again. Maybe he'd have to be his dad's age before it happened. Who knew? That would rule out any chance of having to go through another few years of raising another teenager again though. Blaze had grown up finally, but it had been a long, hard road to get him there. There were a few times when he didn't know if Blaze was going to kill himself with his brazen teenage idiocy or if he was just going to kill the boy himself out of frustration. Luckily, neither had happened, and now Blaze was a mostly decent person with a few quirks, but knew how to do anything on the ranch just as well as his grandpa did.

Matt looked at the clock behind the bar, threw some bills on the counter, waved to Harry, and headed out the door. He'd go drive around the lake once, check on the horses, and then make sure the lights were out at home before he went in.

Though he knew from sad fact that lights out didn't mean his dad and Candy weren't... he stopped thinking that line of thought immediately. Yeah. Good idea, Matt, he told himself. He couldn't wait to get back in his own cabin. Living with his dad had made sense while Blaze was growing up. Another adult there, and since the main house, *Lyon's Den*, was also the office for the ranch, where the clients checked in, where the ranch hands and other workers clocked in and out, there were people there almost all the time. Someone was usually around to keep an eye on the hellion. He and Blaze had grown accustomed to being there, though, and neither thought about moving till recently.

Blaze moved first. He came in from work, headed to the kitchen and caught his granddad and step-grandma having a really good time in the kitchen wearing really not much. Instead of having supper, he'd packed his clothes and moved to the bunkhouse with the summer ranch hands that night and kept muttering something about needing eye and brain bleach that made Matt laugh... till tonight. Tonight he realized the need for brain bleach.

What was wrong with his dad? Acting like a kid. Chasing his wife around the house like... as if... Matt sighed, as if they were newlyweds. They needed their privacy. He got it. Newlyweds were newlyweds despite their age, he guessed. It had been a long time since he'd been a newlywed.

Sure, he had his share of women, but there hadn't been a serious relationship in his life since Blaze's mom left when he was little. While she could handle ranch life, she told him she

simply didn't want to. It was too dirty, too messy, and just too much work. All she wanted was a nice apartment in the city with no yard work and no horse poop to clean up.

She took his kid, a nice hefty settlement, and went back to St. Louis. He missed her, but he'd missed the kid more, and despite all the teenage hell they'd gone through, he was glad when Blaze decided he wanted to live with him. Even happier that Kim let him move back.

Throwing his truck in drive, he headed out toward the lake, one of his favorite places on earth. He never got tired of this view. One of the prettiest places he's ever seen, not that he'd traveled much. In the moonlight, it especially seemed like it had been kissed by paradise.

His granddad had bought this land—or won it in a poker game or something. No one was ever sure. Then he did nothing with it. His dad had inherited it, brought his mom here on their honeymoon, and they never left. Starting out with a small bed and breakfast, it had grown into a thriving tourist ranch that employed over seventy-five people in the summer season. He loved it here, almost as much as Blaze did. That boy thrived on the hard work, horses and the rich black earth of Illinois.

Matt parked his truck on a low rise of land and looked over the lake. He could see the boat dock from here. His dad, Jeb, often rowed in the evening to unwind. He spent lots of hours in the rowboat growing up. He and his dad had the best talks out there, and he often got the longest lectures and the sternest warnings out there. Nowhere to go in a rowboat to get away, and all he could do was listen. His dad had been a strict dad, and Matt often wondered if he'd been a little stricter with Blaze if the wild years would have been less so. He'd turned into a great man, though, so apparently things evened out in the end.

Sighing, Matt gazed at the moon. Would this be the last summer he spent here? He'd lived on this ranch all his life, and even commuted to college daily. Lately, he'd wanted to travel, wanting to see the world. Talking to his new stepmom made him realize what all he'd been missing out on. She had worked in the hotel business for years before she and his dad got married, and had many tales of life in five star hotels. He had a business degree and a lifetime of hospitality management experience. With Candy as a recommendation, he could do something like that for a few years. Or he could just take some vacations. Or find a new ranch and build his own business.

He hadn't made any decisions yet, but serious thought to leaving had been niggling in his brain and working its way into his thoughts for a while now. He'd stay through the busy summer

season, but as soon as it was over, he was going somewhere. He didn't know where yet, but travel, a vacation to start, was in his future.

He hoped a quiet sleeping house was in his future too, and that the cabin was empty by the end of the week. It might not be as far as his dreams, but he was ready to travel to that new cabin soon. Then further.