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1098
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Daddy Lessons

**VICTORIA
CHANCELLOR**

“You’ll love your visit
to Ranger Springs.”
—Bestselling author
Judy Christenberry

Victoria Chancellor

Daddy Lessons

Аннотация

A Crash Course—In Fatherhood! Deep in the heart of Texas, Ranger Springs is the perfect place to start over. Kate Wooten and her young son aren't the only newcomers in town—Luke Simon has just moved into the ranch next door, along with his menagerie of rescued animals. A former Hollywood animal trainer and stuntman, Luke is ready for some peace and quiet. But instead he's getting the surprise of a lifetime: the eight-year-old daughter he didn't know he had. Determined to turn his house into a home for his little girl, Luke knows he can't do it alone. Kate doesn't want any complications in her life, but this bachelor needs her help to turn him into a good father in just two short weeks. She reluctantly agrees to whip him into shape—now, if only she can resist his charms!

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“ I’m bringing my daughter to Texas to live with me.

I’m all she’s got, and really, I’m glad. I want to claim her as my daughter.”

Kate thought that was admirable. Many men would have tried their best to get out of the responsibility of raising an eight-year-old. “This will really change your life.”

“Exactly!” Travis said, straightening and, in the process, moving a little closer. “I’ve never thought about children much. I’ve never been around them, since I’m an only child and most of my friends are single. So I’m going to need some help. Your help.”

Kate knew her surprise showed on her face. “My help? What are you talking about?”

Dear Reader,

With mixed emotions I have written the last Harlequin American Romance novel set in Ranger Springs, Texas. I really love these characters and wanted to tell the story of two people who start over in the Hill Country, finding more than they anticipated. I also love the town of Ranger Springs, the people who “live” there, and other stories I have written about them. So although there won’t be new stories, I hope you will revisit the friends and families who found their perfect match and began

a new life in this friendly town. The Fourth of July committee, which has been planning throughout seven books, finally got their parade!

Kate Wooten, sister of Travis Whitaker from *Coming Home to Texas*, is now divorced and starting over with her six-year-old son. She's a schoolteacher and former soccer mom—not the kind of woman “retired” stuntman and animal trainer Luke Simon is interested in. That is, until he needs someone to give him lessons on how to be a daddy to his newly discovered eight-year-old daughter. Kate is the perfect teacher for this job, but he soon realizes he can't keep their relationship professional. Kate must decide if she will risk her heart one more time for the right man, to create a new family.

As you read *Daddy Lessons*, I hope you will consider the plight of unwanted animals, whether they are the retired performance animals that Luke cares for or the thousands of pets in shelters or on the streets. I give special thanks to D. J. Schubert of the Black Beauty Ranch, run by The Fund for Animals in Murchison, Texas. What a wonderful sanctuary and what a giving man, who answered all my questions.

Best wishes to everyone, and happy reading.

Victoria Chancellor

Daddy Lessons

Victoria Chancellor



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In loving memory of my mother-in-law, Lillian Huffstutler, 1919-2005, who supported and loved me like a daughter. We miss you so much, Sudie.

Books by Victoria Chancellor

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Prologue

Kate loved sharing a meal with her son Eddie, her brother Travis and his family at the Four Square Café. The decor was a little outdated, even by the current retro standards, the menu a bit heavy on carbs, sugar and fats, and the service not nearly as speedy as the fast-food place on the highway. But the waitresses were friendly, the food delicious and the company the best she'd had in years.

Since about six months into her marriage with her lying, cheating ex-husband Ed, to be exact.

“Here you go,” Charlene Jacks said as she delivered a tray of burgers and fries to the table.

“Thanks, Charlene,” Travis said. He handed a plate to his wife Jodie, which she immediately passed to Eddie.

“Thank you, Aunt Jodie.”

Kate smiled at her six-year-old son, the light of her life, who'd thankfully remembered his manners. Her divorce and Ed's subsequent desertion had been especially hard on their son—not that Ed had ever been an involved parent. He'd never been the kind of father that Travis was already with his infant daughter, Marsha.

“Earth to Kate,” Travis said, interrupting her thoughts in the same way he had when they were children. He held out her plate. “If you're not hungry...”

“Oh, no you don’t. I’ll take that right now.” When she’d lived the suburban lifestyle, she’d enjoyed all the trendy chain restaurants. Now she was happy with simpler fare...even if she did sometimes miss a good grilled chicken caesar salad.

“You folks need anything else?” Charlene asked.

“We’re great, thanks,” Travis said, and Kate smiled up at her while Jodie adjusted Marsha’s pacifier.

As Charlene moved away from the table, the sunlight flooding through the front window of the café made Kate squint. And then she noticed something that made her eyes open wide. Something she hadn’t seen in Ranger Springs in the two months she’d lived here.

The heavy blub-blub-blub of the motorcycle engine died as the bike came to a stop across the street, facing the gazebo in the middle of the town square. With the rider’s back to her, she worked her gaze up from his heavy boots to his faded, tight jeans, past the black leather jacket to the dark, too-long hair that blew in the cool breeze.

He threw his muscular leg over the seat and stepped away from the bike. Kate caught her breath. Wow.

“Kate! Do you want your lunch or not?”

She blinked, moving her focus from the scene outside the window to Travis. “Yes, I want...lunch,” she said in a slightly shaky voice. She absolutely did not want to stare at the bona-fide bad boy on the big motorcycle.

“Are you okay?” Jodie asked, placing a hand on Kate’s

forearm.

“I’m fine. I just saw . . . I wonder who that is. He doesn’t exactly look like a local.”

“Who?”

Jodie and Travis both turned toward the window. Travis narrowed his eyes, a sure sign he was getting all protective. “No, he’s not local.”

“Like I would have missed him,” Jodie added, then smiled at Travis’s deepening frown.

Kate grinned. She loved the way her brother and sister-in-law teased each other, argued in a good-natured way and made up with lots of love. She and Ed—the lying, cheating rat—had never developed that type of relationship.

“Who, Mommy?” Eddie asked.

“Just some man on a motorcycle,” Kate replied casually, then looked back out the window. The man who’d just breezed into town didn’t resemble the local guys at all. They wore snap-front Western shirts, the softer, looser jeans made for riding horses, not Harleys, and cowboy or work boots. They definitely didn’t look like . . . that.

The man was walking toward the restaurant, as though he’d sensed her ogling him. Not that she was exactly ogling. She was a thirty-two-year-old divorced mother without a steady job or a permanent place to live. She owned a few pieces of furniture, a couple of suitcases of clothes and a few boxes of personal belongings. Until she found a job, hopefully teaching school,

she was officially unemployed, although she did substitute teach whenever possible. She didn't have the luxury of ogling strange men.

Still, her heart thumped as he opened the door of the café. The bell overhead tinkled, drawing the attention of everyone in the place. He brought in the crisp winter air and the smell of well-worn leather. Or perhaps she just imagined the leather. One thing she wasn't imagining was her shocking appreciation for a one-hundred-percent male. No, make that one-hundred-percent off-limit male.

"Hey, Luke," Hank McCauley called out from across the room. From the corner of her eye, Kate saw him rise from his booth and head toward the biker.

"Hank." The man's soft, deep voice fit his persona as well as his white T-shirt molded his pecs and abs. He walked right by them but didn't look over. Didn't politely smile or nod as most of the locals did. Didn't even notice she'd been practically drooling, despite her mental efforts to curb her unexpected reaction.

The last thing she needed right now was an attraction to a man. She didn't have the time, energy or confidence to start a relationship. And then there was Eddie. She needed to be both mother and father to him now that Ed was out of the picture. Now that their lives had been turned upside down.

"Your hamburger's getting cold, sis," Travis said in a warning tone.

Just then Charlene approached their table and mentioned, as

she refilled their iced tea, “He’s Hank’s friend from California. Hank said he’d be in sometime around noon. Rode all the way to Texas on his Harley.”

“California?” Jodie asked. “I wonder where. I’ll have to find out.”

“It’s a big state,” Travis said in a slightly peeved tone. “Just because you’re from the same state doesn’t mean he’s your new best friend.”

“Jealous, darling?” she teased.

Travis snorted. “Of him? Hardly.”

“I think he’s a very attractive man,” Charlene added. “Not for me, of course. I mean in general. He looks like a movie star, but Hank said he’s a stuntman and a trainer.”

Personal or animal?

“Wow, a stuntman,” Eddie said. “I know what they do.”

Oh, great. Looked as though she was going to have a serious case of hero worship. That, combined with her own wandering thoughts, meant they’d all better avoid the newcomer. “I’m sure he’s just taking a short vacation.” Probably a vacation from all the gorgeous Hollywood women chasing after him.

“According to Hank, he’s bought 640 acres, an old ranch just out of town,” Charlene said, then grinned. “Travis, he’s your new neighbor!”

Neighbor? That would be bad. Very, very bad. Kate swallowed the lump in her throat with a big drink of iced tea, vowing to have a long talk with Eddie when they got home about how they

needed to not bother their new neighbor, at least until he had time to get settled in. And they knew more about him. By then, maybe she could be objective. Maybe she'd even convince herself that she could tell a good guy from a bad one without spending years being married to him.

Eddie swiveled in his chair and watched the newcomer with way too much interest. Yes, she and Eddie both needed to stay away from their new neighbor. She only hoped she could follow her own advice.

Chapter One

Luke leaned against the sturdy new fence that defined the pasture for Lola and Lollipop, two cantankerous zebras; Spot and Petsy, two arthritic Shetland ponies; and Gordon the ill-tempered donkey. Beneath a row of hackberry trees near the driveway, two swayback snowy white horses stood side by side, lazily swishing their tails in unison.

He'd moved to this small town in the Texas Hill Country for just this reason—an affordable place with a good climate where he could provide a “retirement” home for unwanted animals. Where they—and he—could live in peace and quiet. Land in California had been too expensive. So he'd come back to Texas, to the town where his friend Hank McCauley lived, even though this particular place wasn't Luke's hometown, not that he thought of any particular place as home.

Besides, he didn't need a hometown. He was a grown man who could take care of himself. These animals didn't have anywhere to go except a slaughterhouse or rendering plant.

The sound of barking reminded him that he should feed the Jack Russell terriers in their run near the barn. But first he needed to make sure his inquisitive little neighbor got back through the fence—the one that divided his property from Travis Whitaker's ranch.

Ever since the animals had begun arriving from California,

Oklahoma and Colorado, Eddie Wooten had started visiting Luke's property. He hid behind the newly painted barn, lurked behind shrubby Mesquite trees and sneaked between the hackberry trees in the fencerow. When he figured Luke wasn't looking, he'd coax the animals to him with carrots and apples. The same scenario had occurred at least a half-dozen times, enough that Luke was now on the lookout for one little boy.

If Eddie stayed on his side of the fence, Luke wouldn't worry. But the boy was fearless when it came to animals—especially Lola and Lollipop—and put himself in danger by walking into the pasture. Eddie could be accidentally bitten, stepped on or knocked down.

He tried to remember himself as a child, but the image wouldn't form. Sometimes he thought he'd been born at age fourteen. Had he ever been as inquisitive as Eddie? As naive?

Luke winced at the memory of Kate Wooten arriving at his ranch the last time the boy had strayed over. She'd been tense and worried and yet more beautiful than he remembered from the first time he'd seen her. She'd held Eddie to her briefly, assured herself that he was uninjured, and then soundly chastised him for running off. She'd told him that he absolutely could not come here again, that he had to stay away from the animals. Then she'd turned those wide gray eyes on Luke and apologized for her son's impulsive, inappropriate behavior.

He'd never heard childish curiosity called "inappropriate" behavior before. Only later had he discovered, through an

innocent conversation with Gwendolyn McCauley at the local café, that Kate was an elementary school teacher. She was one classy lady, and obviously well educated. Her reserved attitude and the fact that she stuck around only long enough to retrieve her son made their differences real obvious.

He'd gruffly told her that her son should stay on his side of the fence because any animal could be dangerous, even one that looked perfectly harmless. She'd looked at him in horror for an endless moment, then bundled off Eddie without another word. Luke had barely seen her since. Certainly hadn't spoken to her.

She apparently found him even more frightening than his animals.

Eddie cleared the fence and ran in the direction of the Whitaker house. Or more specifically, the Whitaker garage, where he lived in the apartment upstairs with his mother.

Luke didn't want to dwell on the attractive but uptight sister of his coolly polite neighbor. Travis wasn't hostile, but he seemed suspicious of Luke and the Last Chance Ranch. It really didn't matter because Luke owned the land and was here to stay, regardless of what the locals thought or said.

Just as he turned away to walk back to the house, a truck pulled off the rural road into the long driveway, past his house to the large barn. His feed shipment had arrived. When the driver, a young man named Lester Boggs, stopped and rolled down the window, Luke told him, "Pull on around to the barn door. I'll help you unload."

“You runnin’ some kind of zoo?” Lester asked as they piled up the sacks of feed.

“Not exactly.”

“Aunt Joyce said Hank told her and Thelma you used to work in Hollywood.”

“I did a little animal training. A little stunt work.”

“You ever do any stunts for Ben Affleck?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Johnny Depp?”

“Not really.”

The other man seemed disappointed. Well, too bad. Luke didn’t believe in living his life in public. Hank had warned him people would be curious about any newcomer. A newcomer with a menagerie of animals...that caused extra speculation. Luke didn’t care, as long as he wasn’t bothered.

The previous owner hadn’t taken good care of the ranch. All the animals except a few half-wild barn cats had been sold long ago. The place was as close to deserted as Luke had ever seen. His first priorities had been the barn and fences. Everything else could wait.

“Why would you want a bunch of old animals?” Lester asked as they worked on the hay bales. Next year Luke planned to grow his own crop of coastal Bermuda, but for now he needed to buy hay locally.

“I like them,” Luke said, hooking another bale. “They spent their lives performing in circuses, films, animal acts. They’ve

earned a retirement, but some of them were going to be put down because they weren't useful anymore. He felt his anger build at the injustice. "Some were wasting away without food or shelter. I'm giving them a home for as long as they live."

Lester looked at him as though he were nuts. "Whatever you say, Mr. Simon," he said cautiously.

Luke didn't respond. He'd had no intention of talking about himself to strangers. And as far as he was concerned, almost everyone here was a stranger, even if he did know their names and where they lived. Even if they were neighbors.

KATE STOPPED LOADING the washing machine when she saw the telltale burrs on her son's fleece pullover. "Oh, Eddie." He'd been in the pasture where he'd been forbidden to venture.

"Hey, Kate," Jodie, looking gorgeous in a coral athletic suit, said from the doorway of the downstairs laundry room. Jodie, a plus-size model who had a clothing line and a fragrance, and Travis had been married for almost a year. Their daughter was just beginning to teethe—still far too young to be slipping away on her own to get into trouble.

"Hi, Jodie," Kate replied, trying to coax some enthusiasm into her voice.

"What's wrong?"

"My son. Our neighbor. Everything."

"Surely it's not that bad," Jodie said sympathetically, leaning her hip against the dryer.

Kate held the garment briefly to her chest. "I'm frustrated

that I can't stop Eddie from running over to our neighbor's ranch to see those odd animals. He could be injured by Travis's huge longhorn cattle along the way. He could fall and hurt himself—hit his head on a rock or break his leg. And how would anyone know?"

"Would you feel better if Travis moved the cattle for now? Or would you like to find someplace else to live? You know Travis offered to rent you a house closer to the school."

"No, I don't want to put him out any more than I already have."

"It's no trouble."

"That's nice of you to say, but giving me free rent and worrying along with me over Eddie's excursions across the fence are enough for now. Besides, I'll be on my feet soon. I hope."

Jodie came over and gave her a hug. Kate felt like throwing her arms around her sister-in-law and sobbing into her shoulder. But she wouldn't. Jodie was too kindhearted, and Kate knew her melancholy was temporary. Or at least she hoped it was.

She pulled back and sniffed. "I'm sorry. I'm just down right now. I...I'm obviously not doing something right. Sometimes, especially when I spend a little too much time alone thinking, I wonder if I'm doing anything right."

"Of course you are! We all love you. And Eddie is a great kid, even if he is a little too adventurous at times."

"He is a great kid, but I wonder how much is my doing. I mean, I married the wrong man, allowed him to take care of me financially if not emotionally, and closed my eyes to both

his unscrupulous investment decisions and his philandering. I've never worked outside the home, never even considered that I needed credit in my own name. I was blind and dumb to my lying, cheating husband until everything in my 'perfect' world came tumbling down."

"You're being way too hard on yourself."

Kate shook her head. "It's all true. And now I'm responsible for everything—Eddie's health and welfare, his education and development. I need to run a household on almost no money, because about all I can do is substitute teach until I get a permanent job." Kate sniffed again. "I'm sorry, Jodie. I'm just having a little pity party down here in the laundry room. I didn't mean to burden you."

"We keep telling you it's no burden. We love you, Kate. We've never used the garage apartment, so you're welcome to stay as long as you'd like, until you and Eddie get tired of us and want to move away."

Kate attempted a shaky smile. "You're too nice."

In a moment of brash confidence, she'd decided not to take any more handouts from her oil-wealthy father and successful architect brother. She'd taken enough "handouts" from Ed without considering the consequences. No, she needed to succeed on her own merits, as much as possible, as long as Eddie's health or happiness wasn't compromised. Living rent-free over Travis's garage in a nice but small apartment helped tremendously, even though the few pieces of heirloom furniture

she'd managed to keep after the estate sale seemed lonely and sad against the stark white walls and light wood flooring.

"It's just that I've always thought of myself as a homemaker and a mother, not a sole provider," she explained to Jodie. "Although I know how important it is to be independent, sometimes I feel that I can't do this alone."

"Yes, you can." Jodie gave Kate a fierce hug. "Besides, you're not alone. You have us, for better or for worse. And everyone in town loves you."

Kate nodded even as she thought of one person who wasn't so fond of her inquisitive son—their neighbor Luke Simon. Still, she hugged Jodie back and felt better now that she'd expressed her fears. She wasn't a wimp. She would get a job and she would be strong for Eddie.

"Okay, I'll leave you alone with the laundry. I just came down to tell you that we're going into town. Travis needs to stop by the hardware store, then we're joining Hank and Gwendolyn for an early dinner at Bretford House. We'd love for you and Eddie to join us."

"I'm not sure. He's still napping after his little visit to the pasture." Talking about Eddie brought Kate's thoughts back to their neighbor. Luke could be at the hardware store, or just around town...or with Hank and Gwendolyn for dinner out. Ever since that first nonmeeting at the café, Kate had been unexpectedly conscious of him. She could barely talk to him, even to apologize for her son's transgressions. The man flustered

her more than she'd been flustered in a long, long time.

“Oh? Did he cross the fence again?”

Kate held up the shirt. “There’s evidence he did, though I didn’t get a call.” Kate sighed. “I don’t know why Eddie’s so interested in those animals.”

“Oh, come on, Kate. Zebras in the Texas Hill Country? A floppy-eared donkey and two matching white horses? Of course he’s curious. I just wish he’d listen to our warnings. Like you said, he walks—or runs, probably—across our pasture with those longhorns out there. They seem gentle, but those horns are deadly.”

“I know. He loves being outdoors. I had to be so protective when we lived on a busy street in the suburbs. I’d hate to confine him to the apartment here.”

“No, you can’t do that. Children need time to play. It’s too bad he’s such a sneaky escape artist—and I mean that in the nicest way.”

Kate laughed as she stuffed the shirt into the washer. “I know exactly what you mean. Wait until Marsha starts crawling and walking. You’ll get a real workout then.”

“Speaking of workouts, I’d better change. Bretford House isn’t formal, but I don’t like to go there dressed like I should be in yoga class or going for a jog.”

Kate looked down at her own jeans and sweatshirt. “I’d have to change, too, and I still have a lot of work to do. Maybe I’ll pass tonight. You and Travis have a double date with Gwendolyn

and Hank.”

“And our two little monsters? I’m sure they’re bringing their little boy, so dinner should be interesting with both kids teething. Come to think of it, maybe you should stay home!”

Kate chuckled, then Jodie said, “Well, I’m going to get dressed. If you change your mind, be ready in about a half an hour. Otherwise, we’ll see you tomorrow for church.”

“Yes, that’s the plan. If Eddie doesn’t run off again.”

“Good luck,” Jodie said with a smile, then turned and walked out of the garage.

Good luck. Kate knew she’d need it to avoid Luke Simon for the rest of her stay in Ranger Springs. Or, if she got a teaching job here, for the rest of her life. She didn’t want that flustered feeling, she especially didn’t want to get involved with a man, and she extra-especially didn’t want to encourage Eddie’s interest in what should clearly be off-limits—exotic animals and a Harley-riding Californian.

With a sigh, Kate added detergent and started the wash cycle.

THE FOLLOWING Saturday morning after breakfast, Eddie excused himself to play soldier in the backyard. Kate didn’t approve of the game, but Travis had played it with him after Eddie had seen coverage of the war on television. They both claimed that Kate, being a “girl,” just didn’t understand “guy things.”

Kate settled into her couch with her second cup of coffee and listened to Eddie’s new toy gun’s ratta-tat-tat as he ran from tree

to tree. He should have a playmate. She hoped he made friends at the elementary school. Perhaps when she got a permanent job, she'd rent a house in town where there were other children his age. She didn't want her son growing up lonely.

Pushing aside her misgivings about Eddie playing soldier, she picked up a professional teachers organization's magazine and turned to an article she'd tagged. During her years of marriage, she hadn't kept up with educational standards and was sadly behind in understanding funding issues, certification requirements and classroom trends. Before long she was immersed in her reading. When she turned the page, she heard... silence.

The ratta-tat-tat had stopped. There was no sound of her son scurrying from tree to tree. Nothing but the chirping of birds.

She hurried out the door onto the small landing at the top of the stairs and called, "Eddie!"

Nothing.

She ran down the steps, calling him again. And again. No Eddie.

Travis stepped outside onto his deck, baby Marsha in his arms. "What's wrong?"

"I think Eddie has run off again."

"If you wait, I'll take you in the pickup." Travis kept an old truck for driving across his rolling pastures to feed his longhorns, especially in the winters.

"No, he was just outside playing. I think I can catch up with

him. Then I'm grounding him until he's thirty."

Travis unclipped his cell phone from his waistband. "Take this in case you need to call."

"Thanks. I keep forgetting mine."

"You should always have a cell phone with you, Kate. Or a walkie-talkie. I'll get some for us. Be careful."

"It's just a pasture."

"I know."

She rushed off, grateful she was wearing a comfortable pair of jeans, a turtleneck and sneakers, her "suburban mom" uniform. At the edge of the backyard she discovered Eddie's empty juice box. Following the path two little feet had worked into the winter-dry grass wasn't difficult. Eddie had obviously walked this way many times. Too many times, she silently corrected herself.

By the time she arrived at the wire fence separating Travis's property from Luke Simon's ranch, she was out of breath. "I've got to start exercising again," she whispered as she placed her hands on her knees and breathed deeply. Keeping up with one six-year-old was difficult enough, but soon she'd be charged with handling about twenty energetic elementary students on a daily basis. If she got the job.

To her left she heard the faint sound of her son singing his favorite song. Relief swept through her, because although she didn't doubt that he'd once again migrated to see the odd animals—and their equally mysterious owner—she was now sure he was safe.

She'd just glimpsed his red shirt when the roar of a powerful engine disturbed the nature sounds. Looking toward Luke Simon's driveway, she saw a large silver crew-cab pickup move toward the run-down ranch house.

Curious, knowing she shouldn't be, she jogged to the row of trees dividing the pasture and the driveway.

"Luke!" a female voice called from the truck as the engine died. "Where are you?"

A door banged shut. A few seconds later, Luke appeared, dressed in tight, faded jeans and a white T-shirt. His long hair was disheveled and his feet bare.

Kate sucked in a breath. He looked like a movie star. A Greek god. Stop staring at him, she told herself. Concentrate on your son.

Eddie was crouched behind a large oak, also watching the group that had arrived in the noisy pickup, and seemingly unaware that his mother had followed him.

"What the hell are you guys doing here?"

Luke's clearly disbelieving tone carried through the trees. Just then, a big-busted blonde bounced from the truck, giggling as she jogged toward him. It's a wonder she doesn't seriously hurt herself, Kate thought, glancing down at her own modest B-cups.

"Luke! We missed you so much that we had to visit."

"I can't believe you moved to the middle of nowhere!" an equally well-endowed redhead squealed, also running over to him. Both women hugged him, one on each side, until Kate

thought he might be crushed by silicone. Or whatever doctors were implanting now.

It was Baywatch on the Prairie.

“You don’t like my ranch?” Luke asked.

“It’s so...rural!” the blonde exclaimed.

A California-style cowboy eased around the front of the truck and grinned. Dressed in new jeans and a flashy snap-front shirt, he “wasn’t from around here,” as they said in town. “I couldn’t keep them away,” he said.

“I just hadn’t expected to see you guys in Texas.”

“We’re working on a movie just outside of Austin. We’ve got today and tomorrow off while they add new sets, so here we are,” the man said.

“I’m not exactly set up for guests,” Luke replied.

The blonde hugged him so tight she nearly knocked him off balance. Kate almost snorted at the ridiculous display. But then, Luke was probably used to that kind of attention from that type of woman.

“That’s okay, honey. We can sleep anywhere.”

The redhead giggled. The California cowboy laughed and slapped Luke on the back, and then headed toward the house.

Eddie chose that moment to dart from his hiding place, across the driveway toward the small pasture where the two zebras, their long fuzzy ears twitching, sized up the newcomers.

Luke and the others turned at the sound of Eddie’s tennis shoes crunching the gravel. Kate cringed, knowing she’d have

to reveal herself, hoping they didn't assume she'd been lurking in the bushes, watching the tawdry scene. Which of course was exactly what she'd been doing.

She made a lot of noise rustling bushes, then called out, "Eddie! You come back here right now!"

All eyes were on her as she stumbled out of the tree line, got her balance and dashed across the drive. She hated doing this. Making a scene in front of Luke Simon's guests. His gorgeous, movie-people guests.

"Sorry for the interruption," Kate said, breathless. "I'll just get Eddie and we'll be gone."

"Well, aren't you cute?" The blonde peeled herself off Luke and turned to Eddie, perhaps fifteen feet away near the fence, frozen because he knew he'd been discovered. The little scamp.

Kate rushed over, putting her arm around him before the blonde could crush him to her unnaturally large chest. No telling what trauma would be revealed when he was an adult!

The group followed the blonde until they were all standing there, staring at Kate and Eddie as though they were oddities.

"These animals can be dangerous," Luke said to Eddie in a surprisingly patient and focused voice. "I told you before that you can't come over here by yourself."

"He's not by himself," Kate said. "I'm with him now, and I'm taking him home, and he's not going to bother you again, are you, Eddie?"

"No, ma'am."

“Oh, isn’t that cute?” the blonde gushed again, reaching for Eddie. “He’s so polite.”

Kate pulled him behind her. “Excuse me. We’ll be going now.”

“Well, sheesh, lady, we’re not going to contaminate him,” the redhead said.

Luke frowned, but Kate didn’t wait for the scene to get any uglier. She grasped Eddie’s hand and said, “Apologize to Mr. Simon.”

“I’m sorry I tried to see the zebras again.”

Luke nodded.

“And I’m sorry we interrupted your . . . party,” Kate added. She tugged her son across the drive, toward the cover of the trees and the safety of her brother’s ranch.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, Luke excused himself from his unexpected—and frankly, unwanted—guests to take care of a little business. Or so he told them. He needed to get away for a few minutes. Their arrival, combined with Eddie’s surprise visit and Kate’s even more surprising arrival, had left him shaken. And Kate’s snobby reaction to his friends—more like former coworkers—had clearly defined their differences. She didn’t even want Marlina to touch her son.

Kate would be shocked if she knew how often Luke had thought about touching her. Not that he had any right to think about the woman. It was apparent she was one of those women who never associated with a working guy, and her behavior today had driven that point home. Her brother was rich, and she’d

obviously grown up dripping in money. She wore classic clothes and drove a sensible car and had a polite son who just wanted to be a kid.

Well, the hell with her. If she was too good for them, she could just stay on her side of the fence.

Paul, Shelby and Marlena were high-energy, high-maintenance people. When he'd worked on a movie set with them, they'd been tolerable, even fun. Here in the quiet of the ranch, they seemed as out of place as a...well, a zebra in Texas.

As he walked back from the mailbox at the end of his driveway, he speculated that maybe they'd want to go out later. He'd been to Shultze's Roadhouse several times for a beer and a burger and found the place entertaining. The jukebox played country and western, and Texas-oriented beer signs hung on the walls. Marlena and Shelby would gush at the "authentic" decor. As soon as he sorted the mail, he'd recommend they visit the local hangout. Without him.

Several bills, a handful of catalogs—nothing unusual. Then a carefully hand-printed address caught his attention. He didn't know anyone in Florida.

He slit the envelope and pulled out a letter. A photo—the kind taken by school photographers—fell to the desk. He picked it up and looked at the little girl's face. A sense of déjà vu rushed over him, as though he'd seen her before. But he knew he hadn't, so after studying her sun-streaked dark brown hair and amazingly mature brown eyes, he leaned the photo against the lamp and

began to read.

“Dear Mr. Simon,” the letter began, neatly printed like the envelope. “You don’t know me, but nearly nine years ago you knew my sister, Shawna Jacobs.”

Luke’s heart skipped a beat as he remembered his late mother’s former coworker. Shawna had been a pretty, helpful and sympathetic friend when he’d needed one, lending a hand as he sorted through his mother’s belongings after her untimely death. Comfort had turned to passion, and for a week or so he’d shared Shawna’s bed.

He’d been young, the sex fumbling but energetic. She’d claimed she was on the pill. He hadn’t given the consequences a second thought.

He looked back at the photo. No. It couldn’t be....

Chapter Two

Luke continued reading with a mixture of excitement and dread. “My sister tried to contact you after you went away, but she couldn’t find you in California because she thought your name was Moretti, the same as your mother’s. I just found out your real last name and tracked you down on the Internet.”

Luke’s mother, Angela Moretti, had never married. His father, Ronald Lucas Simon, already had a family when he seduced and deserted her. The bastard.

“This will come as a big surprise, but you have a daughter. Brittany is eight years old and in the third grade. Right now, she needs you because Shawna is dead and I’m driving long haul starting in a month.”

No! his mind screamed. Shawna might have been on the pill, but no birth control was one hundred percent foolproof. She could have had his baby. It was possible.

He wished Shawna were alive to ask. He wished he’d thought of her after driving away from his mother’s apartment nearly nine years ago. He was sorry Shawna was dead, but the truth was, she hadn’t meant much to him. He felt especially bad about that now, considering she’d had a child. Maybe his child, he thought, shaking his head.

He knew nothing about children, except that they were frequently loud and often unruly. Just look at Eddie Wooten, who

kept disobeying his mother and coming across the fence. Luke had no idea how to stop that child from indulging his fascination with the ponies and zebras. How in the world could he relate to an eight-year-old girl?

Plus, this ranch was barely livable, except for the animals. Their barn was repaired, their fences secure. They had plenty of food and fresh water. But a human, a little girl? He didn't know how to feed a child, much less bathe and dress one for school.

He may be a father, but he was nowhere near being a dad.

Luke pushed away his panic and continued reading. "You'll need to get all this approved by a judge. I've already contacted the court here in Florida, since my parents are both dead and I don't have any other relatives. I guess you'll also want to meet Brittany. I'm hoping you can come to Florida right away." Shawn's brother, Andy Jacobs, gave his home and cell phone numbers and asked Luke to call him as soon as he got the letter. He closed by asking Luke not to waste time; the long-haul trucking job he'd taken started in a month and Brittany had nowhere else to go.

If Luke didn't claim his daughter, she'd become a ward of the state. A foster child. Unwanted. Deserted by the only two people who had cared for her.

He wouldn't let that happen. Not if she were really his child.

Clutching the letter, Luke sat down on a desk chair that creaked in protest. Of all the things that could have happened to him, of all the twists and turns of his life, this was the most incredible.

He'd never thought about having children. And if he ever did decide to, he certainly would have expected them far, far into the future. Not this month, on a ranch that was barely functional. Not a girl, for pity's sake, and one already eight years old.

He didn't know what to do. Except that he would go to Florida to see her, and if she was indeed his daughter, he would claim her as his own.

Paul, Shelby and Marlena burst through the door, laughing and chatting, bringing Luke back to the present. He placed the letter, printed side down, on the desk.

"Say, we're getting hungry. Is there a place to go out around here? Beer's on me," Paul said.

"Shultze's Roadhouse is on the state highway, just a couple of miles from here," Luke replied, still seated. He glanced again at Brittany's photo, leaning against the lamp. She resembled him, he realized. That's why she'd seemed so familiar. She had his coloring and his eyes. Her mouth and wavy hair were Shawna's.

"Hey, who's that?" Shelby asked.

"She's...that's Brittany."

"Cute kid. A relative?"

Luke looked up at his friends. They were completely out of place here in Ranger Springs, just as he was completely out of place as a father. But still, that's what he was—most probably—and he'd darn well better get used to it.

"She's my daughter," he said simply.

"Oh. Oh, wow." Marlena appeared almost as stunned as he

felt. "I didn't know you had a kid."

"A daughter. She's eight." He picked up the photo and stared at Brittany's image again, a slow smile forming. "I didn't know either, until today." He got up from the chair and turned to Paul. "You guys go on without me. I have to get my ranch ready for a little girl."

"You sure?" Paul asked. "We could have a good time."

"I'm sure. It's been good seeing you again, but things have changed." He looked down at Brittany's photo again, thinking about his ranch, his responsibilities, and his vow to live a quiet, low-key life. "Everything has changed."

AS SHE STOOD on her small balcony watching the sun set over the trees between her brother's property and Luke Simon's ranch, Kate mentally kicked herself for her earlier behavior. She'd come across as an incompetent mother for not keeping Eddie at home, not to mention a klutz as she stumbled out of the tree line and into Luke's little party. They might even think she was a snoop, since she had been listening and watching a private rendezvous. To top it off, she'd offended the grasping Baywatch-like blonde who had almost gotten her hands on Eddie. Kate couldn't believe that when she'd faced Luke Simon up close, her brain had just stopped working, unable to communicate anything intelligent to her mouth. How she had to have seemed to him and his visitors!

Okay, so Luke Simon's friends' opinions of her shouldn't matter all that much. But she really didn't want to offend him,

especially because Eddie consistently violated the neighborly boundaries. Having a child continually ignore his warnings, plus having that child's mother invade his privacy, wasn't any way to welcome a newcomer to town.

Not that she should be a one-woman welcoming committee. She certainly wasn't on par with the other women in his life. The blonde and the redhead were stunning. They might not be natural beauties, but they were gorgeous nonetheless. He probably knew plenty of Hollywood actors and actresses, and they were far removed from regular people in a small town—except her sister-in-law, Jodie, of course, who was both famous and beautiful.

But Kate knew she was an ordinary-looking divorced mother, one who was barely coping on her own. The last thing—the very last thing—she should do was dwell on her unwilling fascination with their bad-boy neighbor.

Okay, maybe now he appeared more like a cowboy than a biker, but he projected a devil-may-care persona that was completely foreign to her. She'd never known anyone like Luke Simon. She'd never dated anyone remotely as daring and attractive as him. She'd always gone for proper and dependable—and look how well that had turned out!—so why did she think of him so often?

Probably because she was at the point in her life where she'd been forced to change. If Ed hadn't misused his clients' money and had an affair, she would have continued with the marriage, at least for Eddie's sake. Her marriage to Ed hadn't been even close

to exciting in the last few years, but she'd grown accustomed to the blandness and the comfort. Now she was suddenly single and broke, over thirty and starting a new life, and why wouldn't she be attracted to Luke Simon? He was, like a movie star or fictional character, compelling from afar. She had no intention of getting any closer than the boundary of his fence.

With a sigh, Kate pushed away from the railing at the top of the stairs. The sun was setting, the day almost over, and she had to talk to Eddie about his behavior. She had to make him understand that fences were important barriers—for children and their mothers!

AFTER PAUL, SHELBY and Marlena left the ranch for Shultze's Roadhouse and to hopefully find a place to stay for the night, Luke got on the phone to check for flights into the Orlando area. Brittany lived in a small town nearby the theme-oriented center of Florida. He wondered if she liked Mickey and the gang, or if she cared more for the new characters he saw on television. Or if she liked video games or stuffed animals more, if she went to movies or would rather play outside.

Maybe there were things kids did that he couldn't even imagine. He knew nothing of those new MP3 players, for example, and could barely operate a computer. There wasn't much of a need for high-tech skills in animal training and stunt work. He happily left that stuff to the business types who invested in horses or breeding stock and the movie special-effects folks.

He picked up the phone and dialed his friend Hank, whose

land adjoined Travis Whitaker's to the west. Luke breathed a sigh of relief when Hank answered after the second ring.

"Hank, it's Luke."

"What's up? You getting your zoo all settled in?"

"Yeah, the animals are doing great. Something else has come up, though, and I need your help."

"Sure, buddy. What can I do for you?"

"I'm going to need some repairs and changes made to the house over here, and I'm going to need them fast. I don't have any idea who to call."

"What's the rush?"

Luke ran a hand around his aching neck. The tension was getting to him. "I just got some news that changed my plans." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Apparently I have an eight-year-old daughter."

"Wow. How did that happen?"

Luke chuckled. "The usual way. One man, one woman, faulty birth control." He'd believed Shawna was on the pill when he'd revealed he had no protection. Now he wasn't sure what to think.

"Yeah, but why didn't you know until now?"

"Shawna was a friend of my mother. She assumed my last name was the same as my mother's—Moretti—and telling her any different would have required an explanation of the worthless piece of—well, just say the man my mother thought she was madly in love with. So I kept quiet and figured I never would see or hear from Shawna again. And I didn't." Luke sighed. "I got a

letter from her brother today, then I talked to him on the phone. Shawna died in a car accident recently and he's been taking care of her daughter. Er, my daughter. He's going to start a new job and can't look after her any longer."

"Wow, that's some story. You must have been shocked."

"Believe me, I was. I haven't thought about Shawna, to tell you the truth. We only spent about a week together right after my mother died. She helped me sort through my mother's things and we got close. Her brother said she tried to contact me, which I believe. Shawna was a nice woman." He felt bad that she'd died, especially never getting to tell him the news that she'd gotten pregnant.

"So, are you sure the girl is yours?"

"Pretty sure. She looks a lot like me."

"Still, it might be a good idea to get some tests done."

"I will, once I go to Florida. I'll check with her family doctor. I'm sure we can get it done there."

"Okay. Good thinking." Luke heard Hank sigh. "So now you're going to raise your daughter, if she's really yours?"

"Yes, I am." Every time Luke looked at the photo, he became more convinced that Brittany was his child. "That's why I need the house fixed up. I've repaired the barn and fences, but not the main house. It's in pretty sad shape."

"Yeah, it is, which is why you got it cheap."

"Right. Personally, I've stayed in worse places, and at least the plumbing and electrical work, but I have to get it up to 'little

girl' standards since I'll have to be approved by the court to get custody of Brittany. And everything has to be done in a month."

"I see what you mean. Well, I can recommend Nate Branson, Jimmy Mack's brother. He just moved back to town due to all the construction in the area. Gina Mae Summers, the Realtor, told me he does good work."

"I'm having trouble keeping up with all these folks. Jimmy Mack is...?"

"Jimmy Mack Branson. The hardware store owner. We met him when you bought the supplies for the tack room."

"Oh, right." Hank had taken him around the town and introduced him to a dozen people, but the ones he remembered most clearly were Kate Wooten and her son, hovered over by her brother Travis Whitaker. "Should I call Jimmy Mack to get in touch with his brother?"

"Why don't you call Gina? Her office number is listed, and you won't be bothering her if you call late either, because she's single."

"Single? Are you matchmaking? Because I've got to tell you, the last thing on my mind right now is women." Well, any woman except Kate, who kept creeping into his thoughts despite her obvious caution—maybe even dislike—of him and his friends. "I'm not about to mess up my relationship with my daughter by dating any woman."

"Okay, I'm just trying to help."

"I'm going to book a flight to Florida so I can meet Brittany

and get those tests done. Can I get you to check my place? I hired Carlos to help out, but some of the animals need medicine daily.”

“Sure, leave me a list and I’ll take care of things.”

“Thanks, Hank. It’s good to have a friend here.”

“You’d have lots of friends if you’d let the folks around here get to know you.”

If he was open and honest, people would soon realize his father was a multimillionaire who’d died and left most of his money to his legitimate family, but quite a healthy bequest to his bastard son, whom he’d never acknowledged in life. And once that fact was public, the persistent biographer, who was doing a tell-all book about Ronald Lucas Simon, would be in Ranger Springs faster than Luke could say “hell, no.”

No, the best thing was to keep to himself. “Yeah, well, if they’re ‘friendly’ like my neighbor Travis Whitaker, I wouldn’t depend on them to ‘help’ me out at all.”

“Travis just got the wrong idea about you when you first got into town,” Hank said.

“Why? I’m not after his property or his wife.”

“No, but she and his sister expressed some...curiosity when you pulled up to the café on your Harley.”

“Oh, that.” He’d enjoyed the road trip from California to Texas, taking his time to see the deserts and small towns along the way, thinking about how his life was about to change. Little did he know that he’d be getting more than a variety of aging animals and 640 acres of land. “I still don’t understand what I’ve

done to make him testy.”

“He’s just protective. His sister Kate went through a messy divorce, and she’s having a hard time making ends meet, from what I’ve heard.”

“You’re kidding! She looks like she’s always had money, always will.”

“Travis and Kate’s mother was an actress and their father was wealthy—oil money out in West Texas. They didn’t do without much as kids, except maybe some stability at home, if you know what I mean.”

Luke thought back to how he and his mother had struggled to pay the bills each month. They didn’t have much, but he knew he could always depend on her, so in a way, he’d had stability. What he didn’t have was a father—not that he’d really needed one. His mother, however, had loved Ronald Lucas Simon even though the SOB had never paid a dime of child support or expressed any interest in his illegitimate son. At least, not until recently. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Well, I’ll let you go and make those phone calls. Give me a buzz when you’ve made your plans.”

Luke ended the call and sat back in his desk chair. So, Kate wasn’t currently wealthy and her divorce had been messy. And she was curious about him. At least, according to Hank. Kate sure didn’t show it. Every time he’d seen her, she’d seemed perturbed by him, as if she’d like to turn up her nose and stalk away, but her manners were good to make such a scene.

Big deal. Luke didn't need friendly neighbors, and he certainly didn't want to get tied up with a woman right now. Soon he'd have his daughter. They'd be just fine together, just as he and his mother had been just fine.

But first, he needed to do two things: get in touch with Brittany's uncle about the travel plans and make arrangements to fix up this house. He didn't want to give the authorities any reason to keep him from being a father, especially when he wasn't sure what court approval would involve.

He'd never abandon his child as Ronald Simon had deserted him.

With new resolve, he dialed Andy Jacobs in Florida, half hoping that Brittany would answer the phone so he could hear her voice for the first time, half dreading talking to her when he didn't know what to say.

The phone was answered on the third ring and Luke sighed in relief. "Hello, Mr. Jacobs. This is Luke Simon." He took another deep breath. "I'm coming to Florida to see Brittany."

Chapter Three

Kate had a substitute teaching assignment at the Ranger Springs Elementary School two days later. She was glad for the experience and the money substituting provided, but the assignments threw her off balance because they usually called her around six o'clock in the morning. She always had to make sure her schedule coincided with Eddie's, just in case she was teaching at the middle school or high school.

Today, her feet hurt from chasing twenty second-graders around the classroom and playground and all she wanted to do was soak in the big bathtub for about an hour. Instead, she knew she'd have her hands full with Eddie because his class had taken a field trip to Cheryl Jacks's petting zoo. He'd chatted nonstop since they'd gotten in the car to drive home. He loved animals so much. He wanted a dog, a cat, a hamster...or a zebra.

"Bring your lunch bag and come on inside," she told him as she parked the car.

"I want to go outside to play."

"I know, and you can, but let me get settled in first. Since I taught today, I need to change clothes. And I bet you'd like some string cheese and apple slices."

"Ooookay," he replied, reluctant resignation temporarily replacing his childish excitement. He dragged his already scuffed sneakers across the carpet as Kate headed for the kitchen.

She fixed his snack and he asked if he could eat it outside, because maybe Aunt Jodie would bring baby Marsha out. Kate agreed, thankful for a little time to herself to freshen up. Still, she watched him to make sure he headed for their deck, not Luke Simon's property.

She prayed the talk she'd had with Eddie after his last transgression had finally sunk in. Besides the danger involved in running off, she'd been acutely embarrassed when she'd popped out of the trees and surprised Luke and his guests. She didn't want to be in that situation again.

In her bathroom, she stripped off her school-teacher clothes and threw them into the hamper. She had a smear of tempura paint on her denim skirt and a spot of ketchup on her flower-embroidered pull-over. Hopefully, both stains would come out in the wash, but at the moment, she couldn't work up much energy for prespotting.

Just as she pulled on an old pair of gym shorts and a baggy T-shirt, the phone rang. She wanted to check on Eddie, but after seeing the caller ID, she knew she needed to answer the phone first.

Five minutes later, she felt on top of the world. The school administrators wanted to make sure her application was on file with the district for a teaching job.

As she hung up the phone, her smile was as big as her hopes for a permanent position. Although she hadn't taught full-time since she was a student teacher eight years ago, she now saw there

was a chance to provide a home for Eddie and herself. She could move out of Travis's garage apartment and rent a house of her own.

One with a safe yard for Eddie to play in.

Eddie! He was on the deck alone. What if Jodie hadn't come outside with the baby?

Kate flung open the door and jogged down the steps. She was probably overreacting, but he'd proved that he could be very sneaky about leaving the yard.

Sure enough, there was Jodie with Marsha in her arms. "Where's Eddie?" she asked.

Kate stopped, her smile fading. "I was just about to ask you."

Jodie propped her six-month-old on her left hip. "We just stepped outside, and I haven't seen Eddie."

Oh no! Not again. Kate took off at a run toward Luke Simon's property.

LUKE WAS on the phone, finalizing his hotel plans in Orlando, when he heard the commotion. The donkey began to bray, and he heard the thundering of small hooves in the nearby pasture. By the time he had come out of his chair and rushed to the door, the frightened squeal of a child cut through the afternoon.

When Luke got to the fence, both zebras were awkwardly running toward the trees, where the ponies and the donkey stood trembling, their ears raised, ready to flee. At first he couldn't tell what had frightened them so. He scanned the pasture, expecting

to see Eddie Wooten running at them with his arms flapping.

Instead, he saw a limp heap of blue and white lying maybe three feet from the fence, by the row of trees.

The pile of clothes moved, one small sneaker pushing against the ground.

“Oh, no,” he muttered as he vaulted the fence and raced across the pasture. His heart beat hard from more than the mad dash. He’d told Eddie several times to stay away, to quit trying to get close to the zebras. They were tame, and although they’d been raised around people, they weren’t domesticated animals. When frightened, there was no telling what they’d do. Their natural instincts were far stronger than those of horses, mules or donkeys.

As he neared the little boy, he heard Kate calling, “Eddie!”

“He’s over here,” Luke called out, sliding to a stop in the slippery new grass. “Here, by the mesquite trees.”

Eddie whimpered, his arms and legs moving. Thank God.

“The what?” she yelled. “Where are you?”

Luke stood up and waved. “Over here!”

Kate ran toward them as Luke went down on one knee.

“Eddie, I need you to tell me where it hurts. Come on, buddy, stop crying.”

Eddie looked up at him, still whimpering, but the little boy reached up and rubbed his eyes. That’s a good sign, Luke told himself. “Can you wiggle your feet?”

Sniffing, Eddie looked down at his stained athletic shoes and

moved both feet back and forth.

“Good boy.”

“Eddie!” Kate dropped to the ground and reached for her son.

Luke put a hand on her shoulder. “Wait! I was just making sure he hasn’t injured his back.”

“His back? Oh, my God. I wasn’t thinking....Eddie, are you okay?”

“I don’t know, Mommy. My leg hurts and my hand hurts.” He held up his scratched right hand, traces of grass and blood making his mother gasp.

Luke turned to look at Kate. “Are you all right? I think Eddie’s going to be fine, but let’s be calm, okay?”

“Calm. Yes, I can be calm,” she replied, taking a deep breath. “Thank you.”

That threw him a curve. The very last thing he’d expected was a thank-you from the mother of the little boy lying in his pasture.

“Eddie, does your back hurt?”

“Not too much. Not like my hand.”

“Okay, that’s good. How about your head?” Luke held up two fingers. “How many fingers do you see?”

“Two,” Eddie replied, holding up two of his own on his left hand.

“Good boy,” Luke said, smiling.

“That’s right,” Kate said, forcing a smile. “I’m going to check your leg, sweetie. Hold real still.”

She was very calm now, very motherly as she inspected his

limbs. Apparently, Eddie had fallen on the side of his hip, not really his leg, and it was probably bruised.

“I don’t think you broke anything, but let’s get you to the doctor,” Luke said.

“I should call an ambulance,” Kate said.

“Travis told me there isn’t an ambulance in Ranger Springs, and I don’t think this is serious enough for a CareFlight helicopter, do you?”

“Well, probably not.” She looked around as though she was getting her bearings. “I need to take him to the medical clinic.”

“I’ll call ahead.”

“I should have brought my cell phone,” Kate said. “Travis is always getting after me to carry it, but I usually forget. When Eddie runs off, I just go after him.”

Luke didn’t want to say anything about her brother, her errant son or her impulsive behavior, so he kept quiet. She had enough to deal with right now.

“Mommy, I want to go home.”

“I need to make sure you’re okay, sweetie. We’re going to see Dr. Amy.”

“I don’t want to see the doctor! She’ll give me a shot.”

“Come on, buddy,” Luke said, scooping the boy up in his arms and rising. “I’ll bet the doctor is real nice.”

“I wanna go home!” Eddie tried to wiggle out of Luke’s grasp, but he held firm. He wasn’t about to let a six-year-old get the best of him, especially in front of Kate.

“Eddie, be still! You could be hurt,” she said, leaning close. Close enough for Luke to feel her warmth and smell her fragrance of flowers and fear. He wanted to reach out and envelop her along with her son, to tell her everything would be okay. But that wasn’t his responsibility any more than commenting on her personal life was, so he simply headed to his truck.

“You’re going to take Eddie and me to the clinic?” Kate asked, walking quickly to match his longer stride.

He glanced down at her. “Seems like a good idea.”

“You don’t have to. If you’ll just take me home—”

“No, I’m taking you to the clinic.” They reached the fence and he paused. “Go on over and I’ll hand Eddie to you.”

Kate slipped through the rails, apparently unconcerned about how her loose shorts revealed her upper thighs, or how the soft knit fabric of her shirt caressed her curves. Luke knew he shouldn’t be thinking such thoughts as he held her injured son, but he couldn’t help admiring the mother. Quickly, he handed Eddie across the fence, being careful not to brush his fingers against her breasts as he released the little boy.

“I have to get my keys,” he said, stepping between the rails. “Walk toward the truck. I’ll be right there.”

He jogged to the house—not an easy feat in boots—and returned with his wallet and keys. Kate was already seated inside the truck, holding Eddie on her lap.

“Seat belt?” Luke asked.

“Oh, right.” She placed the boy on the bench seat between

them and hooked him in. “Are you okay, sweetie? You aren’t hurting too much, are you?”

“I wanna go home. I’m sorry I fell off the zebra.”

“You tried to ride a zebra!” Kate exclaimed. “Eddie, no!”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” he said softly, about to cry.

“Hey, we can talk about that later, okay?” Kate obviously loved Eddie very much and was at a loss to stop his wandering and inquisitive nature. Being a parent was tough, something he was about to experience firsthand...if he could get his house and his life in order in just twenty-seven days.

Kate hugged Eddie to her and appeared close to tears herself when Luke glanced at her. Then he was on the curving road leading over the hills toward town, and he didn’t look at mother and son again.

KATE BREATHED a sigh of relief when Dr. Amy Wheatley Phillips pronounced Eddie bruised but not broken. No nerve damage, just a contusion on his hip and another on his hand, which he’d scraped raw during his fall.

“You must take it easy for at least a week,” the doctor told Eddie. “No falling around or getting any more injuries, okay?” She looked at Kate and winked. “And you need long, warm baths, Eddie. At least one a day. That will make the bruise go away faster.”

“Baths! Yuck. Do I have to?”

Dr. Amy smiled and stroked Eddie’s mussed hair. “Absolutely, young man. Your mother knows best, so you mind

her and you'll get well very soon."

Eddie frowned and swung his legs over the edge of the exam table, appearing even younger and more forlorn than Kate ever remembered. The cotton gown wrapped around him like a big, soft tablecloth. Or maybe a receiving blanket, as if he were a baby again.

Oh, those were the days, when she could keep him safe. Protect him from the dangers of life.

"Come back and see me if you have any problems."

"Thank you, Dr. Amy," Kate said.

"You're welcome. And Eddie? Don't ever try to ride anyone else's animals. In Texas, back in the old days, that could be considered rustling. Only the bad guys tried to steal someone else's animals."

"I didn't try to steal the zebra!"

"Using anything that doesn't belong to you is stealing, Eddie," Kate explained. "Using the zebra for a ride is something that Mr. Simon didn't want you to do, and that means you tried to steal a ride."

Eddie folded his arms across his chest and frowned.

"We'll talk about this at home, young man, after you apologize to Mr. Simon."

"Gladys told me he brought the two of you in," Dr. Amy said as she removed her rubber gloves and dropped them into the biohazard trash.

"Yes, I'm afraid I was a bit of a basket case. Your receptionist

was wonderful, by the way. Very calm in the face of my near-hysteria.”

“I’m sure it’s very difficult to see your own child lying injured in a pasture.”

“Exactly,” Kate said, frowning at her adventurous son.

“I’m glad Mr. Simon was there for you, then. I’m sure he was more objective.”

“Yes, he was...great.” Kate wasn’t happy to realize how true her words were. Part of her wanted to be angry at him for having the tempting animals. Part of her wanted to resent him for his appeal, both to her and to Eddie. But he had been sensible when she felt the urge to rant and cry and hold Eddie tight. He’d been... great.

“See Gladys on your way out,” Dr. Amy said as she left the examination room.

Within minutes, Eddie was dressed in his stained, rumpled clothes and Kate had given Gladys the insurance information. Only then did Kate look to the waiting room to see if Luke Simon was still there.

Or if he’d taken off because he didn’t want to spend any more time than necessary with a hysterical woman and a meddlesome child.

She inhaled deeply when she saw him, one arm stretched along the back of a couch, booted foot crossed and resting on his knee. His long, dark hair was ruffled as if by the wind or his own fingers plowing through the thick strands. He looked far too good

for her peace of mind, just as tempting and exciting as when he'd strolled into the Four Square Café several months ago.

He appeared relaxed at first, but she noticed a bit of tension in his expression, as though he had a lot on his mind. He probably had a ton of chores to do at his ranch. He'd dashed off and left everything. Had he been alone, or were those Hollywood people still there?

She wasn't going to think about those gorgeous women anymore. Comparing herself to others that physically perfect was an exercise in futility, especially when she was dressed in old shorts and a faded T-shirt.

"We're ready," she said just loud enough to get his attention, "if you're willing to drive us home."

"How's Eddie?" Luke asked, rising effortlessly from the couch. Kate nearly sighed when she thought about how strong he had to be to move so gracefully.

"He's going to be fine, if he's careful and takes lots of warm baths."

"Yuck!"

Kate leaned down to eye level with her son. "Eddie, don't you have something to say to Mr. Simon?"

Eddie nodded. "I'm sorry I tried to ride the zebra, Mr. Simon," he said in a small voice. "I didn't mean to steal anything."

Luke appeared confused, glancing at her for clarification.

Kate hid her smile by biting her lips. "Dr. Amy told him about how taking something, even a ride on someone's animal, is like

stealing.”

“You didn’t steal from me,” Luke said. “I’m really concerned about the zebra, though.”

“Why?” Eddie asked.

Luke hunkered down in front of Eddie. “Because she’s pretty old and she has arthritis.”

“Just like Grandpa Whitaker,” Kate explained.

“His fingers are all knobby,” Eddie said.

“Well, her knees are kind of like that and it hurts her to move. She likes to graze real slow beside her friend. When she has to move fast, like to run away from something that scares her, her knees hurt.”

Eddie looked as though he was about to cry. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I thought she’d like to go for a ride.”

“Riding is a lot more fun for the person riding than for the animal being ridden,” Luke explained. “Besides, zebras are wild animals. They want to buck whenever they feel weight on their back. That’s why people don’t ride them in Africa, where they’re from. Over there, the wild zebras buck off the lions and other predators who try to eat them.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that,” Eddie said.

Listening to Luke Simon was a lot like watching a very sexy host on the Discovery Channel. Except none of the hosts were as appealing as this newcomer.

“So, even if Lola—that’s the zebra’s name—didn’t have arthritis, you still couldn’t ride her. She’s wild.”

“But why do you have wild animals?” Eddie asked.

“Because Lola and Lollipop, her friend, used to work in a small circus where they pulled a chariot. They went round and round the ring for many years until they got too old. They didn’t have anywhere else to go, so they came to live with me and the other animals. Now they can eat grass and have a nice retirement.”

“Just like Grandpa Whitaker moved to Hilton Head.”

Kate suppressed a laugh. Her father wouldn’t take kindly to his lifestyle being compared to that of two aging zebras, especially with his younger wife, his golf games and tennis matches. “Sort of, but don’t tell him that.”

“Okay. I’m ready to go home now.”

Kate stood and took Eddie’s hand. “Are you sure you don’t mind taking us home?” she asked Luke.

“No, as long as your brother doesn’t come after me.”

“Why would you say that?”

“He doesn’t like me.”

“He’s overprotective and he doesn’t know you.”

Luke’s eyebrows rose as if asking, “And you do?”

Kate shrugged at the unspoken question and led Eddie toward the door. “Whatever Travis says, I’m grateful for your help. I couldn’t have gotten Eddie here so quickly or easily without you.”

“I’m glad I was home.”

Kate paused as he unlocked the truck. “I hope we didn’t interrupt your visitors...again.”

“No, they’re gone.”

Good, she felt like saying, but she didn’t. She absolutely refused to be petty, especially about a man she barely knew.

She helped Eddie into the seat and buckled him up. “I’m sure you’re very busy, though.” Although Luke had been much nicer and more concerned than she would have expected, he had his own life to lead.

She knew so little about him. She’d imagined much more about him than she should have, first thinking him self-possessed to the point of arrogance. In reality, he was very nice. Perhaps even a little shy. And awfully concerned about Eddie, instead of being angry.

Which made him even more endearing. Darn it. She didn’t need this. Her responsibility to provide for herself and Eddie, combined with her need to stand on her own two feet for the first time, made having any interest in a man a very bad idea. And when she did decide to date again, she would be smart to start with someone less exciting and tempting than Luke Simon.

She definitely needed dating training wheels, not a wild ride on a Harley.

Luke paused after inserting the key, his look again pensive. “It’s not so much that I’m busy. I’ve got some things on my mind.”

“I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“You’re not a bother. That’s not what I meant.”

“Still—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, cranking the engine. He put

the truck in reverse and turned to look behind him, then paused and watched her intently. “I’m working on a solution,” he said before driving toward the ranch.

Chapter Four

Luke straightened the collar of his white cotton shirt, the only one in his closet that was pressed. He'd waited a whole day to come to see Eddie, hoping the little boy was feeling better, and that Kate wouldn't hold a grudge against Luke or his zebra.

She could be the answer to all his problems.

She was a mother, an elementary school teacher and a woman with a lot of class. If anyone could help him clean up his act, Kate Wooten was the one. She could explain what toys a little girl would like, what sorts of things weren't safe for kids, what kind of behavior was proper and how he needed to decorate the house. So much to learn, so little time before he needed approval to take custody of Brittany.

But as much as he wanted to get his plan in action, he didn't think he should come right out and ask Kate for help. For one thing, she didn't know him very well. Until Eddie tried to ride a zebra, Kate had seemed a bit...standoffish. He'd assumed she was snobby, but maybe she was just unsure of him, his animals and his ranch. Mostly him.

Even though he didn't have much time, she needed to feel more comfortable around him first. He hoped he could make a good impression today, and move quickly to gain her cooperation. Brittany was expecting him to be her father in more than name only. They'd talked on the phone several times, and

she was already making plans. Already telling him her wishes for the future.

He felt overwhelmed by the hopes of an eight-year-old.

He opened the door of his pickup, looking up toward the garage apartment, feeling as though he'd "come calling," one of the lines of dialogue he remembered from a Western film. He snatched the small bag he'd brought for Eddie from the seat and stepped out.

At that moment Travis's wife, Jodie, came out the back door of their house onto the wooden deck running halfway to the garage. In her arms she held a baby, maybe six months old. Luke remembered hearing that Jodie Marsh Whitaker was a famous model. Right now she looked very ordinary in a good way, dressed in jeans and a pink sweatshirt, her blond hair in a ponytail.

"Hello, Mr. Simon," she greeted him with a smile. "Are you here to see Kate?"

"Luke, please, Mrs. Whitaker."

She laughed. "Jodie, please."

He grinned despite his intention not to warm up to Travis Whitaker's family. "Jodie, then." He shut the truck's door and took a step toward the deck. "I came to check on Eddie."

"He's doing fine, but he has a heck of a bruise."

"I'm sure he does."

"How's the zebra?"

"Seems to be fine."

Jodie nodded, shifting the baby on her hip. “I’m sure Kate is home. Why don’t you go on up? She lives over the garage for now. Just until she gets back on her feet.”

Ah, yes. The divorce. “Thanks, Jodie.” Before he turned away, he saw her husband exit the house and stand behind her on the deck, arms crossed over his chest. Travis was a big guy, one Luke wouldn’t want to cross—unless he had to. He wasn’t sure why Travis didn’t like him, but Luke wouldn’t let that stop him from visiting Kate or putting his plan into action.

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