



FROM FORTUNE TO FAMILY MAN

Judy Duarte

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Duarte J.

From *Fortune To Family Man* / J. Duarte — «HarperCollins»,

WHAT TO EXPECT... WHEN YOU WEREN'T EXPECTING Kieran Fortune, vice president of Robinson Tech, knows his strengths. He's good with technology; he's good at making money and at making love. But he doesn't know one thing about parenting. And he's just become a father. To a toddler. When the ever-so-sexy millionaire agreed to sign on as legal guardian to his best friend's daughter, he considered it a mere formality. But now Zach is gone and Kieran is... Dad. In a fit of desperation, he reaches out to Zach's ex-girlfriend. Dana Trevino is a serious-minded graduate student who is great with little Rosie. She is also Kieran's polar opposite and the very last woman he should be interested in. It isn't fair. It isn't right. It's also just about inevitable...

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Meet the Fortunes

Fortune of the Month: Kieran Fortune

Age: 31

Vital statistics: Oh. My. Hunk. Smart, sexy and rich.

Claim to Fame: Vice president of Robinson Tech, voted Most Likely to Break Hearts.

Romantic prospects: Excellent. Or at least they were until little Rosie came into his life. A three-year-old is not exactly an aphrodisiac.

"I'll admit it—I'm not the nurturing type. I should have said no when Zach asked me to be Rosabelle's guardian if anything should happen to him. But what were the odds?"

Now I've got this crazy-cute toddler and no idea what to do with her. I'm lucky that Zach's old girlfriend, Dana, has offered to help. I wish I had half Dana's maternal instincts. To be honest, I wish I had Dana in my arms—no, in my bed. But even I have more scruples than that. Zach's barely cold in the ground, and Dana deserves more than I am able to give her. My fantasies of playing house with her need to remain exactly that..."

* * *

The Fortunes of Texas: The Secret Fortunes— A new generation of heroes and heartbreakers!

From Fortune to Family Man

Judy Duarte



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Since 2002, USA TODAY bestselling author JUDY DUARTE has written over forty books for Mills & Boon Cherish, earned two RITA® Award nominations, won two Maggie Awards and received a National Readers' Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books at her website, www.judyduarte.com, or at [Facebook.com/judyduartenovelist](https://www.facebook.com/judyduartenovelist).

To Michelle Major, Stella Bagwell,

Karen Rose Smith, Marie Ferrarella,

Nancy Robards Thompson and Allison Leigh.

I can't think of a better team of authors to work with on a continuity series.

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[*Chapter One*](#)

As Kieran Fortune Robinson stood with the other mourners at the Oakdale Cemetery, the Texas sky was a stunning shade of blue, the sun was bright and a cluster of birds sang from their perch in the nearby magnolia tree. But the spring day was dismal, the mood somber.

Three weeks ago, Zach Lawson had been thrown from a horse and suffered a skull fracture. As soon as Kieran had gotten word of the tragic accident, he'd rushed to the hospital to visit his best friend and to offer his support to Zach's parents.

"Only family is allowed to visit patients in the ICU," a nurse had said.

Zach's father had slipped an arm around Kieran and clutched him with a firm grip. "This is my second son."

In a way, that claim had been true. Sam and Sandra Lawson had treated Kieran as a family member ever since Zach had brought him home to visit during their first winter break at college. A born and bred city boy, Kieran had actually enjoyed the time he'd spent at the Leaning L, even though his busy schedule hadn't allowed for as many visits as he might have liked.

Oddly enough, he and Zach hadn't had much in common, other than a quick wit, a love of sports and a competitive spirit. They'd met on the football field their first semester at Texas A&M and had become fast friends. Other than that, they were as different as a cowboy and a techie could be.

Zach had been an only child, while Kieran had seven brothers and sisters, although that number seemed to be constantly growing, thanks to his dad's years of philandering and the illegitimate half siblings who'd increased their ranks.

And there lay their biggest difference of all—the men who'd fathered them. Sam Lawson was a rancher of modest means who owned a small spread outside Austin. On the other hand, Gerald Robinson, a quirky tech mogul who'd once been known as Jerome Fortune, had built a computer company into a billion-dollar corporation.

After graduation, Kieran had become a computer analyst and eventually the vice president of Robinson Tech. On the outside, it might appear that he'd done his family proud, and in a sense he probably had. But to this day, he felt a lot closer to Zach's parents than he did his own. And that was why Sam's announcement to the hospital staff that Kieran was his second son had touched his heart in a warm and unexpected way.

But nothing had prepared him for what he saw when he approached Zach's bedside, where his once vibrant buddy lay unconscious and hooked up to a beeping ventilator.

If there'd been a chance that Zach might pull through, that he'd be able to go home to Rosabelle, his three-year-old daughter, they all would have found their hospital vigil easier to handle. Still, Sam and Sandra clung to each other and held on to their faith, praying for a miracle that never came.

Zach had remained on life support for two long weeks before his parents finally accepted the fact that their only child, a son born to them late in life, was virtually dead. And now here they were, at the cemetery, saying their final goodbyes.

Kieran stood beside Zach's parents, trying to be the second son Sam had claimed he was and to offer his support. But he wasn't sure how much help he could be. Sandra and Sam, both in their seventies and not in the best of health, were overcome by grief.

What really tugged at Kieran's heart, though, was three-year-old Rosabelle, who held her grandma's hand, her little brow creased as if she was trying to understand all that was happening around her. But how could she, when even Kieran found it so unsettling, so unfair?

A monarch butterfly fluttered by, weaving through the mourners as if trying to lift the spirits of those who'd come to pay their last respects.

After the pastor of the community church finished the eulogy, little Rosie pulled her hand away from her grandma's and reached for Kieran, silently requesting that he pick her up.

He did so, holding her close, wishing what little comfort he had to give would help.

"My daddy went to heaven," Rosie whispered.

"I know, honey." Kieran rested his head against hers, catching the light fragrance of her baby shampoo.

"I'm gonna miss him," Rosie added.

"Me, too." Zach's death was a huge loss that would affect them all.

"Look!" Rosie pointed to the orange-and-black butterfly that now landed on a spray of yellow roses. "It's a flutterby."

"I see it," he whispered, not bothering to correct her pronunciation. What did it matter anyway? He was just glad that she had something to hold her interest, to keep her from thinking about her loss, about not ever seeing her daddy again.

Kieran glanced through the crowd and spotted Dana Trevino, the woman Zach had been dating at the time of the accident. Her long, red hair was swept up into a tidy topknot, reminding him of a librarian. In that plain black dress, she looked like one, too.

A grad student and a research librarian at the Austin History Center, Dana wasn't anything like the women Kieran dated. Not that she wasn't attractive. She had a pretty face and a warm smile. At five-foot-five, she also had a willowy build, although she tended to hide it behind loose-fitting skirts and conservative blouses.

Still, Kieran had thought the cowboy and the librarian an odd match, although he suspected that Dana had been drawn to Zach's country charm and his Will Rogers style, which had given him a combination of wisdom, common sense and humor.

To be honest, Kieran wasn't sure what it was about Dana that had appealed to Zach. They'd never talked about it, but there must have been something special about her.

Still, for some reason he'd never thought their relationship would last. But who was he to judge? He never dated anyone longer than a couple of months, so he had no idea how to even define words like special or long-term.

As the stoic rep from the mortuary thanked everyone for coming, Sandra Lawson turned to Kieran. "Will you come back to the house with us? Sam and I want to talk to you." Her eyes filled with tears, and her bottom lip wobbled.

"Of course," Kieran said, although he suddenly felt compelled to pass little Rosie to the couple, hurry to his Mercedes and get the hell out of Dodge. But like Sam had told the hospital staff, Kieran was their second son.

Thankfully, he seemed to have already shed most of his tears in the hospital. By the time Zach's organs had been donated to give others a chance at a new and better life, Kieran's grief had seemed to subside.

He stole a peek at Dana, who appeared as prim and proper as ever. She clutched a wadded up tissue in her hands, but no tears filled her eyes.

Had she, like Kieran, done most of her crying in the weeks and days before the funeral? Had she also begun to let go of Zach and move on?

“This concludes the service,” the mortuary guy said. “The family would like to invite you all back to their house for refreshments.”

Kieran wasn't the least bit hungry, but he could sure use a drink—a stiff one.

Sam slipped his arm around his wife. “You about ready to go, honey?”

Sandra merely nodded, then blotted her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

“Can I ride with Uncle Kieran?” Rosie asked.

“Your car seat is already in our car,” Sandra said. “It'll be easier if you ride with us.”

Sam placed a hand on Kieran's shoulder. “You're coming home with us, aren't you, son?”

“Yes, of course. I'll meet you there.” Kieran brushed a kiss on the little girl's cheek then passed her to her grandparents.

As Sam, Sandra and Rosie walked away from the graveside, Kieran remained a little longer so he could say a final goodbye to his best friend.

The monarch butterfly was still fluttering about. When it landed on top of the spray of red and white carnations covering the casket, he glanced to his right, where Dana continued to stand.

“Are you going to the Lawsons' house?” he asked.

“Yes, I promised them I'd be there.”

It wasn't a surprise that Sandra and Sam wanted—or needed—to hang on to everyone and everything that reminded them of Zach.

“How've you been?” Kieran asked. “Are you holding up okay?”

Dana turned and caught his eye, a slight smile chasing the grief from her face. “I'm doing all right. After the last two weeks...well, that was tough.”

To say the least.

“I feel so bad for Rosie,” she added.

“So do I.”

“At least she and Zach had been living with Sam and Sandra. That should help her adjust to not having her daddy anymore.”

Kieran sure hoped Dana was right. Again he studied the redhead, noting a simple, wholesome beauty he'd missed seeing before. She'd implied that she was adjusting to her own loss, but he wondered if that was really true or the kind of thing people said when they struggled for the right words.

“Sandra mentioned that you'd been at the ranch with them earlier today,” he said.

“I went to help some of the ladies from her Bible study prepare food for after the service.”

“Do you need a ride back?”

“No, I have my car.” She nodded toward a white Honda Civic parked about ten feet from his black Mercedes. It wasn't a fancy car or the latest model, but it was clean and recently polished, the wheel rims shiny.

Funny what things a guy noticed at times like these.

“Then I'll see you back at the house,” Kieran said.

Dana smiled—not a smile that was joyful and happy, but one that was filled with compassion. Was that what Zach had seen in her?

Actually, standing there with her now, the afternoon sun casting a glow on those auburn strands of hair, Kieran noted that she had a natural beauty that was almost alluring. But he shook off the inappropriate assessment as quickly as it awakened. Dana had been Zach's girlfriend, and even though he was gone now, Kieran wasn't about to overstep the bounds of male brotherhood.

As he got into his car, he made up his mind to do whatever he could to help the Lawsons move on with their lives.

Growing up in the Robinson family, Kieran had learned that money could fix just about anything. But all the gold in Fort Knox wasn't going to make things better or easier for him. Not when so many different feelings were in play and he'd always made it a point to avoid any touchy-feely stuff.

Still, while he might fall miserably short in his attempt to offer Zach's family his emotional support, he'd do his best.

He owed his best friend that much.

* * *

Dana had managed to hold back her tears during the funeral. But once she climbed into her car, her eyes welled.

She reached into the pocket of her skirt, pulled out the wadded tissue she'd stashed there earlier and blotted her tears.

Would she make it through the day without breaking down? She certainly hoped so. She wanted to stay strong for Sam and Sandra.

How are you holding up? Kieran had asked just minutes before. It seemed to be a regular question she'd been faced with...at school, at work and, most recently, at the Leaning L while she'd helped the church women prepare the food for today.

She really didn't blame people for assuming she'd been devastated by Zach's loss. She mourned him, of course, but she wasn't the grieving fiancée they thought her to be. They'd dated six months, but in fact, she wasn't sure she'd even been his girlfriend. She'd certainly found him attractive, and she'd adored his sense of humor. But it was his family life that had appealed to her the most. That was the reason she'd continued to date Zach after she realized he wasn't Mr. Right. She suspected Zach had known it, too.

His parents had created a warm, loving home on the Leaning L, and they'd always made her feel welcome. In addition, she adored Rosie, Zach's sweet, precocious daughter. Since her mother had signed over full custody to Zach right after birth, that pretty much made Rosie an orphan, just like Dana was.

When Dana was twelve, she'd lost her parents in an accident. Without anyone who was either willing or able to step up and take her in, she'd gone into foster care.

Fortunately, Rosie wouldn't have to worry about that. The Lawsons had always been a big part of her life, so it wasn't like she'd be completely uprooted and shipped off to another home to live with people she didn't know. Dana took great comfort in that.

When she arrived at the Leaning L, she parked next to Kieran's Mercedes. It was only natural that he'd be invited back to the Lawsons' house. He and Zach had been the best of friends, even though the two men had been so dissimilar—and not just when it came to the clothes they wore, the music they liked or the social circles in which they ran.

Still, they'd been very close.

Much closer than Dana and Zach had ever been.

Before Dana could climb the wooden porch steps and let herself in, Kieran swung open the front door as if he'd been waiting just for her. Then again, she'd been right behind him.

"Come on in." He stepped aside so she could enter the small, cozy house that had always reminded her of the kind of place a ranching family might have lived in during the 1950s, with its rough-hewn paneling, the overstuffed, floral furniture with crocheted doilies over the armrests and a rag rug on the floor. It was all very Norman Rockwell. The only thing missing was a big, boxy television with a small black-and-white screen.

Maybe that was another reason she liked this house—well, the vintage feel as well as the warm welcome she'd always received.

As she crossed the threshold, she caught a whiff of Kieran's cologne, something musky and woody, reminding her of a lazy summer day in the mountains. Something undoubtedly expensive and sold at only the finest stores in Austin.

"Sandra took Rosie to her room for a nap," Kieran said. "The poor kid could hardly hold her eyes open."

Dana acknowledged the comment with a nod, then scanned the living room, where the pastor of the church and several close family friends had gathered. They were seated on the sofa as well as on some of the chairs that had been moved from around the linen-covered table in the adjoining dining room.

The women from Sandra's Bible study and Dana had arrived early this morning and prepared the food, which would be set out as a buffet. Before leaving for the service, they'd stacked blue paper plates, white napkins and plasticware at one edge of the rectangular table, and placed a bouquet of spring flowers in the center.

Sam greeted Dana with a hug. "I'm glad you're here. Sandra and I wanted to talk to you as well as to Kieran. As soon as Rosie is sound asleep, we can go into the kitchen, where it'll be more private."

"Of course." Dana had no idea what they intended to say, but she was glad to be included in what seemed like a family discussion. She shot a glance at Kieran. Their gazes locked, their sympathies clearly united.

Moments later, Sandra entered the living room, her eyes dry, yet still red-rimmed. "Rosie's finally taking a nap."

Sam nodded, then lifted his right hand, directing them to the doorway that led to the kitchen. "Shall we?"

When they entered the small, cozy kitchen, the counters lined with cakes and platters of cookies, memories slammed into Dana, causing her to pause in the middle of the room. One mental snapshot after another struck, the first one reminding her of the cold, rainy night last winter when she'd joined Sam, Sandra and Zach to play cards. The memories of times spent in this very room clicked in her mind as if she were watching the scenes on an old nickelodeon—the morning she'd helped Sandra bake cakes for the church bazaar, the afternoon she'd washed a bushel of apples that had come from trees in the family orchard, then learned how to make and can applesauce.

This particular kitchen, with its light green walls, white Formica countertops and floral printed café curtains, was also where Dana had last seen Zach alive and well. Sandra had invited her to dinner just three days before the accident. They'd had pot roast, carrots, mashed potatoes and gravy...

Dana shook off the memories before she fell apart and cried for all she'd lost. She'd loved her visits to the Leaning L, but now that Zach was gone, she might never be invited back.

Sandra, always the hostess, asked, "Would anyone like coffee?"

"Let me serve it for you," Dana said.

Normally, Zach's mom would have declined the help, but this wasn't a normal day. She took a seat at the antique oak table, practically collapsing in her chair.

Dana placed cream and sugar on the table, then filled several mugs with hot coffee and passed them out to Sam, Sandra, Zach and the pastor of the Oakdale Community Church, who'd been asked to join them in the kitchen. Since Dana preferred tea, she passed on having anything at all to drink.

"Last night," Sam began, "we... That is, me and...my wife..." His voice wobbled and cracked. He cleared his throat, paused a beat, then looked to the minister.

Pastor Mark nodded, then pushed his mug aside. "Sam and Sandra read over Zach's will last night, and they have a concern as well as a heartfelt request."

Dana still had no clue where this conversation was heading, but it was obviously in a direction the older couple needed their minister's help expressing.

Pastor Mark Wilder, who'd served his congregation for the last thirty years, scooted back his chair and got to his feet as if he was preparing for a sermon. "Sam and Sandra believe that Zach's

wishes should be followed, but they also know he hadn't expected to die so suddenly or so young. And their biggest concern is for little Rosabelle."

Dana had no doubt about that. The couple adored their precious granddaughter.

"As you know," the pastor continued, "Rosie and Zach have been living with Sam and Sandra for her entire life. So the Leaning L is the only home she's ever known."

Where was he going with this? Dana assumed Rosie would stay with her grandparents. After all, she'd just lost her father. Who else would take her? Where else would she live?

Oh, no. Surely her mother hadn't resurfaced. From what Zach had told Dana, her pregnancy had been unexpected and unwanted. She'd planned to give her baby up for adoption, but Zach had refused to sign the paperwork, insisting that he wanted sole custody of their child. The woman had agreed and then walked away without a backward glance the moment she'd been discharged from the hospital.

Dana stole a glance at Kieran. The expression of concern he'd been wearing moments earlier had morphed into one that almost appeared panicked.

It wasn't until Pastor Mark completed his speech that Dana realized why.

"Zach gave custody of his daughter to Kieran."

Chapter Two

Kieran hadn't been sure the Lawsons had even known about the existence of Zach's will, but he had. He'd also been well aware of Zach's wishes when it came to who would raise Rosabelle. He just hadn't planned to bring it up, especially now.

When Zach had first mentioned his visit to the attorney and had asked Kieran to be Rosie's guardian if the unthinkable should happen, Kieran had laughed. Sure, he'd been honored to be chosen, but he'd known there had to be someone much better qualified than him to finish raising Zach's daughter.

What did Kieran know about kids—or parenting?

He didn't have any insecurity about his competence to do anything else. As one of the legitimate offspring of Gerald Robinson, aka Jerome Fortune Robinson, he was certainly capable of taking care of her financially. He was a millionaire many times over and a damn good computer analyst. He was also good at making and investing money. But he was a man who knew his strengths, and parenting was not one of them. Hell, he certainly hadn't had the perfect example of either a mother or father while he grew up. And he'd told Zach as much.

But Zach had disagreed. "If something ever happens to me," he'd said, "there's no one else I'd trust to take care of my daughter."

Kieran would have mentioned Rosie's biological mother, but the flighty brunette was completely out of the picture. She'd gladly signed over full custody of the newborn to Zach and had never looked back.

"It's just a formality," Zach had said. "We'll both be dancing at Rosie's wedding."

At the time, Kieran had believed that was probably true, so he'd reluctantly agreed. But obviously neither of them had foreseen the accident that would change everything.

Kieran, who actually liked having Rosie refer to him as her uncle and had no problem assuming that easy role, blew out a ragged sigh as he looked at the people around the room. "I knew about Zach's will, but neither of us expected him to die so soon."

"Sandra and Sam are hoping that you will hold off on exercising your right to custody," Pastor Mark said. "At least while Rosie is so young, and the loss of her father is so recent."

Kieran hadn't planned to assume custody, although the Lawsons probably didn't know that. And he wanted to put their minds at ease as well as his own. "If Zach could somehow talk to us right now, he'd agree that Rosie would be better off living with the two of you. Your bond with her is the strongest, now that he's gone. We can discuss the legalities later. But in the meantime, if there's anything she needs, anything at all, just say the word. I'll make sure she gets it."

Sandra's eyes overflowed with tears. "I'm so glad you feel that way, Kieran. We love that little girl with all our hearts, and she's..." The grieving mother and grandmother sniffled. "She's all we have left."

It might sound as if he'd made a huge concession, yet even though he adored the sweet little girl, he was actually relieved that she was going to continue living with Sam and Sandra on the Leaning L.

"We'd also like both of you to remain a part of her life," Sam added, looking first at Kieran, then at Dana. "Especially over the next few months, while her loss is so fresh."

"Of course," Dana said. "I'd hoped you'd allow me to continue visiting her—and you, too."

"Honey," Sandra said, gazing at her son's girlfriend, "over the past six months you've become the daughter I never had. I've enjoyed having you around, even if it wasn't as often as I'd have liked." Then she looked at Kieran. "I hope you'll come by regularly, too. I know your job keeps you busy, but..." A tear slipped down her cheek, and she paused to wipe it away.

But she didn't need to finish her words. Kieran knew what she meant. He'd make it a point to come around more often than he had in the past. "I'll never be too busy for Rosie or the two of you."

"See?" The pastor placed a hand on Sam's shoulder. "I told you all we had to do was pray about it, and everything would work out."

Kieran wasn't very religious, but he appreciated them putting in a good word with the man upstairs. As far as he was concerned, this was working out for the best—for everyone involved.

"Why don't you go back into the living room?" he suggested to the grieving couple. "I'll help Dana get the food set out."

"That's so sweet of you," Sandra said as she got to her feet. "I feel funny not being the hostess, but..."

Dana slipped her arms around Zach's mom. "I know you do, Sandy, but let me take over your duties today. Besides, I have help." When she glanced at Kieran, he nodded his agreement.

"Come on," the minister said. "It's time for people to show you their love for a change, just as you've done for them in the past."

After the Lawsons and Pastor Mark returned to the living room, leaving Kieran and Dana alone, Dana said, "I hadn't realized Zach gave you custody."

"I'm not entirely sure why he did."

"He considered you his best friend."

Kieran had felt the same way about Zach, but still, what had he been thinking when he'd asked Kieran to step up and parent Rosie? He was a diehard bachelor and not the least bit family-oriented.

Sure, he loved and respected his siblings. But seriously? He would make a lousy parent.

"Just so you know," Dana said, "I agree that it's in Rosie's best interests to stay on the ranch with Sam and Sandra, but you need to consider something."

Kieran never made rash decisions. What did she think he'd failed to think about?

"Sam has heart trouble, and Sandra's health isn't very good. I'm not sure how long either of them will have the stamina to keep up with an active three-year-old."

She had a point, and while he had no idea what the future held, he was glad the couple wanted Rosie—and that they would be able to raise her, at least for the time being.

As Dana moved about the kitchen, pulling salads from the refrigerator and serving spoons from the drawer, Kieran watched her work. He was drawn to her hair, especially since the color reminded him of autumn. She usually wore those long red locks pulled into a topknot or woven into a twist held up with a clip. He'd seen her with it hanging down once, and it nearly reached the small of her back.

He'd always thought of redheads as being a little feisty, but Dana was more serious and a little old-fashioned. She was also bright and the studious type. At least, he'd always had that assumption because she was a graduate student and a researcher at the history center, so it was an easy jump to make. Either way, she wasn't the type of woman Kieran dated.

When Dana turned away from the kitchen counter with a bowl of macaroni salad in her hand, she caught Kieran studying her. For a moment, something stirred between them—a spark of some kind. Maybe a flash of chemistry. He'd dated enough to know when an attraction was mutual.

But if he was right about what he'd sensed, she seemed to get over it a lot faster than he did.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No." Hell, no. He'd merely zoned out, caught up in a momentary fixation. He shook off his wild thought. "I... I just wasn't sure what to do next."

"Would you take this salad, along with the others on the counter, to the dining room and place them on the table?"

"Sure." Glad to have a job to do, one that would take him out of the kitchen and away from her, he took the bowl and did as instructed.

What was the matter with him? Even if he did find Dana attractive and interesting, she'd dated Zach. It wouldn't be right to think of her in a...well, in a romantic way.

So he'd better get his mind on either someone or something else. Quickly.

* * *

Dana reached into the drawer nearest the oven and pulled out a couple of pot holders. But she couldn't help glancing over her shoulder to see Kieran carry the first of the salads out to the dining room. The man might be well-dressed and gorgeous, but he was completely out of place in a kitchen, let alone one that was built in the 1950s.

Even when he wasn't dressed in a stylish gray Armani suit, the corporate vice president seemed to be cut from a different bolt of cloth than Zach. Kieran was made from expensive silk, like the fancy yellow tie he was wearing, while Zach had been made out of rugged and durable denim.

It was impossible not to compare the two men, to note their good qualities or admire their close friendship, although now that Zach was gone, there was no longer any reason to.

Dana returned to her work and pulled a ham from the oven, leaving two casseroles still baking inside.

When footsteps sounded in the open doorway, the kind made by Italian loafers and not cowboy boots, she turned to see Kieran return, his hands now empty.

"What next?" he asked.

She put the hot pan on the stove top, then set the pot holders on the counter. "Would you mind slicing this ham?"

"No, not at all."

"There's a serving platter in the small cupboard over the fridge. There might also be a couple of trivets in there. I'll need them to hold the casserole dishes."

His brow knit together. "What's a trivet?"

She couldn't help but smile. He'd probably been raised with a housekeeper, a cook and a nanny, so it was no wonder that he didn't know his way around a kitchen. But she had to give him credit for trying to help and to fit in. "A trivet is a small little rack that keeps a hot dish from resting directly on the table."

"Got it." He brushed past her, leaving a soft trail of that mountain fresh scent in his wake.

She couldn't help taking a second whiff, appreciating his unique fragrance. But that's the only arousing awareness she'd allow herself. She shook off her momentary attraction, took the pot holders in hand again, removed the two casseroles from the oven and placed them on the stovetop.

After Kieran set the platter on the counter, he removed the trivets from the cupboard. "Why don't I put these on the table so they'll be ready for those hot dishes?"

She thanked him. Then, in spite of her resolve to keep her mind off him and on her work, she watched him go. She'd never been interested in men like Kieran, although she had to admit he was more than attractive. At six feet tall, with light brown hair and blue eyes, he was a killer combination of bright and sexy. Most women wouldn't think twice about setting their sights on him, but Dana

was more the down-home type. And she knew most men considered her to be a little too quirky to notice her in a romantic way.

In addition to the obvious, Kieran was also a member of the renowned Fortune family. And Dana had no family at all.

Of course, that didn't mean she'd been left destitute. Before their fatal accident, her parents had set up a trust fund for her, and last year, on her twenty-fifth birthday, the money had been released. She'd used most of it to purchase and to renovate a run-down house in Hyde Park that was built in the 1940s.

Still, even though she was a property owner and had a small nest egg, she wouldn't fit into the social circles in which Kieran and his family ran—nor would she even want to try. Not when her idea of a perfect afternoon was a trip to an antiques shop, where she scoured vintage photos, or a lazy walk through flea markets, where she searched for hidden treasures.

No, she'd feel completely uncomfortable hobnobbing with Kieran and his rich family and friends. Heck, she sometimes felt out of place in 2017 Austin, which was one reason she loved walking in her quaint, historical neighborhood.

So why complicate matters when she liked her life just the way it was?

"I'm finished," Kieran said, as he reentered the kitchen yet again.

Dana was finished, too. Not just getting the food ready, but comparing the different lives she and Kieran lived. Besides, even if she ever did consider going out with a man like him, it would never work out. From what she'd heard, Kieran dated a lot of gorgeous women, and Dana would never agree to be one of many.

She had a good life—and a busy one. She wasn't lacking anything other than a family of her own. And now that the Lawsons had invited her to come around more often, she'd be able to maintain and nurture the relationship she had with them.

It might not be the perfect setup for the holidays and other lonely days, but it was close enough to be a darn good substitute.

* * *

The call Kieran had been dreading came only a week after Zach's funeral, while he was in his office at Robinson Tech.

"Sam's in the hospital with angina," Sandra said. "It's pretty serious this time, and I'm not sure how long he'll need to stay. They're talking about surgery."

"Is there anything I can do?" Kieran asked.

"I have a babysitter at the house with Rosie. The granddaughter of a neighbor. The girl is good with kids and responsible, but she's only fourteen. She'll be able to handle things for a while, but I have no idea how long I'll need to be here with Sam."

"Don't worry about Rosie," Kieran told her, even though his own concern about the child's well-being, especially with him in charge of her, was mounting by the second. "I'll pick her up and relieve the sitter. But if you don't mind, since I'm not too far from the hospital, I'll stop by to see you and check on Sam first."

"Thanks, Kieran. He'd love to see you. He's on the third floor, in room 312."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes—maybe less."

Sandra paused a beat then asked, "What would we do without you, Kieran?"

He could ask her a similar question. How in the world will Rosie be able to get by without you?

"I'm happy to help out whenever and however I can," he responded.

"Bless you, honey. I'll see you soon."

After disconnecting the line, Kieran told his assistant to cancel an afternoon appointment and to reschedule tomorrow's board meeting. Then he left his high-rise office and drove to the hospital. The direct route he took reminded him of the times in weeks past that he'd traveled that same stretch

of road on his way to see Zach in the ICU, hoping and praying that his friend would have made some improvement during the night, only to find that he hadn't.

Kieran felt that same cold and heavy weight of dread and fear now.

Sam has heart trouble, Dana had said last week, and Sandra's health isn't very good. I'm not sure how long either of them will have the stamina to keep up with an active three-year-old.

He'd known Dana was right, but he'd hoped the older couple would be able to keep Rosie for another few years—maybe even until she graduated from high school.

Was it already time for him to step in and take full custody of Rosie, as unready as he might be?

Maybe Zach's parents only needed him to provide temporary help and babysitting duties. Once Sam was feeling better and returned home, Sandra would want Rosie back again. Then Kieran's life would go back to normal. He convinced himself that was the case.

It would only be for a few days. He could handle child care duties for that long.

"I got this," he said out loud, hoping the sound of his voice would provide all the assurance he needed.

Yet those words, interlaced with the doubt that plagued him, were still ringing in his ears when he entered the hospital lobby. As he started toward the elevator, he spotted Dana coming out of the gift shop holding a yellow ceramic vase filled with brightly colored flowers.

She wore a simple black skirt and a white sleeveless blouse. Once again, her hair was pulled up in a topknot, with two turquoise chopsticks—or were they knitting needles?—poking out of it.

When she saw him, she broke into a smile that dimpled her cheeks. Again, he was struck by her simple beauty, something he'd failed to notice when she'd been with Zach.

"I take it Sandra called you," he said.

"Yes, she did."

"I guess this is what you meant when you told me you were concerned about Sam's health."

Dana blew out a soft sigh. "Yes, but I was hopeful that the doctors had his heart issues controlled by medication."

Kieran had hoped that was the case, too.

"I just stopped by for a quick visit," he said. "I told Sandra I'd relieve the babysitter and keep Rosie for a few days. Once Sam is released and ready to go home, I can take her back to the ranch."

"You may need to keep her longer than that. The doctor mentioned surgery, and those 'few days' could end up being more long-term."

"Yes, I know." Kieran was trying to prepare himself for that possibility. He glanced down at his leather loafers, then back into Dana's eyes. There was no need to lie or to pretend that he was ready to be a parent. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little nervous about being Rosie's guardian. As much as I adore her, I've never spent much time with kids."

"I can understand that, but you'll do fine. Zach wouldn't have chosen you to step up if he'd had any concern about that." Dana's eyes, a stunning shade of blue, filled with something akin to sympathy. "Not that I'm an expert on child rearing," she added.

"That's just it," Kieran said. "I'm great at giving piggyback rides and playing hide-and-seek for an hour or two. But being her legal guardian means choosing just the right preschool and knowing when she needs to see a pediatrician." Damn. Just the thought of doctor visits brought on a whole new worry that filled his gut with dread. "What do I do if she gets a fever or a tummy ache?"

And then there was the whole idea of shots, immunizations and making her take liquid medicine that tasted nasty.

Worry and fear must have altered his expression because Dana said, "You'll do just fine."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

She placed a soft and gentle hand on his shoulder, which sent a rush of warmth to his gut, chasing a bit of his fear away. "And remember, it's just a few days at this point. There's no need to borrow trouble."

“That’s easy for you to say.” He offered her a halfhearted grin, although he really did appreciate her support.

“If it’ll make you feel better,” she said, “I’d be happy to stop by your place so I can visit Rosie and give you a break at the same time.”

Kieran would take all the help he could get, even if it was just an occasional visit. “I’d appreciate that, Dana. Before you leave I’ll give my business card, along with my address.”

The hand that had been resting on his shoulder slid down to his back, giving it a rub that suggested she wanted to provide him with comfort and understanding. But her touch, the trail of her fingers, triggered a spark of heat he hadn’t expected. Nor did he have any idea what, if anything, to do about it.

“You’ll do fine,” she said.

God, he sure hoped she was right. But he couldn’t very well remain in the hospital lobby, talking to a woman who’d sent his thoughts scampering in an entirely wrong direction. So he nodded toward the elevator. “Are you ready to visit Sam?”

“Yes, let’s go.” Dana fell into step beside him, but they didn’t speak again until they reached the third floor.

As the doors opened up, Kieran said, “Here we are.”

They started down the corridor together, their shoes clicking and tapping on the tile floor. Still, they didn’t speak.

When they neared room 312, they spotted Sandra walking out the door and into the hall.

“How’s Sam doing?” Kieran asked her.

“About the same. The doctor has ruled out bypass surgery for the time being, and he’s responding to treatment. But Sam has a few other health issues they’d like to get stabilized before they discharge him. So it looks like he’ll be here for a while.”

“What about you?” Kieran asked. “How are you holding up through all of this?”

Sandra took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. “I’m a little tired, but I’m doing all right. My blood pressure is higher than usual, which is a little concerning. My doctor would like me to get some rest and stop worrying about Sam. But that’s not easy to do.”

Under the circumstances, Kieran didn’t suppose it would be. Not when Sandra had their granddaughter to worry about, too.

“I’ll plan on having Rosie indefinitely,” Kieran said. “Once Sam is feeling better, just say the word and I’ll bring her home.”

Sandra’s eyes filled with tears. What she couldn’t blink away, she dried with her index fingers. “As much as I hate to let Rosie go, especially when I fear it could end up being permanent, I really have my hands full with Sam right now.”

“I’ll take good care of her,” Kieran said. “And if it makes you feel better, Dana promised to help me.” He gave the attractive redhead a nudge.

Dana slipped her arm around Sandra and drew her close. “That’s right, Sandy. I know how difficult this must be for you, but don’t worry about anything or anyone except Sam—and yourself.”

“We’ll just be a phone call or a short drive away,” Kieran added.

“Thank you.” The older woman again swiped at her teary eyes. “That’s probably for the best.”

Kieran knew they’d made the right decision all the way around, although he still wasn’t sure about his capabilities as a guardian, let alone as a paternal role model. But he’d do his best by Rosie.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” he told Sandra, although his gut twisted at the thought of being on his own with Rosie.

But, hey. He’d just take it one day at a time.

“Sandy,” Dana said, “is there something I can do to help you? Do you want me to bring anything to you from the house? Or, if you give me a list, I can run errands or stop by the market and pick up groceries or whatever.”

“Since I don’t have to worry about being home with Rosie,” Sandra said, “I’d like to camp out here at the hospital for a while. So, yes. If you don’t mind, there are some things you can pick up from the house and a prescription that’s ready at the pharmacy.”

While the women continued to work out a game plan of sorts, Kieran looked up at the ceiling as if he could see through it and beyond, as if he could somehow connect with Zach and ask for his forgiveness. I’m sorry I lied to your mom. I have no idea how to provide for Rosie’s needs.

But he made Zach—and himself—a promise right then and there. He would do his best to provide everything Rosie needed—come hell or high water and damn the cost.

Chapter Three

Dana hadn’t planned to visit Kieran and Rosie until the weekend, but less than twenty-four hours after running into him at the hospital, she changed her mind.

He’d admitted to being nervous and uneasy about his ability to fill Zach’s shoes. In spite of the assurance he’d given Sandy, Dana suspected that he wasn’t feeling nearly as comfortable taking care of a three-year-old as he might want everyone to believe.

So after putting in a full day at the history center, she drove across town to the high-rise building in which Kieran lived. She and Zach had once attended a party here, where they’d hobnobbed with socialites, techies and corporate types.

They’d moved about the well-dressed group, holding their drinks in hand and making small talk. Zach might have appeared to be a simple cowboy, but his wit, humor and charm had carried him through the evening, and he’d fit right in. Not so with Dana.

Sure, everyone had been kind and gracious to her, even when the only things she could think to say had to do with a new exhibit at the history center. She’d smiled and nodded, as if all was right in her world, but she’d felt lost, like a street urchin on the snowy lanes of eighteenth-century London.

Okay, so it really wasn’t that bad. But she’d felt out of place among the rich and successful crowd.

And now, after parking across the street in the public lot next to a busy Starbucks, she began to have second thoughts about her surprise visit.

What had she been thinking? She shouldn’t just drop in uninvited. Maybe she should head to the popular coffee spot instead. She could purchase a venti green tea and call it a day.

Then again, Kieran had said to come “anytime.” She sat in her parked car, pondering her options.

What if he wasn’t home?

Maybe she should give him a call. She reached into her purse, pulled out the business card he’d given her yesterday and read the personal contact information he’d written on the backside. Then she dialed his cell.

He answered on the third ring, although his voice sounded a little...tired. Or was he stressed?

“Are you up for a visitor?” she asked.

“If the visitor is you—and if you’re talking about coming over now—I wouldn’t mind a bit.”

“Actually, I’m standing outside your building.”

“Then come on up. I’m on the tenth floor, number 1014. My condo is on the east side, just to the left of the elevator doors.”

“All right. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” She grabbed her purse and locked the car. Rather than jaywalk, she strode to the corner, waited for the green light and crossed the street to the impressive, curved building of glass and steel.

The doorman, a dapper, uniformed gentleman in his mid to late fifties, stood at the entrance. He must have been expecting her because he knew her name and greeted her with a smile. “Good afternoon, Ms. Trevino. Mr. Fortune said to send you right up.”

She thanked him, then headed to the elevators. Once inside, a flutter started in her stomach and continued to build on the ride up to Kieran's luxury condominium, reaching a peak by the time she rang the bell.

The door swung open almost immediately, but when she caught a look at the handsome man, who appeared more than a little haggard, her momentary nervousness dissipated.

His mussed hair suggested that he'd just woken up from a long winter's nap, although she suspected he'd been raking his fingers through it more often than usual. He wore a black T-shirt and a pair of gray gym shorts, but she doubted he'd been working out. At least, not in the usual way. And even though his current appearance wasn't the least bit stylish, nor was he as impeccably put together as she was used to seeing him, it didn't make him any less attractive.

"I'm glad you're here." He stepped aside for her to enter. "Come on in."

She might have complied, but it looked as if an entire toy store had exploded in his living room. In fact, there was so much clutter on the floor she could hardly take a step for fear of tripping over something.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Stuff I bought for Rosie."

Dana surveyed the results of his shopping spree—a blue-and-white doll house, a tiny pink kitchen setup along with plastic food items and a little red shopping cart. Puzzle pieces, crayons, books and a variety of stuffed animals littered the room.

Five different dolls of various hair color, skin tone and sizes were lined up on his dark leather sofa, each with a pink teacup in her lap.

"Where's Rosie?" Dana asked. "Or is she somehow lost in this mess?"

"She's been running on full throttle all day and finally went to sleep five minutes ago. But I have to tell you, I probably need a nap more than she does."

Dana furrowed her brow. It was after five o'clock. "Why'd you put her down for a nap this late in the day?"

"I didn't plan it that way. Every time I asked if she was sleepy, she told me no. Finally, she crashed on her own. I found her curled up on the floor in the guest room, next to her new toy box. I was afraid she'd wake up, so I covered her with a blanket and left her there."

Dana had no idea what to say. Kieran had admitted that he didn't know anything about kids, and she'd had no reason to doubt him. But she'd never expected anything like this, and she couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing." At least, not anything she wanted to actually say out loud. Poor Kieran looked as though he was ready to drop in his tracks, too. "Apparently, you've had a busy day."

He rolled his eyes. "You have no idea."

Dana continued to scan the room, just now noticing a pink motorized kiddie car parked in the dining area. Seriously? Kieran had purchased a big, outdoor plaything like that when he didn't even have a yard?

"This is mind-boggling," she said. "What'd you do? Take Rosie shopping and let her have free rein with your credit card?"

"No, I picked this out myself, along with some new clothes for her and a toddler bed. That's all in the guest room, which is where she'll sleep while she's here."

Apparently, Kieran had accepted the fact that Rosie's stay might not be temporary after all. "Did you purchase all of this today?"

"No, I bought it yesterday, before I picked her up from the sitter. I asked Karen, my assistant, to suggest a place I could find everything she might need, like toys, clothes and furniture. And Karen suggested Kids' World, which is supposed to be a popular place for parents to shop. I was able to get it all taken care of in less than an hour. The delivery guys brought it this morning."

“Talk about one-stop shopping.”

“Yeah, that was the idea. I didn’t have much time to get everything Rosie is going to need.”

Children needed more than just toys and games. The most important thing was love, and that wasn’t something Kieran could purchase.

Dana again scanned the clutter, unable to even guess how much all of this had cost him. For a woman who’d spent years in foster care, she couldn’t fathom the extravagance.

“This must have cost you a year’s salary,” she said. Well, maybe not his salary, but certainly that of a grad student and research librarian.

“I’ll admit, it wasn’t cheap. But that doesn’t matter. I just want Rosie to be happy while she’s here.”

Dana hated to criticize him for trying to do what he thought was best, but he needed to know that he’d wasted both his time and his money. “I hate to disappoint you, but Rosie probably would be just as happy with a picnic at the park, complete with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Or even a trip to the library for the preschool story hour, especially if she could also check out a few books and maybe a Disney DVD to bring home.”

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “I did get a few of these things on sale. And they also delivered the whole kit and caboodle for free.”

“And you think that means you got a bargain?” Dana laughed again. “I’m surprised the happy owner didn’t volunteer to carry it here on his back.”

“Okay, so maybe I overdid it a little.”

“You think?” Dana covered her mouth with her hand, hoping to stifle another laugh.

Kieran blew out a ragged sigh. “Okay, I probably blew it. But my heart was in the right place.”

She had to agree with that. The man was not only wealthy and successful, but apparently generous, too.

“Don’t just stand there,” Kieran said. “Come on in.” He moved aside the pink plastic shopping cart as well as the child-size kitchen, making a pathway for her. “Can I get you something to drink? I have every kind of fruit juice imaginable as well as Gatorade, punch and soda pop. Oh, there’s also chocolate milk. But if you’re up for something a little stronger, like I happen to be, you have your choice of beer and wine. I also have a full bar in the dining room.”

“Actually, wine sounds good to me.”

“You got it. What’s your preference? Red or white?”

“Whatever’s easiest.”

“I have a sauvignon blanc in the fridge.”

“Perfect.”

“Have a seat.” He directed her to the marble counter in the kitchen with a set of sleek black barstools. And she complied.

While Kieran uncorked the bottle, Dana scanned the interior of his home. She tried, in spite of the dolls and toys that littered the living room, to remember what his bachelor pad had looked like when she and Zach had attended his party.

The modern furnishings were both expensive and impressive. The artwork that adorned the walls and the sculptures that were displayed throughout also must have cost plenty, which made her suspect he’d hired a decorator.

What a contrast it was to her quaint little home, which she’d decorated herself, mostly with items she’d purchased at estate sales and antiques stores.

“There you go,” Kieran said, as he placed a glass of chilled wine in front of her.

“Thank you.” She took a long, appreciative sip and watched him move about the kitchen, with its state-of-the-art stainless-steel appliances that would please a master chef, and prepare a plate of crackers, cheese and grapes.

Did he usually fix dinner for a woman while they both enjoyed a glass of wine? Did he play soft, romantic music in the background?

Not that it mattered. But she had to admit she was curious about the women Kieran might bring home, the ones he found attractive. Did he prefer tall, leggy blondes? Maybe shapely and voluptuous brunettes?

Or how about quirky redheads?

She chased away that wacky thought as quickly as it crossed her mind. A man like Kieran Fortune wouldn't be the least bit interested in a woman like her. And while she found him more than a little appealing, he really wasn't her type, either. Still, she was intrigued by the handsome, dedicated bachelor who, according to Zach, claimed that he'd never settle down.

Yet here he was, apparently becoming a family man. How was that going to work out for him?

He removed a longneck bottle of Corona from the fridge, opened it and took a drink before sitting in the barstool next to hers.

"So tell me about you," he said, his gaze warm, his expression suggesting genuine interest.

She could understand that. Even though she'd dated his best friend for the past six months, Zach's priority in life was his daughter, which was fine with Dana. So when they'd dated, they'd stuck pretty close to the ranch or else they'd gone out for a hamburger and a movie. At that same time, Kieran had been working on a special project for Robinson Tech, so Dana had only run into him a couple of times.

Still, his comment and his curiosity took her aback. She wasn't here to make any kind of personal connection with him. Sure, she sympathized with him and wanted to offer her help with Rosie. But this visit wasn't about her.

"There's not much to tell," she said. "I'm in grad school, although I took a break from my classes this semester to focus on a special project for the Austin History Center. I work there as a researcher."

"I knew that much," he said. "What do you do on your days off?"

She didn't usually share that sort of thing with people her age, since her favorite things to do might be considered unusual. But she decided there wasn't any reason to worry about what Kieran might think. "I enjoy taking long walks in my neighborhood, shopping in my favorite antiques store and going to estate sales."

"Seriously?"

See? He was no different from anyone else.

"Yes," she admitted. "I bought a house in Hyde Park and like to find interesting things to decorate it the way it might have looked back in 1948, when it was built."

He studied her a moment, as if still trying to decide whether she was pulling his leg, then smiled. "I'd like to see your place someday."

Now she was the one to wonder if he was being sincere or just being polite and making small talk. But she shrugged it off and said, "I'd be happy to show it to you. I'm proud of the way it's all coming together."

"Do you own the house?" he asked. "Or are you renting?"

Was he wondering if she could afford to buy a place of her own?

She supposed he'd have no reason to ask, other than plain curiosity, so she leveled with him. "I purchased a two-bedroom fixer-upper about six months ago with the idea of flipping it, but the renovations took a while and were a lot of work. So now that it's done, I'd like to enjoy the fruits of my labor for a while."

"Are you going to keep it, then?"

"No, within the next six months, I'll sell it and buy another in the same neighborhood."

He took another drink of beer and eyed her carefully. "I'm impressed."

With her?

Or with the completed renovation project?

“Now I’d really like to see it,” he added.

Okay, so it had been the work she’d done on the house that had surprised and intrigued him.

“You’re more than welcome to stop by anytime,” she said. “It’s not as classy, modern or impressive as your place, but it’s warm and appealing to me.” And to be honest, even though she’d never admit it to anyone else, she was also proud of the house since she’d done most of the work herself.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” he asked, a smile lighting his blue eyes.

She’d never been especially comfortable talking about herself or blowing her own horn, so she steered the conversation back to a topic that would suit them both better. “I hope you’ll bring Rosie when you come.”

“Of course.”

“And speaking of Rosie, have you hired a nanny or housekeeper yet?”

“No, and I’d rather not—if I don’t have to. She attends preschool three days a week, so I’ll go to the office then. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I’ll work from home.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

“I hope so.” He glanced past her, his gaze landing on the toys, dolls and games cluttering the living area. “But I’m probably going to need my cleaning lady to come more often than once a week. Who would have guessed a child could wreak so much havoc?”

As wild and wacky as she’d found Kieran’s overzealous attempt to provide for little Rosie, her heart went out to the poor man.

“You know,” she said, “I was serious when I offered to help out whenever I can.”

“Don’t be surprised when I take you up on that offer.” He flashed a dazzling smile that set off a flutter in her tummy again. But this time, the bevy of butterflies wasn’t caused by nervousness. Instead, it was due to sheer anticipation.

Too bad she couldn’t take back her offer to assist him with Rosie. Even the slightest thought of striking up a friendship—let alone a romance—with a man like Kieran Fortune was out of line.

And bound to end in disappointment.

* * *

Working from home two days a week wasn’t the best situation, but as the vice president of Robinson Tech, Kieran could make his own schedule, so it was certainly doable. Besides, he’d promised Zach he would take care of his little girl, and he wasn’t about to farm out the job.

Unfortunately, his work-from-home plan didn’t last long. Being productive while having a preschooler underfoot was next to impossible. For some reason, he’d thought that Rosie would be able to play quietly and entertain herself, but he’d been wrong about that.

He’d also thought that, after practically buying out the toy section at Kids’ World, she’d have enough to keep her busy until kindergarten. But that wasn’t the case, either.

She might start out working on a puzzle or skimming the pictures in a book, but she got bored easily and wanted him to play with her. He’d put her off as often as he could, but before he knew it, he was the one doing the entertaining. The only time she sat still and let him work without interruption was when he put on a DVD for her, but he couldn’t very well do that from morning until night.

Now, as he prepared a spreadsheet for tomorrow’s board meeting, she again walked up to him and tugged on his sleeve. “Uncle Kieran?”

“Yes, honey?” He tore his gaze from the sales numbers and looked at the cute little imp, who held a toy medical bag in her hand.

Early this morning, he’d combed her hair and pulled her blond locks into an uneven and messy ponytail. But no matter how hard he’d tried, he hadn’t been able to get the rubber band on evenly. And the red bow she’d insisted on wearing only served to point out how lopsided it was. Still, she was a cute kid, with big green eyes and thick dark lashes.

“Will you play with me?” she asked. “I’ll be the doctor, and you can be sick.”

“I’m pretty busy right now,” he said. “Can’t you find something else to do?”

Her lips curled into a pout, then she brightened. “I could make pizza and hamburgers for your dinner.”

“That sounds great.” Especially if her return to the play kitchen in the living room would buy him another few minutes to finish his spreadsheet.

As she scampered off, he glanced at the time on his laptop. Weren’t kids supposed to take afternoon naps? Dana said they did, but it looked as if Rosie hadn’t gotten that memo.

As much as Kieran wanted to handle things on his own, he realized that wasn’t going to work. His first thought was to ask one of his brothers or sisters to help out, but Rosie would probably be more comfortable with a woman.

The only problem was, Rachel lived in Horseback Hollow. Zoe was in charge of brand management for Robinson Computers, overseeing the company’s presence on social media, plus organizing events to raise the company’s profile. And if that wasn’t enough to keep her occupied, she was happily married to Joaquin Mendoza, who took up any free time she might have.

Sophie worked as an assistant HR director at Robinson Tech, which kept her busy. She was also all starry-eyed these days, thanks to her recent engagement to Mason Montgomery. And Olivia, who was still single, was a computer programmer at the company. Clearly, his sisters all had lives of their own, so he couldn’t ask any of them.

And even if they did have the time, they’d all been a little skeptical of his ability to be a father. So there was no way he’d reveal that he was struggling. Instead, he’d prove them wrong, even if it killed him.

At the sound of the battery-operated motor of the little car, Kieran swore under his breath. If Rosie ran it into the dining room table leg one more time...

Oh, hell. Why wait until then? As soon as she took a nap—if she ever did—he’d call the doorman and ask him to get rid of it, even if that meant putting it out on the curb with a sign saying: Free to a Good Home.

A loud thump sounded from the dining area, which meant Rosie had crashed into the table again. What in the world made him think he could handle child rearing on his own?

I’ll help any way I can, Dana had said. And she’d seemed sincere.

Kieran whipped out his cell phone, ready to call her right now and take her up on that offer.

* * *

Of all the places Dana could have imagined having dinner on a Tuesday evening, Cowboy Fred’s Funhouse and Pizza Emporium wasn’t one of them. But when Kieran called to invite her to join him and Rosie for an early dinner, he’d sounded a little frazzled. And when he’d admitted that he wanted an adult to talk to, she’d agreed. Then she’d hurried home to shut off her Crock-Pot, in which she’d placed a small roast before leaving for work this morning. Once she’d placed the meat in the fridge, she’d changed her clothes.

She’d been a little flattered by Kieran’s invitation until she realized there was no way he’d ever want to meet a date at one of the most popular kids’ eateries in Austin. Still, she’d applied lipstick and hurried to meet him.

She found him standing out in front of Cowboy Fred’s, holding Rosie’s hand. He was dressed more casually than usual in a pair of black jeans and a maroon-and-white golf shirt bearing a Texas A&M logo.

When Rosie, who wore a pair of pink shorts and a white T-shirt with a princess graphic, spotted Dana, she burst into a happy grin and squealed, “Dannnnnnna!”

The girl’s happy reaction was heartwarming, but it was Kieran’s dazzling smile that set Dana’s pulse soaring at a wacky rate.

“Thanks for joining us,” he said, as he greeted Dana in front of the bright red door encircled with blinking theater lights. “I owe you.”

She winked at him, then studied little Rosie's lopsided ponytail, the red ribbon dangling unevenly and about to slide off.

"We've been cooped up all day," Kieran said, "so we both needed to get out. But next time, we'll invite you to have grilled steaks at my house."

Next time? So he'd be calling her again and asking her to join him, only next time at his place? Now, that was an interesting thought.

He grabbed the brass handle and opened the red door for her and Rosie to enter. When the child dashed inside and waited for a greeter dressed in a cowboy costume to stamp her hand, Dana followed, dazed by the rows of mechanical ponies and cars, by the huge room filled with video games.

The flashing lights and the electronic bleeps made her think of a kiddie casino. Wow. This place was wild. And loud. Now she knew what Kieran meant about "owing her."

"Ma'am," the cowboy said, "I'll need to stamp your hand, too. Yours, too, sir. Each child's number needs to match the adults' who brought her."

"Uncle Kieran," Rosie asked, "can I please go play on the climb-y thing?"

"Sure, princess. You go ahead." He pointed to a blue bench that was stationed close to the structure. "As soon as we get our hands stamped, Dana and I will be sitting right there, waiting for you."

As the happy girl hurried off, Kieran turned to Dana and asked, "Can you believe this place?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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