

Loretta Bivens

A  
Cowboy's  
Heart



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By

Loretta Bivens



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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my big sister Connie, who is my best friend, my biggest fan, and my greatest encourager. Sis, I have watched you grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and I do believe you're finally learning how to "cowboy up." I love you and I'm proud to be your baby sister!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In undertaking a project as multifarious as writing a book, one undoubtedly has to rely on the input and assistance of many different people to accomplish the task. I would like to take the time to thank and acknowledge these people regardless of the amount of time or effort spent.

First, I'd like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who is the head of my life, and who, without His divine guidance and assistance, this book never would have been written.

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I'd like to thank my sister, Constance, who prayed for me and put up with me during the whole process, listened graciously to every idea, every dialogue change, and even sat through the reading of whole chapters as they developed.

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Last, but not least, I'd like to thank everyone who lovingly encouraged me throughout the different stages of this endeavor, those who read my first book and asked for more, and those who read bits and pieces of this book as it progressed and said they thought it was good enough to sell a million copies!

I love you and thank you all so very much! God bless you.

## **A PRAYER FOR ALL WHO HAVE A COWBOY'S HEART**

Heavenly Father, first of all, I give you all of the praise, the honor, and the glory. Without you, I am nothing, for it is in you that I live, move, and have my being. I bless your name forever and ever.

Father, I pray for my beloved readers. In a world where doing wrong has become the “norm” and doing right has become the butt of jokes, I pray that this book will inspire those who read it to ride against the winds of this present world system and let Jesus Christ hold the reins of their heart and lead them down the path that they should go.

I pray that in the face of adversity, struggle, and despair, those who read this book will mount up on wings like an eagle and look to Jesus for the courage and strength to cowboy up!

Lastly, Lord God, I pray that you will bless each person who reads this book. Enlarge their pastures, and let the fruit of your unmerited favor rest upon their fields. Be their mighty protector in these last and evil days. Bless them like only you can, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Amen.



## GIDDYUP!

The black Ford Lariat F-150 kicked up a lot of dust as it rode down the wide dirt path of Cedar Lane Stables, which was the current home of the Federation of Black Cowboys. When it rounded the curve in the path and reached the huge, lopsided gate, it came to an abrupt stop. Joe Lee Anderson backed the truck up, slipped it into an open parking space, and climbed out.

Noticing some men hanging over the fence near the corral, he strolled over to them. “Hey, has anyone seen Cowboy?”

He was referring to Don Rouse, who was known to his friends as “Cowboy for Christ,” often called “Cowboy” for short.

One of the men turned, his scraggly features easily recognizable, his weathered face crinkling into a big smile. “Well, if it ain’t Oak Anderson.”

A slow grin spread across Joe Lee’s face. No one had called him Oak in a long time.

“Uncle Ben,” he greeted the older man, grabbing him up in a bear hug. “It’s good to see you.”

Ben “Tex” Miller was one of the old timers, known affectionately to the other cowboys of the Federation as “Uncle Ben.” He was a true cowboy and he was black. In his heyday, he had worked skillfully alongside many a famous cowboy, including the infamous Bill Pickett, the father of bulldogging, and both Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, the singing cowboys. It was Uncle Ben who nicknamed him “Oak,” because Joe Lee was as tall as an oak tree. Joe Lee stood about six foot four, taller with his boots on.

“You here to ride?” another man asked, walking up to the group.

Joe Lee Anderson turned to see the familiar face of his friend, Lenard Hebert III, affectionately known as “The Professor.” Sticking his hand out, he grinned lopsidedly. “Professor, how are you, man?”

“I’m good,” Lenard replied, shaking his hand. “It’s been a long time.”

Joe Lee nodded, rocking back on his heels, shoving his hands in his jean pockets. He knew he’d have some explaining to do. He shook his head with regret. He hadn’t seen his friends in over three years.

One by one, Uncle Ben introduced him to the other men standing at the fence. Most of them were young and green, eager to learn, and the old timers like Uncle Ben were happy to mentor them. A few rodeo stories and a couple of roping demonstrations later, Joe Lee was begging his leave.

“Hey,” Don called out, interrupting them as he hauled his thick body down the dirt path, adjusting his worn, sweat-stained Stetson, pulling it low on his forehead to give him some shade from the glaring sun. “You looking for me?”

Joe Lee smiled warmly and embraced his friend. “Sure am, Cowboy.”

“Where you been, man?” Don slapped at his friend’s hat, genuinely glad to see him.

“Working mostly.” Joe Lee shrugged timidly, knowing the third degree was about to begin.

“It’s been over three years, Oak,” Don scolded, giving him a little shove, not satisfied with his short response.

“Yeah, I know,” he admitted, but not wanting or willing to give any details. Lowering his head, he dug the tip of his boot into the dirt. “I had a lot going on, man.”

“Like what? You couldn’t call somebody?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Complicated? Oh, you mean that fancy cell phone you got is too complicated for you to use so you couldn’t call, right?”

Joe Lee rolled his eyes. He knew his friend was joking, but he was also making a point at the same time. "OK. I've been away."

"Away? Where, in jail? Oak, you been in jail?" Don inquired excitedly.

"Calm down." Joe Lee put up his hands. "I was not in jail."

Don hunched up his shoulders. "Then where were you, man?"

"I was away...at school."

"School?" Don frowned, not expecting his friend's response.

"Yeah. I was finishing up my degree."

"Where, in Alaska?" Don asked, sarcastically alluding to his lack of communication.

"The University of Pennsylvania."

Don smiled and leaned his back up against his friend's truck. "So, you finally did it."

"Yeah."

"That's great, man! So this means you're a doctor now?"

"Yep, a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine." Being one of the few black veterinarians in the city would put him in a class by himself. "You know, I was working at the Belmont Large Animal Hospital before, but now that I've got my degree, I'm preparing to open my own equine clinic."

"Well, I'll be," Don remarked, surprised yet genuinely happy for his friend. "Man, I'm really proud of you, and I know it must've been difficult for you, going back to school at your age, but you still could've let a brother know. I mean, I could've at least come to your graduation to support you."

Walking up on the tail end of the conversation, Lenard asked, "Support who?"

Don nodded his head in Joe Lee's direction. "Oak finally got his degree and is going to open up that horse clinic."

"Equine clinic," Joe Lee corrected him in good-natured exasperation.

"Well, congratulations! And, you know," Lenard said, swinging his body around and spreading his arms out, "we got your first patients right here."

Joe Lee laughed and slapped his buddy's hand. "I know that's right."

"Hey, Oak!" a woman's voice called out from the open door of the red trailer marked *Debbie's Reins and Things*.

Joe Lee turned around and waved at the woman. "Hey, Deb, what's up?"

"What do you mean *what's up*? Where you been?" she asked, coming out of the trailer and standing on the bottom step. "Get on over here and talk to me!"

He excused himself and sprinted over to the trailer. Leaning over, he hugged the pretty brown-skinned cowgirl. Her petite frame was sporting worn, faded jeans and a bright red T-shirt with her picture on it. Her long, thick hair was plaited in a single braid which hung over her shoulder. She looked like a teenager, but her sparkling brown eyes belied her maturity.

"How you been, Deb?" Joe Lee smiled down at her.

"I've been fine." She squinted up at him, her hands on her slim hips. "How *you* been?"

He chuckled at her accusatory tone. "I've been fine, just busy is all."

"I'll bet. What's her name?"

"Naw, it ain't like that."

"Uh-huh," she smirked. "How's your mama?"

Joe Lee Anderson was forty-five-years-old and still lived with his mother. They lived in a beautiful two-family home with a big yard and a two-car garage. Actually, it was his house and his mother lived with him, but to hear him tell it, it was hers. She had worked and sacrificed all her life for him and he just wanted to make sure that he showed her how much he loved and appreciated her. And, in spite of what it looked like to others, he was no *mama's boy*. On the contrary, Joe Lee was very much a man. He was a cowboy.

"Fine. How's yours?"

"She's OK. She's in the trailer. Why don't you stick your head in and say hello?"

When she moved out of the way, he stepped up, pulled open the trailer door, and stuck his head in. "Hey, Mama, how's it going?"

"Well, Lord, if it ain't Oak Anderson," she greeted him from behind the counter. "How are you, handsome?"

"I'm fine, ma'am. It's good to see you."

"Come on in here and give me a hug!" She held her arms out.

He bounded up into the trailer and over to the counter, where she wrapped her arms around him. After releasing him, she barraged him with questions. "Is everything alright? Where you been all this time? How's your mother?"

He hung his head and answered respectfully, "Yes, ma'am, I've been away getting my degree and Ma's doing fine. I'll tell her you asked about her."

"A degree, huh? Well, that's good. I'm real proud of you. But that don't excuse you for staying away so long!" she reprimanded, shaking her finger at him.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied meekly.

"Alright, go on, git! I got work to do." She fussed at him, but smiled.

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled broadly, blowing her a kiss as he let the screen door close. When he stepped out of the trailer, he smiled down at his long-time friend, who still had her hands on her hips.

"So, have you seen Judah yet?" Debbie asked, walking with him over to his other waiting friends.

Judah was Joe Lee's horse, a fine brown and white quarter horse which he boarded at Cedar Lane Stables. Although he hadn't visited him or rode him in over three years, he always made sure to send the monthly payments for his keep.

"No. I'm going to see him now." He turned his head and nodded in the direction of the stables.

"I'll walk with you guys," Debbie said, and fell into step with them as they headed toward Horse's Row.

As Joe Lee and his friends walked down Horse's Row, he took note of the horses that hung out of their stalls, heads bobbing up and down, whinnying as if they were talking to one another. He was reminded of a group of neighbors on a busy street, hanging out of their windows, or over their fences, exchanging the latest gossip. It was quite a comical sight.

When they reached Judah's stall, the horse pushed his head all the way out and sniffed the air. He snorted loudly, shaking his head and tossing his mane, his hind legs dancing excitedly in the small stall. It had been awhile, but he was glad to see his owner. He pushed his nose up hard against Joe Lee's arm, nudging him playfully. It was as if no time had passed.

"Did you miss me, boy?" Joe Lee spoke as the horse butted his head up against his chest. He reached out and rubbed the horse's nose. "I know it's been a while, boy, but don't knock me down with your enthusiasm, OK?"

"He'll calm down in a minute," Don told him, laughing at his friend. "It's a wonder he even recognizes you after all this time."

"You recognize me, don't you, boy?" Joe Lee cooed, putting his hands lovingly on either side of the horse's head. The horse shook his head and snuffled loudly, knocking his hands away. Joe Lee stepped up closer to the stall and peered in. The horse stepped agilely to the side, allowing him visual access to his home.

"Why don't you go in and brush him down?" Don prodded, figuring his friend wanted to check out the horse's living conditions.

Joe Lee unhooked the stall gate and was inside and working before Don could say another word.

"Listen, man," Lenard called out. "I've got to go and check on a few things. How long are you going to hang out?"

"I don't know, man," Joe Lee answered, not really sure of his plans.

"Maybe I'll catch you later. If not, don't be a stranger. I mean it, Oak."

"I hear you, man."

Debbie leaned in the stall and said her goodbyes, too. "Oak, I've got to go, but it was great seeing you. I hope we'll be seeing you more often."

"Yeah, me, too, Deb. I've missed you guys."

After the others had gone, Don stepped up to the stall.

"You want to talk to me now? I have to tell you, man, I was worried about you. How could you just disappear like that? I mean, I asked around, but nobody seemed to know where you were or what you were doing. I thought we were friends, man."

Joe Lee stopped brushing his horse and looked out the stall at his friend. "We are. It's just...it's been rough, that's all. I was trying to concentrate on school and work full time." Sighing, he admitted, "I meant to call, man, I really did, but every time I thought about calling, something else would come up and I was off and running with the next crisis in my life and before I knew it, the time had just passed and now, here it is, three years later. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, well," Don accepted his apology noncommittally. "Listen, why don't you hang around for a bit? Some of us are going to kick back and hit the pit. You know we've always got plenty of steaks to grill and maybe after we finish eating, you and I can talk some more. How's that sound?"

"Sounds like a plan," Joe Lee agreed without a second thought.

Tipping his Stetson back, he looked over his surroundings. Cedar Lane Stables was a sight for his sore eyes. It was a large patch of land, mostly dirt and fences but, as he looked around, his eyes took in all that he could see – the horses, the corral, and the other cowboys milling around – and he began to relax. The tension that had kept his stomach in knots for the past few months slowly dissipated. He looked down at his dusty pants and boots and grinned. This was exactly what he needed. He whipped out his cell phone and called his mother.

"Are you on your way?" his mother inquired.

"No, I'm at the stables. I'm going to hang out here with the guys for a bit. Will you be OK?"

“Yes, of course,” his mother assured him. “It’s been a long time since you’ve visited the stables, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, have fun and I’ll see you when you get home. Give everyone my love.”

“I will, Ma,” he smiled into the phone. “Deb’s mother asked about you. She said to say hi.”

“Tell her I’ll give her a call real soon.”

“OK. Listen, the guys are calling me. I’ll check in with you later.” Joe Lee snapped his phone shut and headed off in the direction of his name being called out by the other arriving cowboys.



## CHAPTER ONE

*Ringgg! Ringgg!*

Joe Lee barreled through the front door, flinging his key ring onto the table in the foyer. Out of breath, he snatched up the house phone. "Hello."

"Hey, man. It's me, Don."

"Hey, Don, what's up?" he asked, shrugging out of his jacket. "Why didn't you call me on my cell? Did I forget to give you the number?"

"No, and I did, but I got your voicemail."

Joe Lee pulled out his cell phone and checked. It was on vibrate. "Sorry."

"Listen, I've been thinking. How about joining us for our next showdeo?"

"Me?" Joe Lee asked incredulously. "Man, you know I ain't been riding like that."

"What's the problem?" Don asked. "It's not like you can't ride. You just need a little practice. It's just like riding a bike."

Joe Lee thought about the invitation. It would be great to ride with the guys again. Until the other day, he hadn't realized how much he missed riding and being around the other cowboys.

"I don't know, man. It's been awhile. I mean, I'm still pretty sore from the other day and I just rode around the corral."

Don laughed. "That's why you've got to get back in the saddle."

Joe Lee had to admit, even though he was sore all over and every muscle in his body ached, he hadn't felt this good in a very long time. He also knew that his newly lifted spirits had

everything to do with his visit to Cedar Lane Stables. A resigned laugh rumbled up from his belly. “OK, man, I’m in!”

“I never doubted it for a minute. Cowboying is in your heart!”

Don was right. Cowboying was in his heart and he was glad that he had decided to reconnect with his friends at the Federation. It had been a rough few years. He had finally finished school and was looking around for a building to purchase for his equine clinic. He was glad that he had worked at the animal hospital, but he didn’t want to waste any more time getting started with his own business. Though there were still some minor details to work out — and most of them personal — he was raring to go. He had reconnected with his friends at the Federation because he knew that in order to deal with his personal issues, he needed time to think, to get his head together, and the only way he knew how to do that was on the back of a horse.

When he reached his bedroom, he threw his suit jacket on the bed, and then opened two dresser drawers. He pulled out his favorite plaid shirt from one and a pair of Wranglers from the other. He laid them both across the foot of the bed. He wanted to shower and change before his mother came home. It was his turn to cook.

His cell phone jangled. The ringtone was set to Johnny Cash blaring “I Walk the Line.” Dripping wet, he jumped from the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and grabbed his cell phone from the dresser. “Yeah?”

“Hi, baby. What time are you coming over?” a soft and melodic voice asked. The voice on the other end of the line belonged to his girlfriend, Alexandria Winters. He had forgotten about their date.

“I’m sorry, Alex, but I can’t tonight,” he apologized, steeling himself for the histrionics. He didn’t have to see her face to know that it was already twisting into an angry scowl.

“And why not?” she questioned, her voice shrill and demanding.

“I can’t, is all,” he answered simply.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Her irate voice faded as he consciously tuned her out. He didn’t feel like dealing with her tonight. To be honest, he should have broken up with her weeks ago, but he’d been putting it off. Even though they had only been dating for a few months, she was already pressuring him for a commitment and he wasn’t ready to commit to anyone, especially not now.

“Are you still there, Joey?”

“I’m here, Alex.” He gritted his teeth. He hated it when she called him that. She wouldn’t call him Joe Lee because she said it sounded too *country*, and he didn’t want her calling him Oak.

“Look, I’m kind of busy right now, so I’ll give you a call tomorrow and we’ll talk.”

Before she could say another word, he ended the call.

When the house phone rang, he thought it was her calling him back. Snatching up the receiver, he growled, “Not now, Alex. I told you I’d call you tomorrow!”

“Excuse me?” It was an unfamiliar female’s voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he quickly apologized. “I thought you were someone else. How may I help you?”

“I’d like to speak with Zoë Anderson.”

“She’s not here right now. Can I take a message?” he asked, adjusting his tone and the towel wrapped around his narrow waist.

“Are you her husband?”

“No,” he chuckled, “I’m her son.”

“Oh!” the woman squeaked in surprise. “I didn’t know she had a son. My client didn’t say anything about a son.”

Joe Lee frowned. “Client? Look, who is this and what is this about?”

He heard the woman sigh. “I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson. My name is Constance Bregan and I have some very important information for your mother. Could you please take my number and ask her to call me as soon as she can?”

“Yeah, sure. Hold on while I get a pen.” Joe Lee searched the dresser for a pen or pencil. After he had recorded the information

and hung up the phone, he continued to wonder about the strange call. Whoever the woman was, she seemed surprised that Zoë Anderson had a son. He couldn't wait for his mother to get home.

About an hour later, his mother came home from the Woodside Senior Center where she volunteered every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon.

"Joe Lee," she called out as she walked through the house.

"In the kitchen, Ma," he answered, clanging pots and clinking dishes.

"What's for dinner?" she asked, although the fragrant aroma of cooking beans gave her the answer.

"Chili."

"Ugh! Where's the Tums?" she teased, coming up behind him.

"Ma!" Laughing, he turned and kissed her on the forehead.

"How come every time it's your turn to cook, you make chili?"

"I thought you liked my chili."

"I do, but not three times a week," she admitted, putting her hand to her chest and plopping down into one of the kitchen chairs. "I know you have other dishes in your culinary repertoire. Next time, be creative and cook something else, OK?"

"OK," he agreed, shaking his finger at her, "but just remember, you asked for it."

"Did I get any calls?"

He answered by handing her a stack of message slips. His mother's social life was far busier than his own. Remembering the strange call, he pointed to the top slip. "There was a very interesting call from a woman named Constance Bregan. Do you know her?"

"I don't recall the name." She frowned, wrinkling her otherwise smooth forehead. "What did she want?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, stirring his culinary concoction, "but she seemed surprised that you had a son. Why don't you give her a call?"

“OK, after dinner,” she said absently, stuffing the message slip into her pants pocket.

Joe Lee turned from the stove. He was too curious to wait. “Ma, call her now. I want to know what she wants.”

Smiling, she scrunched up her nose at him. “You are so nosy.”

“Just call her, Ma. Please.”

Sighing in exasperation, she got up and walked over to the kitchen wall phone. She rolled her eyes at him and dialed the number he had written on the paper. “Hello, may I speak to Constance Bregan?”

“Speaking,” the woman answered.

“Yes, my name is Zoë Anderson and I’m returning your call.”

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Anderson. Thank you for returning my call so quickly.”

“Just what is this about, Ms. Bregan?”

Constance Bregan cleared her throat. “Please bear with me for a moment, Mrs. Anderson. I need to ask you a few questions and then I will try to explain everything.” Her client had been looking for Zoë Anderson for almost forty years. She had to make sure that after all of the false alarms, she had finally found the right woman. “Is your full name Zoë Anita Anderson?”

“Yes it is.”

“Did you ever live in Langston, Oklahoma?”

“Yes, I did, many years ago.”

“Did you know a man named Jacob Garrison?”

*Jacob Garrison. Jake.* Zoë could hear the woman on other end of the line still talking, but she had stopped listening. Her mind ceased to function and her heart forgot to beat. She had forbidden herself to even think about him, much less speak his name. The pain in her heart had lain dormant for forty-five years, but now, at the mention of his name, it had awakened and burst forth like the destructive flames of an out-of-control fire, burning and searing everything in its wake.

“Mrs. Anderson?” the voice spoke again, this time a little anxious.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Zoë tried to block out the memories that so brutally assaulted her, memories of a broken body, left battered and bloodied on a wooden park bench.

*She dried the last dish, folded the towel, and placed it on the back of the kitchen chair. She looked around, pretty sure they wouldn't notice her absence. She walked briskly in the direction of the local park, taking the back streets so she wouldn't be seen by any of her neighbors. She moved quickly. She didn't want to be late. She didn't want him to think she wasn't coming. Silently, she counted every step, trying to keep her mind off of the lateness of the hour, for there was a curfew.*

*When she reached the park, she passed by the front entrance and headed for the back gate, which had less traffic in and out. When she neared their rendezvous point, she saw him. He sat with his back to the gate, which was unusual because normally he would sit and watch for her.*

*"Jake," she called out to him.*

*He didn't move.*

*"Jake!" she called out again, a little louder, but not much more because she didn't want to call unnecessary attention to herself.*

*When he still didn't respond, fear crawled up her spine. She started running toward him. When she reached the bench, she gasped in horror. He was sitting up, but he was unconscious. Blood was everywhere. Someone had beaten him. Badly. His left eye was swollen shut and his face was purple and black with bruises. He was almost unrecognizable.*

*"Help!" she screamed. "Somebody help me!"*

*In that instant, she had forgotten the rules. She had forgotten that she was a Negro girl and he was a white boy. She had forgotten that their love was forbidden. In that instant, seeing his battered body covered with blood, she had forgotten how to breathe.*

Zoë held onto the receiver with her right hand and gripped the top of the kitchen counter with her left, trying to steady herself. She felt weak in her knees and her breath seemed to stop flowing from her body. Her heart was pounding so loudly she thought surely the woman on the other end of the line could hear it.

“Mrs. Anderson, are you still there?” Ms. Bregan asked with concern.

*What happened to the air?* her mind screamed.

Feeling lightheaded, Zoë sucked in the air around her as hard as she could, but despite her efforts, her knees finally buckled out from under her and she dropped awkwardly down into the nearest kitchen chair.

Joe Lee’s head snapped up. “Ma, what is it? Are you alright?”

She held up her hand. She didn’t know if she was alright or not. She needed time to think, to breathe.

*What happened to the air?* The thought screamed through her mind again.

He rushed over and sat down in the chair beside her. Taking hold of her hand, he listened, trying to hear snatches of the conversation his mother was having with this Bregan woman, trying to read the expression on her face.

“Ma, what is it? What does she want?”

“Hush, Joe-Lee!” his mother snapped.

*Joe-Lee.* When she said it like that, it sounded like one name, and she hadn’t said it like that since he was a little boy. He frowned because she rarely raised her voice to him.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Bregan, but could you repeat that?”

*What was it the woman had said? Something about Jake dying?*

Long after the woman had finished talking, Zoë still held onto the receiver. Joe Lee, aware that she was no longer talking, wrestled the receiver from her hand and hung it up.

She finally looked over at her son, his eyes wide with concern. He looked so much like his father. She sighed heavily. She knew she had to tell him and there wasn’t much time.

“Joe Lee.” She mumbled a quick prayer and then took a deep breath. “That woman, Ms. Bregan, was calling about your father.”

“My father?” he asked, puzzled. “What about my father?”

“He’s been trying to find me. He wants to see me.”

“He wants to see you?” he repeated her words incredulously, jumping to his feet so quickly that the chair tumbled out from

under him to the floor. “Where has he been for the last forty-five years?”

“Joe Lee, please,” she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper, her heart feeling torn.

“No, I don’t want to hear anything about that man!” he screamed, pounding his fist on the table and then storming out of the kitchen.

Zoë watched as her only son stomped angrily away. How could she make him understand? How could she even try to explain to him that she had to see his father? She had to see Jake, had to talk to him. She had to find out what happened. She had to know the truth. They both did.

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