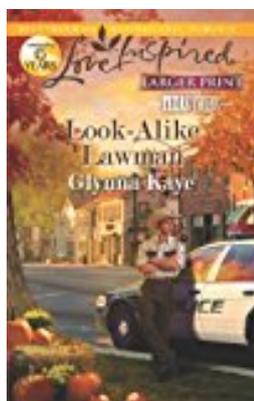


[PDF] Look-Alike Lawman (Love Inspired Large Print)

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Description:

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "My daddy was a policeman, too. A bad guy killed him."

Grayson Wallace stared at the boy gazing up at him. The little chin jutted in evident pride, but the dark brown eyes searched his own for understanding. A connection. Acknowledgment. He was only a first-grader, not too much older than the son of Gray's former girlfriend. Way too young to have lost

his daddy, let alone lost him to a bad guy.

Gray massaged the shoulder of his own left arm, which was held close to his body in a sling. Hadn't the division captain said, when asking for a volunteer, that visiting a Fort Worth elementary school's career day was cushy duty? He could still hear the good-natured hoots and catcalls of his fellow officers when he'd raised his hand. Couldn't blame them. He didn't have kids of his own. Spent almost every waking moment trying to keep lowlifes off the streets. He wasn't known for coaching T-ball, catching Disney matinees or reading bedtime stories in his spare time like many of the other guys and gals did.

But then, they weren't aware of how close he'd let himself get to Jenna's boy.

No, catering to kids might not be his gift, but hanging out with grade-schoolers for a few hours was better than another day sitting around the office shuffling paperwork as he'd done the past several weeks. This was a perfect task for a cop on limited duty, recovering from a shoulder injury sustained during an undercover assignment.

But now, looking into this child's pain-filled eyes, it sure didn't strike him as *cushy*.

Grayson crouched in front of the dark-haired boy, aware of other kids crowding close, and uttered the words he instinctively knew the youngster needed to hear. "It takes a lot of courage to be the son of a lawenforcement officer."

The boy blinked back tears and nodded, his eyes reflecting gratitude that Grayson had taken notice of him.

Poor kid.

"What's your name?"

"Cory Lopez, sir."

Sir. Didn't hear that a lot these days, even in the South. Gray held out his hand and clasped the small one offered. Gave it a man-to-man shake. "Good to meet you, Cory. Like your teacher said earlier, I'm Officer Grayson Wallace."

The first-grader took a deep breath. "My dad is Duke Lopez. Did you know him?"

Cory's gaze held steady in confident expectation.

Duke Lopez. Gray remembered the name, although he'd never met him. Lopez hadn't been one of Fort Worth's finest, but on a force in one of the outlying communities. Nevertheless, any time a cop went down in the line of duty, you knew about it. It impacted you. You never forgot.

"No, I didn't know him, Cory." The hope in the boy's eyes dimmed, and Gray almost regretted admitting the truth. "But he was a brave man. I heard how he saved his partner."

The boy took a step closer. "He was a hero."

"Yes, he was."

"When I grow up, I'm going to be a policeman hero, too." Gray flinched inwardly. His mother must love that. "That's a fine thing to aspire to, Cory."

"I'm going to be a firefighter," a dainty African-American girl piped up, easing shyly closer to Gray. Like Cory, her outfit conformed to one of the acceptable variations of the Fort Worth Independent School District's K-8 dress code—a collared navy shirt and khaki pants. The regulations helped keep kids from all walks of life on more even footing starting out and served to discourage gang affiliation and too-provocative clothing.

"A firefighter is a fine thing to be, too."

The girl beamed and nudged a classmate.

"Did a bad guy hurt you, mister?" A blond boy pointed at Gray's sling. Did he dare admit to kids this young that there were not-so-nice people in the world? Then again, in this neighborhood, that was nothing they didn't already know.

And Cory knew it for sure.

"Okay, children." Miss Gilbert clapped her hands to get the attention of the first-graders, her cheerful voice raised over the childish chatter. "Time to clean up."

Gray glanced at the clock. He'd already been at the school several hours, rotating through the elementary classroom along with a fireman, doctor, veterinarian and a marine like his little brother Carter. Each told about what they did and answered eager—and sometimes amusing—questions. But it was now two forty-five on a Friday afternoon. He needed to get going. He had to report back at Division, then pack a few things and head out for a five-hour drive to a western Texas community called Grasslands.

While he'd gone there for the first time only last weekend, he'd delayed that particular trip for weeks. With his injuries to be attended to and post-assignment paperwork and court appearances filling in time until the end of September, he'd had a legitimate excuse for staying away. But truth be known, he'd needed time to digest his little sister Maddie's news—that while he'd been away on the undercover assignment, she'd discovered they had family they hadn't known existed.

She had a twin sister, Violet, and he an identical twin brother. He still wouldn't believe it if he hadn't come face-to-face with Jack Colby only a handful of days ago in a Grasslands church parking lot. The revelation that Sharla Wallace, the only mother he'd ever known, wasn't his and Maddie's birth mother compounded the shock. And he still hadn't gotten his head around the fact that a woman named Belle Colby—Jack and Violet's mother—was his and Mad-die's biological mother, as well.

But Belle was in a coma sustained from injuries when she'd fallen from a horse last summer. Which is why he'd agreed to return to the Colby Ranch this first weekend in October. There were things he and his newfound siblings needed to work through together, decisions to be made. This next trip wasn't one he looked forward to any more than he had the first one.

"Children! I said it's time to clean up."

Gray stood, and the kids eagerly scattered to their workstations. All except Cory, who continued to gaze at him with what could only be described as a reverential look. Not good. Gray motioned to the other kids. "I think you're supposed to get your stuff and catch a bus home or something."

"My mom picks me up."

"Then you'll want to be ready when she gets here."

"She's always late."

They stared at each other in silence. What did the kid want from him? He'd already told him he didn't know his father, but he could feel the boy's pain. His longing. While he hadn't been an orphan himself, he knew what it was like to grow up without a mom. His mother—or at least the woman he had thought was his mother—had died in a car accident when he was not much older than Cory, so he knew the loss of a parent he'd loved.

He knew, too, what it was like to miss his dad. He had no idea where his missionary-doctor father might be. Gray had returned from last month's close-call, determined to strengthen his relationship with his dad. But Brian Wallace had been reported as ill somewhere along the Texas-Mexico border and all efforts to trace him during recent weeks had been unsuccessful. No, Gray's situation wasn't exactly like Cory's, but it nevertheless tugged at his heart. "Can I touch your badge?"

Jerked back to the present, Gray couldn't help but smile at the innocent request. What would it hurt? He squatted again and the boy tentatively reached out a finger to the panther crouched atop the shield. Symbol of Panther City, a nickname for Fort Worth since the late 1800s.

"He looks mean," Cory whispered, stroking the big cat almost as if he could feel the animal's thick, muscled coat under his fingertip.

"He does, doesn't he?"

"Like he could eat bad guys."

Gray drew a sharp breath. It had been two years since Duke Lopez had taken a bullet while drawing a gunman's attention from his fallen partner. Cory would have been, what? Four? How well did he remember his father?

"Cory, your mom is here," Miss Gilbert called from the doorway. "I see her coming down the hall."

Good. The little guy's mother wasn't late after all.

The boy's eyes reflected evident surprise at her on-time arrival, then he gave the panther a final pat. Their gazes met in solemn recognition of a mutual bond that caught Gray off guard.

"It's an honor to meet the son of Duke Lopez."

The boy nodded, then in a flash scampered to his workstation to clean up and gather his things. Gray rose and turned, preparing to give the boy's mother a courteous nod. But his smile froze. *Whoa*. That was the kid's mother? Since when did moms look like that?

Even in profile as she stood chatting in the doorway with Miss Gilbert, she was a beauty. Dark flashing eyes. Dazzling smile. A warm, flawlessly creamy Hispanic skin tone. Shiny black hair pulled into a demure bun contrasted with the spiky heels, short skirt and a molded-to-her-figure blazer.

Cory hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and raced to the door, breathlessly pointing toward Gray.

"Mom! A policeman! And he knows Daddy is a hero."

She turned startled eyes toward him—and the open, friendly expression evaporated from her striking features. Her lustrous brown eyes locked on his for a long moment before narrowing slightly. She

then put a protective arm around her son's shoulders and ushered him from the room.

"But Mom," Cory protested for at least the tenth time since leaving the elementary school. "I wanted you to meet Officer Wallace. He doesn't know Daddy, but he remembers him. He knows he saved his partner. Don't you even care?"

"Of course I care." Elise Lopez attempted to keep her voice even, not wanting Cory to sense how upsetting his growing obsession with policemen had become for her. Her hands tightened on the steerin...

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