

LAST WISH

by Barbara Ellin Fox

Chapter One

“A smiley face?” Kansas City, Missouri attorney, Michael Bainbridge looked up from the folder he held, into his grandmother’s gentle eyes.

“Do you remember how your grandfather left you a smiley face sticker for something important, or to spur you to victory? Not any smiley face either. Stickers were four inches across.” Grandmother’s neat gray suit and perfectly made-up face didn’t disguise her drooping shoulders.

“Yes, I remember.” Michael shifted on a crushed-velvet sofa in the living room of his childhood home. He ran a finger between his throat and the collar of his tailored shirt. Stickers were great when you were a kid. Why now?

He squinted at the folder, then at his grandmother.

A soft smile curled her lips. “Your grandfather loved all our grandchildren. He struggled with this request and instructed me to save the folder for last.”

All was an odd way to speak of Michael and one cousin. All indicated more than two. Surely Grandmother didn’t include Michael’s brother who died with his parents twenty-five years ago.

The correct word when referring to two was both.

Guilt formed a tight knot in his chest. He barely remembered his family. How would life have been without that drunk driver?

“Your grandfather put this sticker on the folder himself the day before he passed away. The request involves a particularly meaningful piece of property, one of the earliest your grandfather and I purchased. Will you take care of his last wish?”

He swallowed at the hopeful expression on Grandmother's face. "I'll take a look to see what I can do."

The ever-present sadness that haunted her expression from the moment Grandfather died lightened. "Thank you, dear. You won't be sorry." She patted his hand, then leaned on him, rising to move past the marble coffee table. "Don't get up. I'll rest in my room and let you decide how to get on with this. Lock the door when you leave."

Michael nodded and squared his shoulders. He'd carry out this commitment the same way he'd given up the DC position and returned to Kansas City when Grandfather died. Grandmother needed him. There'd be no contest in his decision.

His finger slid over an envelope. Grandfather's bold script had weakened, revealing tremors in his hand. He swallowed before sliding a single paged letter from the envelope.

Dear Michael,

For twenty-five years you have filled a hole left in my heart by your father's death. My joy has been watching you grow into a fine man. I am both proud of you and excited about your future.

This request may seem simple on one hand and extremely difficult on the other. Strong is the character who overcomes adversity. Pull this one off, lad, and you'll accomplish the crowning achievement in life.

I love you, Michael. Enjoy the smiley face.

Grandfather

P.S. Please forgive this old man's mistakes. Remember him kindly.

Grandfather had only treated Michael with kindness, guiding him into a successful career. How could he not remember with love, the man who'd raised him?

Michael worked with everything he had to squeeze back tears. Holding his breath, he closed his eyes and rubbed them, but could not stop a single drop. Minutes passed before his vision cleared enough to scan the file's top sheet.

Individually owned commercial Brookside properties were rare. When he'd last seen this piece, the store housed a gourmet cheese boutique. The real estate had been worth a million and a half, maybe two million dollars at that time, nearly six years ago.

The conditions of the codicil seemed basic. Michael had four months to develop a solid lease. The rental fee must compare to other leases in the ritzy shopping area. If the occupant stayed, Michael inherited the property. If not, he didn't. Simple enough.

His eyes perused the next paragraph. "... must participate in two related community projects." Writing a lease wasn't hard, and he could give money to a few charities. After four months he'd meet with Grandfather's attorney, Lou, at Asher and Bean.

Michael flipped through document pages while scanning paperwork. His gaze crashed into a name, jerking his reading to a halt. Pain jolted his chest. *No*. Fingers pressed his forehead and slid over his eyes as his belly bunched with tension. Did Grandfather not know what this would do to him? Six years and he still hadn't put her memory behind. Why did he make him her landlord?

Connect him to anyone else—a liquor store owner, a crackhead, or a Bengal tiger trainer, not the woman who'd torn a meteor-sized chunk from his heart.

Michael steadied his breathing, rolling kinks from his neck. The past didn't factor into this. He owed his grandparents everything for taking him in after the accident. He shifted on the sofa and clenched his toes until his leg tensed. Only an ingrate whimpered at his grandfather's last request.

I said I'd take care of this, and I will. No matter the cost, he'd succeed. Michael huffed, then loosened the strangling tie. He'd make Grandfather proud.

Thumbing further through the file, he noted a business plan, financial statements, and a current lease. He'd study the details later, then follow-up with research.

Michael slid the folder into a leather messenger bag. First thing, he'd drive by the property, check out any changes. He rose and pulled a chord on the heavy drapes, sealing light from the room, then left through the front door. A hard rattle of the knob made certain he'd secured the lock. Grandmother living alone worried him.

Satisfied, he climbed into a black Dodge Charger, the one prize he'd brought with him from DC. The engine thundered. A drive around Brookside would give him a quick look at various shops before visiting the store. Then he'd reintroduce himself to June Cowan and be past the first hurdle.

Memories of June riding her horse, Belles, over hurdles at Heritage and Longview Parks made him smile. Even after six years, he still used equestrian expressions.

Five minutes later, he entered their old neighborhood, Brookside, one of the nicer places near Kansas City. Well-kept homes built during the 1920s with their small yards and period architecture suited families, while a high-dollar area had been perfect for his grandparents.

Michael admired the Trolley Trails where the town had made a six-mile path by stripping tracks from the old streetcar line. Today joggers, bicycles, and baby strollers filled the trail. Dogs accompanied most everyone.

He slowed in front of a fenced patio dining area on Grandfather's property. Brightly colored umbrellas covered metal tables with chairs. An overhead vinyl banner read Outdoor Doggie Cafe. A second, more secluded patio with a roof, connected to the building. Near the shop's entrance, a fenced section with no tables bore a smaller banner, Doggie Play Yard. Signage over the entry sported a dog balancing a cup on his nose with a spray of swirling coffee. Hoof 'n Woof Bakery and Cafe.

A smile threatened Michael's mouth. June had started an online horse treats business for a class project during high school. Horses and dogs. She'd always been an animal fanatic. The more neglected the animals were, the harder she tried to save them.

An annoyed driver honked. Michael drove the short streets again, watching for a parking space. Drivers zipped in and out. The instant a spot opened a car scooted in. Past a series of benches positioned by a wall of climbing roses, he pulled the Charger into a slot feeling as if he'd won a game of musical chairs. He took a deep breath, then exhaled, and loosened his grip on the steering wheel. Sweat saturated the leather covering. The truth was, he still wanted to know why she'd removed herself from his life.

Emotion he'd thought long under control clawed its way into his chest. Jaw clenched at rejection, his pulse rivaled a courtroom gavel.

Memories plagued him. Michael, senior class president and captain of debate, fell for beautiful freshman June before the first week of school ended.

Sure, they'd argued during the years they'd been exclusive. She'd obsess over an animal shelter, a dog she trained, or a starving horse she'd found at a sale barn. June had a bleeding heart for animals crowned with a tendency to act without thinking.

Even with their differences, Michael figured one day they'd marry.

He reached for the Charger's key, fighting the urge to shift into reverse. With a flick of a wrist, he killed the engine, willed self-control, and got out. Moisture from a light mist cooled his cheeks and spread across his shoulders.

Pushing through the shop door, the pungent aroma of cinnamon mixed with coffee soothed his lungs as they drew in a deep sample. His gaze swept the cafe, then landed on June.

"Welcome to Hoof 'n..." Words died with a small gasp.

His stomach lurched. Her effect on him hadn't diminished.

Blue eyes filled with surprise. Wrenching her stare to a cup she held, June snapped the lid, slid on a coffee sleeve, and called, "Double chocolate mocha latte."

An older gentleman wearing a green polo shirt shuffled to the counter, stopped, and picked up the cup.

Michael couldn't look away. Her short blonde ponytail poked through a baseball cap. Dolphin earrings danced by her cheeks with *Beach Baby* in glitter adorning a pink tank top. A familiar Beach Boys' oldie played.

His gaze traveled from *Beach Baby* through a display case. Glancing past muffins, he recognized her slender figure. A memory of her wearing cut-off shorts and flip-flops with crazy colored toenails darted through his mind.

June scribbled on a paper and then handed the note to a younger woman with short brown and green striped hair, a pierced eyebrow, and a tattooed forearm. The woman disappeared through a door.

Michael moved closer, drinking in June in the flesh. So much time had passed. His heart wanted to drop its legal claims to pain and welcome her.

The mental prosecutor muscled forward. She ditched you, buddy. Her choice. Not yours.

"Michael."

His name tripped off her lips in a familiar melody. Lips that whispered I love you while they discussed their future. He glanced away.

"I'm sorry about your grandfather. His death saddened us. Have you been in town long?"

He took in a closed mouth breath to settle his pulse. "A little more than a month."

After Grandmother's call, he'd grabbed the earliest flight, only they'd lost Grandfather hours after he arrived. He'd quickly taken a position with the County Prosecutor's office, leased

an apartment, gone back for the Charger, and arranged household shipping from DC. Today he'd attended a private reading of Grandfather's last will and testament.

Michael perused the wall behind June. A whiteboard listed specials, Slamin' Salmon, Barkscotti, Sweet Chews. A hand-crafted sign on white cardboard sat on the counter. Celebrate Summer! Beach umbrellas and sandcastles decorated the words. The place oozed June's creative imagination.

"Did you want to order something?" Lines of tension marked the corners of June's eyes.

Michael cleared his throat. "No. I'm here on business." He moved a step closer. "I stopped by to let you know I'm your new landlord." The words fell in a pile. "I'll need to see the shop and go over your books."

Worried crinkles near the corners of her eyes deepened as her brows drew close together, and the dolphins stilled. A familiar storm brewed. He'd seen that hard glint each time they'd argued. She dared him, laying down a challenge.

Bring it on.

Had she spoken those words? Or had he read them in her gaze?

"Legally, you must give me a forty-eight-hour written notice before you may go any further than the public dining area of Hoof 'n Woof."

Michael looked around at expectant coffee drinkers sitting at a half-dozen tables. A variety of dogs rested at their feet. Everyone, including their canines, wore some sort of beach garb. They watched like the next sentence might change the world.

He stepped forward and pulled a phone, pen, and a new business card from a pocket. Noting the time, he calculated forty-eight hours before writing on the blank side of the card, then pocketed the pen and cell. He held out the card. "Here you go."

A yellow and blue poster caught his gaze. Wear your fun in the sun for a free treat. Someone had underlined the date spanning a week.

Aware of the brush of soft fingers as June took the card, he ignored the jolt. Michael turned and walked out the door.

If she still wanted to play hardball, they'd have four tough months ahead.

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