MILLS & BOON

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His, Hers and... Theirs?

JUDY DUARTE

Judy Duarte
His, Hers and...Theirs?

Аннотация

Eva Galindo's dream of being a mother was about to come true–twice over. The Brighton Valley biologist wasn't just having a baby… she was expecting twins! Meeting single father of twins Dan Walker seemed like the sweetest twist of fate. How could she not offer to help out the gorgeous Texas rancher–by being temporary mommy to his own adorable pair?Suddenly becoming guardian of his orphaned niece and nephew was a tall order for any man. But Dan couldn't think of a better stand-in nanny than the sloe-eyed mother-in-training. Only, now he didn't want Eva to leave. Maybe it was time to take a chance on both their futures by combining forces and turning two into one big, loving family….

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“They’re great kids,” Eva said. “And I’ve grown close to them, too.”

“I’m not surprised. You’re a natural mother.”

Her eyes brightened, and her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink. “Thank you so much for saying that. I’ve been worried about the kind of mom I’ll be.”

“You’ll be the best. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

They stood just an arm’s length from each other.

A wave of desire washed over Dan, and he was sorely tempted to reach out and touch her, to run his knuckles along her cheek.

Her lips parted—half in surprise and half in arousal. But she wasn’t the only one whose thoughts had taken a sexual turn.

He wanted to kiss her again in the worst way. And in her eyes he could see that she wanted it, too.

Dear Reader,

It’s summer in Brighton Valley, Texas, the fictional town where His, Hers and…Theirs? takes place. The sun is warm, and the days are lazy.

It’s the perfect time for love, especially for a shy laboratory technologist who is pregnant—with twins!—and a rancher who has recently become the guardian to twins of his own.

I don’t know about you, but I enjoy books with medical

professionals and hospital settings almost as much as I do books with cowboys and ranches. So writing the BRIGHTON VALLEY MEDICAL CENTER series has allowed me to create stories with all my favorite elements.

So whether your summer reading takes you to the front porch, the seashore or a faraway place, I hope you enjoy Dan and Eva's romantic journey as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Happy reading!

Judy

P.S. If you want to know more about me and the books I write, please visit my Web site, www.JudyDuarte.com.

His, Hers and…Theirs?
Judy Duarte

www.millsandboon.co.uk

JUDY DUARTE

always knew there was a book inside her, but since English was her least favorite subject in school, she never considered herself a writer. An avid reader who enjoys a happy ending, Judy couldn't shake the dream of creating a book of her own.

Her dream became a reality in March of 2002, when Silhouette Special Edition released her first book, Cowboy Courage. Since then, she has published more than twenty novels.

Her stories have touched the hearts of readers around the world. And in July of 2005, Judy won the prestigious Readers' Choice Award for The Rich Man's Son.

Judy makes her home near the beach in Southern California. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she's spending time with her somewhat enormous but delightfully close family.

To Raema Pace, who not only gave me a personal tour of the lab at our local hospital, but also shares two grandchildren with me.

And to Emalee and Kaitlyn Colwell, who have brightened our lives and hearts.

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Chapter One

The playground at Twin Oaks Park was jam-packed with happy kids, and Dan Walker couldn't feel any more out of place than if he'd walked into a Sunday service at the Brighton Valley Community Church wearing nothing but his boots and his Stetson.

Of course, the family-style event was just what the pediatrician had ordered, and his five-year-old niece and nephew were having the time of their lives.

The grounds were hopping with mommies who wiped noses and kissed boo-boos and with daddies who played catch and flew kites. But it had been a real shot in the dark for him to think that he would somehow pick up everything he needed to know about fatherhood by attending a Parents of Multiples outing.

When Dr. Tomlinson had suggested Dan bring Kevin and Kaylee to play at the park, he'd been desperate and had thought he would give it a try. He figured it might be a good way to check things out without actually becoming a card-carrying member of the group. But being there had only made him feel less confident about doing right by the kids.

As his niece and nephew dashed around the playground, fitting right in with the sandbox crowd, Dan stood along the sidelines and watched. Too bad he hadn't decided to go the library instead. He could have checked out a copy of Parenting

For Dummies or some other Daddy how-to book. Surely he would have picked up more information by reading than by osmosis at a family outing.

He supposed he ought to mosey on up to one of the real parents and ask, “How in the world do you do it? What’s the trick?”

But he’d learned never to admit his shortcomings. In fact, if he ever thought he had a better than average chance of failing at something, he preferred to hit the high road rather than face the risk.

He chuffed at the irony, since here he was, the least capable adult in the bunch. But apparently Fate hadn’t gotten that memo.

Last winter, on an icy Manhattan street, his sister, Jenny, who’d been struggling to make her mark on Broadway, had been struck by a car and killed.

When Dan had gotten the call, he’d been crushed. But it hadn’t been the tragic loss of his twin sister that had torn him up. That had been tough enough. But what had made matters worse was that the two of them had been estranged for years, and her death meant they’d never be able to patch things up.

And then there were the kids. Jenny had been a single mom, and even though Dan had only been around Kaylee and Kevin once since they’d been born, there’d been a will, and his sister had named him their guardian.

The fact that she’d done that had been comforting in a sense. It meant that she hadn’t completely shut him out of her life,

that she'd known somewhere along the line that they'd eventually mend their rift.

Of course, who else was she supposed to leave them with? Their father had been a married man, which was one of several reasons Dan and Jenny had butted heads. So, he supposed, her options had been limited.

Either way, he wasn't sure what his sister had been thinking when she'd chosen him as the guardian of her children. After all, what in the hell did he know about being a parent?

At thirty-eight he was set in his ways, to say the least, and with some luck and a good deal of determination, he'd managed to avoid marriage and family himself. Of course, even though wedding bells and a wife were still out, apparently single parenthood wasn't.

After the funeral, he'd been prepared to take the kids back to the ranch with him in spite of all his insecurities. After all, he remembered how it felt to be young, homeless and unwanted. But it had been a stroke of luck for everyone involved when Catherine Loza, Jenny's roommate, had asked to keep the kids with her in New York for a while.

Dan had been uneasy about leaving them behind, but they'd been so comfortable in a big city environment, in the fourth-floor apartment where they'd lived most of their lives. Besides, they knew Catherine much better than they knew him. So all things considered, it had seemed like the best solution for the kids.

On top of that, Catherine was a woman, and Lord knew that all

kids needed a mother figure. Dan sure would have liked having one when he'd been five.

So he'd left Kevin and Kaylee with Catherine, called them regularly and sent monthly checks to cover their living expenses.

But several months later, Catherine got a big part in a Broadway musical and called Dan in a panic. She was looking at a grueling practice schedule followed by evening performances that would keep her out late at night. She could no longer take care of the kids, and Dan had flown back to New York and brought them home to Texas.

And now, two weeks into the whole family ordeal, he hadn't gained much confidence, which didn't sit easy with a man who was proud of the fact that he could out-rope, out-ride and out-cowboy just about anyone in Texas.

But parenting two five-year-olds? That was a whole different ball game.

Dan adjusted his Stetson, making sure the brim blocked the sun from his eyes. Then he hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans and shifted his weight to one hip.

Damn, he wished he were anywhere but here today. But this wasn't about him; it was about the kids.

And right now, they were having a blast playing with the other twins and triplets, some of whom were dressed like mirror images of themselves.

But then again, why wouldn't Kaylee and Kevin be having a good time at the park? Living on a cattle ranch with the uncle

they scarcely remembered and a crotchety old cowboy-turned-nanny couldn't possibly be any fun.

It was good to see them laughing and socializing, though.

Off to his right, he noticed a brunette who was also standing along the perimeter of the playground. She wore sunglasses, so he couldn't see her entire face, but her cover-girl profile and shape were intriguing.

She didn't appear to be a typical mom, although he couldn't put his finger on why he'd come to that conclusion. Maybe because her purse was way too small to fit in all the things some of the other mothers packed, like little baggies filled with snacks, wet wipes and Band-Aids. Or maybe because earlier this morning she'd somehow found the time to weave her long dark hair into a fancy braid that hung down her back.

She was dressed differently than the others, too, with a pink scarf that was stylishly wrapped around her neck, a crisply pressed white cotton blouse and a pair of slim-fit black jeans.

Whether she was a mom or not, he decided she was nice to look at—and that she was an intriguing diversion from the hubbub and the energetic chatter that swarmed around him.

Dan had been so caught up in his perusal of the brunette that he hadn't paid much attention to the activity on the playground—until a child let out a scream.

He watched the attractive woman dash across the sand toward the slide. As his gaze followed her, he realized that the screaming child was one of his.

Oh, God. His heart dropped to his gut, and his pulse kicked into overdrive as he hurried toward little Kaylee, who'd gotten hurt while Dan was supposed to be looking out for her.

The sight of blood running along the side of her face and her heart-wrenching screams shook him to the core.

Did he need any more proof of his shortcomings than that? He'd been gawking at an attractive woman, rather than watching the kids play, and he'd failed the kids, just as he'd known he would.

Hell, he wasn't cut out to be a father, no matter what Fate seemed to think.

He dropped to his knees on the sand beside them and started to reach out to Kaylee with stiff arms, but as the brunette continued to tend to the child, he pulled back his hands and let someone more capable do the comforting.

"Oh, sweetie," she said, lifting her sunglasses from her eyes and resting them atop her head. "What happened?"

"I…fell…down," Kaylee sobbed. "And I got hurt. Really bad." She lifted her little hand to her forehead to probe the gash, and as she lowered it, she spotted the blood on her fingers and let out another wail.

"It's okay," the brunette said. "It's just a little blood. The owie isn't very big."

"Yes, it is," her brother said. "And it's bleeding a whole bunch. We better call the ambulance."

At her twin's suggestion, Kaylee cried even louder. Still, Dan

thought a 911 call was probably their best bet. He knew that even the simplest head cuts could bleed profusely, but he'd much rather let a professional take charge.

The brunette made a quick scan of the playground and beyond. "Where's your mommy, honey?"

"She's in heaven," Kevin said. "She's watching over us, but I guess she was busy just now."

"I'm their uncle," Dan admitted. "This is Kaylee and Kevin."

The brunette turned to him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interfere."

Her hazel eyes were almost amber in color, and her lashes were thick and dark, but he shook off the compulsion to study her. "Don't be sorry for stepping in. I'm way out of my league when it comes to this stuff."

"Do you have a handkerchief?" she asked.

"No, I never use them. Sorry." He realized one would have come in handy about now.

She smiled, then pulled the scarf from around her neck, revealing a nasty scar that ran from the underside of her chin down to her throat and beyond. A burn of some kind, he suspected.

She held the pink cloth against Kaylee's forehead, applying pressure to her wound.

"Are you a doctor?" Kevin asked the woman.

"No."

"A nurse?" the boy continued.

She slowly shook her head. “No, I’m not.”

Then probably just a mother, Dan guessed. She’d certainly taken charge like a woman who’d done this a hundred times before.

“I do work at the Brighton Valley Medical Center,” she told Kevin, “but not with patients. I’m a medical technologist.”

“What’s that?” the boy asked.

By this time, Kaylee seemed to realize that she was under the care of a professional, and even if she didn’t know what a technologist actually did, her scream had softened to a whine.

“I’m a scientist,” the brunette said. “I work in the lab.”

Whoa, Dan thought, realizing she was the brainy type. He’d never really known any of those. He tended to date women who were more street-smart than book-smart.

Dated? Now where had that wild-ass idea come from? If she was hanging out at the park with the Parents of Multiples, she was probably a mother—and married, which meant she was off-limits, even if he’d been looking. And he wasn’t.

Still, his gaze slid to her left hand, which was ring-free. Not that it mattered, he supposed. His dating days were over now that the ranch house was filled with the pitter-patter of little feet.

Kaylee clung to the woman who dabbed at the wound with her scarf, permanently staining the fabric, no doubt. He’d have to buy her a new one when this was all said and done.

“Are you someone’s mommy?” Kaylee asked.

“No,” the woman said.

Then what was she doing at the park? Dan wondered. He almost asked but figured it might be best to bide his time and wait for one of the kids to quiz her. The two of them, especially Kevin, were certainly doing a pretty good job of interrogating her.

"Thanks for stepping in to help," Dan said. "Kaylee needed a woman's touch."

"You're welcome." Her smile reached her eyes, turning them to the shade of Tennessee bourbon. "Are you babysitting today?" Was it that obvious he wasn't an experienced guardian? Probably, since a real father wouldn't have let one of his kids get hurt.

"I'm afraid I'm the man in charge," he said, faking a smile and doffing his hat. "My name's Dan Walker. And you're…?"

"Eva Galindo." She nodded toward the small building that housed the restrooms. "The bleeding has stopped, so maybe we should get some water and wash her face."

"Good idea." He stood, placed his hand on Kevin's head and stroked the straw-colored strands of his hair. "Come on, sport. We've got to get your sister cleaned up."

As they walked toward the restrooms, Dan said, "I really appreciate this, Eva."

"I didn't do anything out of the ordinary. I saw her trip in the sand and take a fall. I guess it was just instinct kicking in."

"Lucky me," he said, meaning it. Hopefully, Fate had decided to give him a break, at least for the rest of the day.

Eva took Kaylee into the ladies' room and came out several minutes later. The little girl's hair and face were wet but clean.

And Dan was able to get a good look at the half-inch gash that marred the upper left side of her forehead and the bruise that surrounded it.

"What do you think?" Eva asked, gripping his gaze and setting his heart off kilter.

He didn't dare tell her that he was thinking of her as some kind of superhero right now. So instead, he glanced at her water-splattered, bloodstained white blouse and smiled. "I think I'm going to owe you a new outfit."

"That's not what I meant. Look at that gash, Dan. It's pretty deep."

The bleeding might have stopped, but the wound definitely gaped open.

"You know…" Eva cocked her head and studied the little girl's forehead. "She's probably going to need a few stitches."

"No!" Kaylee, who'd been a little standoffish with Dan the past couple of weeks, clung to the woman. "I don't want stitches."

If Dan had been looking in the mirror at his own face and had seen the cut, he would have let it pass without any treatment at all. But on a little girl?

"Why don't you want stitches?" he asked.

Kevin jumped in with the answer. "'Cause when we lived at our old house, Jimmy Milburn got stitches on his face and got to be a pirate for Halloween."

"Being a pirate is cool," Dan said, hoping to convince the kid that it was some kind of adventure, rather than something to be

afraid of.

"Yeah," Kevin said, "but Kaylee doesn't like swords and stuff. She wants to be a princess. Besides, when I told Jimmy that I wanted to have stitches like his, he said it really hurt."

"It won't hurt Kaylee," Eva said. "She has a princess cut. And doctors are very careful when dealing with a princess."

The girl turned to Eva, her tears coming to a rolling stop. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sure of it." Eva ran her hand along the dampened strands of Kaylee's long, blond hair. "The doctors at the medical center can spot a princess a mile away. And they know just what to do with royal injuries."

Kaylee cocked her head to the side. "They do?"

"Absolutely."

"Then, okay. I'll get princess stitches." Kaylee looked at Eva as though she were a fairy godmother.

But hell, Dan didn't blame the kid for that. He was thinking of Eva as though she'd fluttered into his life with a pair of wings and a magic wand, too. She'd been a real godsend, and he wished he could take her home with them until the kids turned eighteen.

"Will you ride with us to the medical center?" he asked her, hoping like heck that she would agree. Having her along would make the ordeal so much easier for Kaylee. And for him, too.

"Me? Well, I…" As her gaze caught his, he spotted more than indecision in her eyes. He noted apprehension, too.

Finally, at about the time he'd expected her to blow him off,

she said, “All right, I’ll go with you.”

Dan didn’t know when he’d heard sweeter words, when he’d felt more relief. “Thanks, Eva. I’ll make it up to you.”

Of course, he didn’t have a clue how he was going to do that, but he’d figure out a way.

When Eva had set out this morning, she had thought the scope of her adventure would be simply checking out the Parents of Multiples picnic at the park and getting a feel for what would soon be in store for her.

Now, as she sat in the dual-wheeled Chevy pickup across from cowboy Dan Walker, she felt as if she was living someone else’s life. For a woman who was basically shy and introspective, it was both exciting and unnerving at the same time.

She wasn’t one who basked in new experiences, and this was certainly a first for her. One minute she was on the edge of the playground, watching the kids chase after each other, and the next she was standing by helplessly while little Kaylee tripped and flew headfirst onto the steps of the slide.

Instinct had taken over, and Eva had rushed to the little girl’s side. Looking back, she was thankful to know that her lousy childhood hadn’t disabled whatever internal button had kicked in at just the right moment.

Thank goodness her instincts were functioning properly, since she’d be having a set of twins of her own in six months or so.

And now here she was.

She stole another glance across the pickup at the handsome

cowboy in the driver's seat, wondering if she would have even given him the time of day on any other occasion. Not that he wasn't attractive, but he was well over six feet tall and as buff and brawny as the good Lord made them. He was just the kind of man who could easily toss stacks of hundred-pound bales of hay to the left and right without breaking a sweat. Yet there was something about the soft brown color of his hair and bluebonnet shade of his eyes that spoke of a gentle side.

That, she suspected, along with the way his expression had crumpled around the crying child, had made Eva trust him well enough to get into his truck in the first place.

Her stepfather had been a brute of a man who'd mentally—and sometimes even physically—abused her, so she tended to avoid men who reminded her of him. She'd had a couple of boyfriends in college—each of them budding scientists who had been brainy and slightly built—but the relationships had never lasted very long.

So when, after much thought, she'd decided to create a family of her own, she'd opted for in vitro fertilization. It had been easier that way. She hadn't needed to make any decisions about whether to have a man in her life or not.

She had to admit, though, that she was still a little apprehensive about being a mother and bringing home two newborns, which is why she'd come to the park today. She'd read about the Parents of Multiples event in the online newspaper and had decided to observe things from a distance.

It was a scientific approach to her problem, and it seemed to be the most logical way for her to proceed.

If she liked what she saw and the people she met at the park, she would take it a step further and attend one of the evening meetings, where she might connect with another mother of twins who could offer her advice—and maybe even friendship.

Of course, she hadn't been at the park long enough to observe much of anything when little Kaylee was injured.

She glanced over her shoulder and into the small backseat at the rear of the cab, where the twins sat in matching car seats.

When Kaylee's gaze met hers, the little girl smiled, but her bottom lip quivered a bit, as if she was trying to be brave. Eva's heart went out to her for the second time in just minutes.

According to Kevin, their mother was in heaven, which was sad. But there hadn't been any mention of their father or any indication of why the kids had come to live with their uncle. If Eva and Dan were alone, she might ask him, but she couldn't bring it up in front of the kids. Not when the answer might be painful for them.

As Dan pulled into the driveway that led to the Brighton Valley Medical Center and turned left toward the entrance of the E.R., Kaylee peered out the passenger window.

"Is this where the princesses come to get their owies fixed?" the girl asked.

"It sure is. And if we're lucky, my friend Dr. Nielson will be working. She's the royal physician, and she takes care of all the

queens and princesses."

Kaylee settled back in her seat.

"You're good with kids," Dan said, sliding a grin her way. "I'm impressed."

His praise nearly knocked her off balance, since she didn't work with children in the lab. But she'd had to draw her share of blood when she'd been in training, and she'd learned a few tricks when working with frightened kids. Of course, once she'd graduated with her master's degree in biology, she no longer worked directly with patients.

"It's all in a day's work," she said, making light of what she'd just done.

"Then you deserve a raise," he concluded.

She had the strongest urge to look his way, but kept her eyes fixed on the road—or rather on the parking space he was pulling into. She still found it hard to believe that she'd agreed to ride with him. She certainly wouldn't have if his niece and nephew hadn't been with him.

But earlier on the playground, when Kaylee had thrown her arms around Eva and held on tight, the most stunning sense of warmth and wonder had flooded her chest. And so had a sense of awe.

Eva liked the way her emotional side had kicked in, which didn't happen all that often. But even more amazing was the realization that her own mother's abandonment and her stepfather's abusive nature hadn't damaged her in a way that

might hamper her ability to love and nurture her own children.

At least, it didn't appear that way.

She reached up and fingered the side of her neck, where industrial-strength drain cleaner had splashed upon her skin, burning it all those years ago.

She kept the scar covered whenever she could by choosing turtlenecks and scarves to wear, but it wasn't the ugliness she tried to hide. She'd learned to deal with her flaws a long time ago. It was just that people—particularly children—would sometimes ask what had happened to her, and she didn't like to talk about it.

As an adolescent, she'd made up a wild story about an alien abduction, but who would believe a tale like that now? Certainly not the medical professionals with whom she worked.

Of course, she didn't usually mix or mingle with many of her coworkers outside the medical facility. And it was fairly easy to keep to herself while bent over a microscope in the lab.

The irony struck her as odd, though. For someone who knew a lot of intimate details about people and their health, even before their doctors did, she kept her own secrets close to the vest. It was easier that way—and much safer.

"All right," Dan said, as he shut off the ignition. "We're here. Let's hope we won't have a long wait."

It was Saturday afternoon, and Eva suspected the E.R. would be packed, but that wasn't her main concern. She was more worried about what she'd say to Kaylee if Dr. Nielson, "the royal physician," wasn't working today and the little girl worried that

she wasn't getting the proper medical care.

So while Eva climbed from the vehicle and waited for Dan and the kids to get out, she tried to come up with a plan B, but wasn't having much luck. After all, Betsy Nielson was great with children and would play along with the princess thing. Another doctor might, too, but Eva didn't know the others as well.

As they headed toward the E.R. entrance, a breeze blew across Eva's face and along her throat, causing the scar to tingle as if the years had rolled back and the wound was still in the healing stage, still pink and tender.

She knew it was just her imagination, but she turned up the collar of her blouse anyway, hoping to hide the scar, as well as the fear that she might not have healed completely—on the inside, where no one could see.

And that, in spite of how good she seemed to be doing with Kaylee this afternoon, that she might somehow fail her own children one day.

Chapter Two

Upon entering the E.R., Eva led the way to a triage area, where a nurse was posted to determine the priority in which the incoming patients would be seen.

Kaylee's condition certainly wasn't critical, and since the E.R. appeared to be especially busy today, Dan figured they wouldn't see a doctor until the cows came home. And if that were the case, he was going to owe Eva big-time for spending the afternoon at the medical center with them.

The triage nurse sent them to sign in with a clerk behind a desk who took Dan's insurance card. Thank goodness he'd put the kids on his plan after Jenny's death.

After providing all the pertinent information, he returned to the waiting area. There weren't many chairs from which to choose, so they opted for a grouping near a TV monitor that was set to the Discovery channel.

The kids and Eva zeroed in on the television, while Dan snatched a magazine from a table. He wasn't sure how long they'd had to wait before Kaylee's name was called, but he'd just reached the last pages of a battered, two-month-old issue of Modern Horseman.

As they all headed to the doorway that led to the exam rooms, the nurse who'd called them, a tall, slender woman with black spiky hair, looked at Kaylee and smiled. "What happened,

sweetheart?"

"I fell down, and the slide hurt me."

"That's too bad. But don't you worry. We'll get you fixed up as good as new."

"Are you the princess doctor?" Kaylee asked.

The nurse furrowed her brow and cast a quizzical glance Eva's way.

"She's talking about Dr. Nielson," Eva explained. "Is she on duty today?"

The nurse smiled. "Actually, she is working. And we usually assign the children to her whenever we can. So your odds of seeing her are good."

Eva seemed to be relieved, although Dan wasn't sure why. Apparently that particular doctor was good with kids. Was she also a plastic surgeon?

The nurse—Shannon O'Reilly, according to her ID card—took Kaylee's temperature and checked her blood pressure, then she left them to wait for the doctor.

Kaylee nibbled at her bottom lip, and Eva eased closer. "Are you doing okay, honey?"

"I'm scared. I don't want it to hurt again. It's all better now, and I just want to go home."

Dan didn't know if she meant back to New York or the ranch, but he wouldn't ask. The kids didn't have any options about where they lived now.

Eva slipped an arm around Kaylee's shoulder, and the girl

leaned into her. It was nice to see her connecting with someone. She'd been a little standoffish with him since he'd brought her to Texas.

He supposed he couldn't blame her for that. He didn't know squat about kids, especially girls. And he had a feeling she wasn't used to being around men, especially the rugged and outdoorsy type.

Moments later, an attractive redhead entered the room. She couldn't have been much more than an inch or two over five feet tall, but she had a definite, take-charge presence.

She introduced herself to Dan and Kaylee as Dr. Nielson, then greeted Eva. "Is this your family?"

"No," Eva said. "We're just…friends."

Dan would have corrected her if he could have figured out a better answer, but as it was, that would have to do.

As Dr. Nielson slipped on a pair of gloves, then examined the child's wound, Eva said, "Kaylee's a little concerned about getting stitches and looking like a pirate."

"Don't worry about that," the doctor said. "I've got something much better than stitches for this cut. We're going to use skin glue instead."

Dan eased closer, wondering if he'd heard her right. Was she really going to close Kaylee's wound with some kind of glue? Or was this all part of the magical princess-talk that Eva had been using on the child?

"Cool." Kevin eased closer to the exam table on which his

sister sat. “Can I watch?”

“You certainly can.” Dr. Nielson stepped aside, giving the boy a better view.

When the doctor was finished and Kaylee’s wound was thoroughly cleaned, then sealed, Kevin stepped back and grinned. “It’s too bad all the king’s men and all the king’s horses didn’t have that stuff when Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall.”

The doctor smiled at the boy. “You’ve got a point there. They might have been able to put him together again.”

“So that’s all there is to it?” Dan asked. “That bionic glue will hold together?”

“Yes, it will.” Dr. Nielson removed her gloves and dropped them in the trash. “We can’t use it on all wounds, but it should work out nicely for Kaylee.”

“Just like magic,” Dan said, realizing that it sounded as if he was slipping into the fantasy zone Eva had created. But that’s not what he meant. He was thinking about the marvels of science and modern medicine.

The doctor reached for a clean rubber glove from the box and blew it into a balloon. Then she took a black marker and made eyes and a mouth near the base of the thumb, leaving the fingers to poke up like a Mohawk.

“Cool,” Kevin said. “It has pokey hair like the nurse. Can I have one, too?”

“You bet.” Dr. Nielson handed the blown-up glove to Kaylee, then reached into the box for another.

Dan looked over the sealed wound on his niece's forehead. He'd had plenty of stitches in his day—the gash in his knee for one—so he knew the routine for that. Kaylee would need an appointment for a checkup and suture removal. But what happened with skin glue?

"Does she need to come back?" he asked.

"Not unless you notice any unusual redness or swelling." Dr. Nielson gave them some instructions about keeping the wound dry and protecting it. "In fact, after you check out at the discharge desk, you're good to go."

"Can I see my owie?" the girl asked.

Dr. Nielson found a mirror, then handed it to her.

As Kaylee peered at her reflection, she scrunched her face. "It still looks like an owie. You didn't do anything to make the cut go away."

"It takes time for it to get better," the doctor said. "The red line will turn pink before it disappears."

Kaylee didn't appear to be convinced.

"I think it looks like a fairy kiss," Eva said. "All good princesses have one, you know."

The little girl brightened. "Okay. And it's shiny because of all the fairy dust and magic."

If Dan was going to have to make up stories to appease Kaylee, she would be out of luck. His brain didn't work that way. He was more inclined to resort to one of the snide remarks Uncle Hank used to make when Dan had been a kid and had sprained

a finger, scraped a knee or stubbed a toe. “Just go rub a little dirt on it and quit your whinin’.”

But Dan couldn’t say something like that to a little girl.

Besides, when he was twelve and had a cut along his thigh from a piece of barbed wire, Hank had used that line on him. He hadn’t realized the old man hadn’t intended for Dan to take him literally, and after following what he thought was sage advice from a real live cowboy, he’d gotten an infection along with a fever. He’d had his own medical emergency after that.

While Dan settled the account and signed the discharge paperwork, Kevin slipped up beside him. “When are we going to eat the picnic food?”

They’d had a late breakfast and hadn’t been hungry when the other picnickers had spread out their lunches. So most of the food Dan had packed for them was still in a cooler in the back of the pickup. But he didn’t feel like eating a bologna sandwich right now.

“I have a feeling that most of the people at the park have called it a day and headed home.” Dan looked at Eva. “You’ve got to be hungry, too. How about going out to an early dinner with us? After that, I can take you back to your car.”

The invitation seemed to take her aback, and before she answered she glanced down at her blouse, which was stained and crumpled.

“We’ll go someplace casual,” he added. “Maybe the Burger Barn or something.”

“Oh, please!” Kaylee said to her new friend. “Come with us, Eva. I don’t want to be the only girl.”

At the child’s request, the tension on Eva’s face eased, and Dan was again struck by her natural beauty. By the delicate arch of her brows, by the thick dark lashes, by the intoxicating color of bourbon in those expressive eyes.

The collar of her blouse, which she’d turned up after removing her scarf, now drooped, revealing the scar she’d probably tried to cover.

“All right,” she finally said. “And as luck would have it, I’ve got spare clothes in my locker at the lab. So if you don’t mind giving me a few minutes to change, I’ll go with you.”

Kaylee let out a joyful little whoop, and Kevin appeared to be just as happy, which only went to show that kids were better off with a woman than a man. Of course, that wouldn’t change the dynamics of the Walker household. They were stuck with two men.

“Do you want us to wait in the car?” Dan asked Eva.

“You don’t have to. Why don’t you come to the lab with me? You can see where I work.”

“Sure,” Dan said. He had to admit that he was curious about where the pretty scientist spent her days. Besides, he didn’t have anything else planned for today, other than grabbing a bite to eat and then heading home.

So he and the kids followed Eva to the elevator and down one floor to the basement, where the lab was located.

Eva let them all in, then asked them to take a seat near the entrance while she changed clothes. “I’ll just be a few minutes, and then I’ll show you around.”

Moments later, she returned wearing a cream-colored, lightweight turtleneck sweater and the same pair of jeans. She’d applied a touch of pink lipstick, and when she smiled, he noted a flush to her cheeks. He didn’t think it had anything to do with makeup.

“Are you ready to check out the lab?” she asked.

The kids nodded and got to their feet. As Eva breezed past Dan, he caught the whiff of citrus—orange blossoms, maybe?

They followed her through the doorway and into a large room with white walls and various cubicles, where several people in white lab coats either studied machines or sat on stools and peered through microscopes. Eva said hello to her coworkers and introduced Dan and the kids.

“We’re going to take a quick tour,” she explained, as she moved through the lab.

Dan had never been behind the scenes in a hospital before and felt as though he was on some kind of field trip. Still, he found it interesting as she pointed out a refrigerator case that stored blood and blood products, as well as the several different machines and testing apparatus.

“So you’re the one they call in when they need to take blood,” Dan said.

“Actually,” Eva explained, “the lab technicians are the ones

who draw blood. I'm a technologist and work behind the scenes. I run the needed tests and send the results to the doctors so they can make the proper diagnosis and treat the patients." She led him to a cubicle that had a fancy microscope. "This is the station where I work."

"Who's that?" Kevin pointed to a photograph Eva had displayed on one of the sidewalls of her workspace.

Dan noted a smiling Eva, an elderly woman and a candle-laden birthday cake.

"That's Clara Morrison," Eva said. "She's a friend of mine. We were celebrating her seventy-sixth birthday that day."

"Wow," the boy said. "That's a lot of birthdays."

"It sure is." Eva reached into a drawer, pulled out a slide and slipped it into the microscope. "Here, let me show you what I do." She peered through the lens, then stepped aside to let the boy take a peek.

"Ooh," Kevin said. "I see a whole lot of little circles."

"I want to see them, too." Kaylee pressed against her brother. "Let me have a turn."

Kevin moved away reluctantly, then let his sister peer into the microscope. She'd barely had a chance to ooh and ah herself when he said, "Come on, Kaylee. It's my turn again."

Dan was tempted to ask for a turn himself, but he was too caught up in watching Eva move through the lab or in trying to catch another hint of orange blossoms each time she brushed past him.

As it was, he stood off to the side and remained an observer, a role he usually slipped into whenever he left the ranch. But not because he was shy or awkward. He just didn't open up around people he didn't know or trust.

Yet as he watched Eva blossom in her natural surroundings, her amber eyes brightening as she spoke to the kids, her tone soft and maternal, he couldn't help lowering his guard just a bit.

And looking forward to having dinner with her.

Dan figured the Burger Barn was their best choice for a meal, and the minute he stepped inside the family-style restaurant, he realized he'd been right. He placed their orders, then with Eva's help, carried their food and drinks on trays to the dining area.

"I'm not hungry anymore," Kevin said the minute he spied the colorful, indoor climbing structure that was designed to look like a big red barn with a yellow silo and blue netting.

"Not so fast, sport." Dan unloaded the drinks, burgers and fries onto the white Formica table. "You need to eat first, while everything is warm. You'll have plenty of time to play when you're done."

"Oh, okay," the boy said, plopping into one of the white seats covered with a built-in blue vinyl cushion. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of Matchbox race cars and a Star Wars action figure.

A few minutes later, both kids had wolfed down their kiddie meals and had finished their milk.

"See?" Dan said. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Without answering, the twins dashed off, leaving Dan and Eva to munch on their burgers and fries.

"Kaylee seems to be doing a lot better," Eva said.

Dan agreed. She'd been a real chatterbox at dinner, opening up for Eva more than she had for him in the past two weeks. And he had no choice but to attribute the change to the attractive woman seated across from him.

As he caught Eva's gaze, she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "So, where's their father?"

Before Dan could respond, Kevin slipped back to the table to pick up the little toys he'd left behind and said, "Our daddy's in New York."

Kaylee, who'd returned on her brother's heels, added, "He's rich and has a great big car."

"Yeah," her brother chimed in, "but we don't get to ride in it. He's too busy."

"He's always busy," Kaylee said. "That's why we never get to see him."

Eva glanced down at the half-eaten bag of fries resting in front of her, then back at the child. But she let the conversation drop.

When the kids took off again, she blew out a sigh, leaned forward and rested her forearms on the table. "I didn't mean to pry. Or to bring that up in front of them."

"I know. I thought they were out of hearing range, too."

"I take it their father isn't very involved in their lives."

"No, he isn't." Dan didn't want to go into all the details. When

he'd found out his sister was dating a married man, he'd told her how disappointed he'd been in her. She'd tried to explain that she hadn't known at first, that the guy had kept it from her. And that when she'd told him that she was pregnant, he'd finally confessed.

Dan had tried to talk her into moving back home, but she'd refused. He'd never understood her need to move away from Brighton Valley in the first place, never understood her dreams.

After that, she'd been pretty tight-lipped about the kids and her personal life. But he'd never been one to keep quiet and had continued to let her know that he believed children should be raised in a loving, two-parent home. And that maybe they should be raised closer to family. But there was no need to go into any of that with Eva.

"Their dad has never really been a part of their lives," Dan said instead.

"That's too bad. They're cute kids."

"It's their old man's loss, I guess." He'd tried to tell himself that they were probably better off without him, which is what Jenny had insisted.

And maybe she'd been right.

All Dan really knew about Daddy Warbucks was that he was some Broadway bigwig who'd paid only a token amount of child support. And that Jenny hadn't wanted to make trouble for him by asking for more money. At least, that's what Catherine, her roommate, had said.

Dan opened a small bag of ketchup and squeezed a splotch

onto his fries. He wasn't going to reveal more than he already had to Eva. It didn't seem fair to the twins—or to Jenny's memory. Still, he would have liked to have been able to say that his sister had known better than to get involved in a situation like that, but obviously she hadn't.

"I think kids ought to be raised by people who want them," he said.

"So do I. And I'm glad they have you."

Dan sure as hell wanted to do right by them. He'd feed them, clothe them and educate them by sending them off to college or trade school. But no one knew more than he did that kids needed love and affection, too, and he was afraid he'd fall short in that department.

"When did your sister die?" Eva asked.

"About six months ago."

"And you've had the kids all that time?"

"No, they just moved in with me a couple of weeks ago."

If Eva wondered why that was, she didn't ask. But for the damnedest reason, Dan felt compelled to explain. "After the funeral, my sister's roommate, Catherine, suggested that they stay with her. And it seemed like a good idea to me. They hardly knew me. I'd only seen them once—when they were three. My sister came for a visit, but she didn't stay long."

They'd argued, as they were prone to do, and she'd left earlier than she'd planned.

Eva remained silent, but seemed to be hanging on his words.

Her eyes asked, And you agreed to leave them in New York with a stranger?

"The only other option I had at the time was to take them away from their comfort zone and drag them back to Texas to live on the ranch with me, and, like I said, they didn't know me very well." He didn't mention Uncle Hank, who'd finished raising Dan and his sister, Jenny, when they'd had nowhere else to go. The crotchety old cowboy meant well, but he spent the bulk of his day grumbling about his lot in life.

"How are they doing?" Eva asked. "Was the move hard on them?"

"Probably. Who knows?" Dan lifted his chocolate milkshake and took a sip, relishing the cold, creamy drink. "Catherine recently landed her dream job—the lead dancer in a Broadway musical—and daycare became an issue for her."

To be honest, even if he didn't feel like sharing it with Eva, when he'd left the kids in New York after the funeral, he'd felt a little uneasy about the whole setup. He'd wondered how Catherine would handle the childcare on her own, but she'd seemed so sure of herself.

And, just as he'd suspected, when the kids had become too much for her to juggle, she'd contacted him and he'd immediately jumped on a plane.

"So now they're living in Texas with you," Eva said, connecting the dots with the information he'd given her.

"Yeah. That's about the size of it." If there was one thing to be

said about Dan, it was that he tried his best to do the right thing, and that come hell or high water, he was loyal and responsible.

"What did you think of New York?" she asked.

"It wasn't my cup of tea." He preferred wide-open spaces and rolling hills to skyscrapers.

"How long were you there?"

"Too long." His flight had been delayed in Houston, and by the time he'd arrived in New York, it had been too late to get the kids. So he'd taken a cab to an over-priced hotel, where he'd been too keyed up to sleep a wink. Then he'd gone to Catherine's apartment the next morning and picked them up. "To be honest, I felt like a real fish out of water in Manhattan."

As awkward as he'd felt, as afraid as he was that he'd somehow mess up and do damage to their psyches and scar them for life, he hadn't been able to get them to the airport fast enough.

But once he'd brought the kids back to the ranch and tried to create some kind of family, he'd been more out of place than ever.

"How about you?" he asked.

"Me?" Eva reached for her milk.

"Have you ever been to New York?"

"I've always wanted to go. I'd love to see a Broadway show. But I doubt that I'll get to travel anytime soon."

"Why's that?" he asked, reaching for a fry.

"Because I'm pregnant."

His hand froze in midreach. "You gotta be kidding."

She wasn't, and he soon came to that conclusion.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you don't look…pregnant."

"I'm only about three months along."

He paused for the longest time, the French fries long forgotten. "Is that why you were hanging out at the play ground, watching the kids?"

"In a way. I'm not used to being around small children, so I'm intrigued by them."

"I never would have guessed that. You were so good with Kaylee. If you would have told me that you were a preschool teacher or a mother of three, I wouldn't have doubted it for a minute."

Eva couldn't help but smile. Her sole purpose for being at the park this morning was to learn how to parent and deal with two kids at one time, and here someone assumed she was a natural.

She certainly wouldn't admit otherwise. But it was nice to know that even after growing up in a dysfunctional family, she had what it took to be a loving mother and that she would have enough TLC to go around.

She lifted her apple juice and took a drink. "I didn't just chance upon the park today. I went specifically because I'd heard there was going to be an event sponsored by the Parents of Multiples. I was hoping to learn a few tricks in dealing with a set of twins."

He furrowed his brow, looking even more confused. "You have twins at home?"

"Not yet."

Before he could respond, little Kaylee ran to the table. "Uncle Dan, Kevin said you're going to give him a horse and teach him how to be a real live cowboy."

Dan nodded. "Yep, that's what I told him."

"But what about me? I want to ride a horse and be a real live cowboy."

"I thought you wanted to be a princess," Dan said.

The child nibbled on her bottom lip, then looked up at him with please-don't-say-no eyes. "Can I be both?"

Dan chuckled. "Sure. Why not?"

Kaylee broke into a bright-eyed grin. "And can Eva be a cowboy, too?"

"I doubt she'd like that," Dan said.

"Yes, she would." Kaylee turned to Eva, placing a small hand upon her knee. "You could ride a horse and everything."

Eva hadn't meant to encourage a relationship with the girl, though she could see how Kaylee had jumped to that conclusion. Now she needed to do some serious backpedaling. "I'll have to pass on becoming a cowboy, but maybe someday, after you learn how to ride, you can show me how it's done."

Kaylee quickly turned to her uncle. "Is it okay? Can Eva come to our house and watch me ride?"

"Sure," Dan said. "She can even invite her husband, if she wants to."

Apparently, he'd made the natural jump from "pregnant" to

“married.”

It seemed important that she set the record straight, so she said, “I don’t have a husband.”

“Sorry. I just assumed…” He shrugged. “Then bring your boyfriend.”

“I don’t have one of those, either.”

Other than a twitch at the corner of his left eye and a slight crunch of the brow, he didn’t respond.

She realized that he might have concluded that she’d had a one-night stand or an indiscriminate affair and, while it was none of his business, she felt compelled to explain. “I had in vitro fertilization.”

Her decision made perfect sense to her. She would soon have her own little family without the involvement of another parent who might not look at things the way she did. But Dan’s brow failed to completely relax until Kevin returned to the table.

A big grin was splashed across the boy’s face. “See, Kaylee? I told you so. I’m going to be a cowboy, just like Hank and Uncle Dan.”

“I get to be one, too,” his twin sister countered. “And Eva gets to come to the ranch and watch me ride.”

Kevin turned to Eva with a whopper of a grin. “Cool. You’re going to really like it at the ranch. We got horses and cows and dogs.”

“Mostly cows,” Dan said. “It’s a cattle ranch. And, of course, you’re welcome to come out and visit anytime.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “Come home with us tonight and—”

“Whoa, there, pardner.” Dan’s voice held a dash of humor. “You can’t just pick up people at the park and then ask them to come home with us.”

“And as much as I’d like to see the ranch,” Eva said, “tonight’s not really a good time for me.”

“Yeah, it’ll be too dark.” Kaylee turned to her uncle. “So how about tomorrow?”

Dan let out a little chuckle and turned up his hands in a what’s-a-guy-to-do sort of way.

Eva thought for a moment as she felt her heartstrings being pulled by Kaylee and Kevin. She didn’t have to go to work again until Monday, and she had no real plans for her day off.

She glanced at Dan and caught an intensity in his gaze that seemed to second the child’s invitation.

“Okay,” she said, surprising herself for agreeing so quickly.

Something told her there were a hundred reasons she should steer clear of the little family, but as her heart strummed in the nicest way, she’d be darned if she could wrap her mind around any of them.

Chapter Three

Bright and early Sunday morning, Eva left her two-bedroom townhouse, climbed into her silver Toyota Celica and followed the directions Dan had given her last night. Then she drove about ten miles out of town.

As she continued along the county road, passing the landmarks he'd told her about—Sam Houston Elementary School, Roy's Feed and Grain and the Flying K Auto Parts Store—she realized she was getting close.

Cattle grazed in pastures along both sides of the road now, so she slowed, looking for the driveway that was marked by the big green mailbox he'd told her about, a plastic replica of a John Deere tractor. When she saw it, she turned left and followed the tree-lined driveway, her vehicle kicking up dust and gravel until she reached the house and outbuildings.

She parked by the barn, next to the pickup Dan had been driving yesterday, and shut off the ignition. She hoped she hadn't made a mistake by agreeing to visit the twins and their uncle, but she'd really enjoyed their time together last night, and getting to know the kids had been a special treat. Besides, spending time with them would be good practice.

Before she could open the driver's door, two cattle dogs ran up to her vehicle, barking to announce her arrival. Rather than get out immediately, she scanned the old clapboard house, noticing

that the yellow walls and white trim had been freshly painted, that the shingled roof appeared to be new.

The front door swung open, and Kaylee stepped onto the porch. “She’s here!” As the screen slammed behind her, she tore across the porch and down the steps with Kevin just a couple of strides behind her.

The dogs seemed to realize Eva was a welcome visitor, so she climbed from the car, shut the door and greeted the children. “Good morning.”

“You came,” Kaylee said. “You really came.”

“I said that I would.” Eva’s gaze traveled back to the porch where Dan stood. She’d thought he was handsome yesterday, but he’d somehow morphed into a real live cowboy overnight, and she couldn’t help but note the change.

He had an almost heroic aura now, as if he belonged on the set of a shoot-’em-up western.

Tall and lean, he hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his worn denim jeans and moseyed toward her with a Texas swagger that made her breath catch.

“Did you have any trouble finding the place?” he asked.

“No, your directions were easy to follow.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, wondering if she should have braided it earlier. A pulled-back style would have been more practical for a day at the ranch, but as it was she’d fussed in front of the mirror long enough.

“Do you want to start with a tour?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Something told her she ought to try and include the kids in the conversation, but she couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from the cowboy. That is, until the screen door squeaked, alerting her to the fact there was someone else at the ranch.

She turned to see an old man who appeared to be in his mid-seventies shuffle across the porch. He used a cane to support him, but his gait was a little unsteady. She’d assumed Dan and the kids lived here alone, although she didn’t know why. They hadn’t actually addressed the issue.

The old man carefully climbed down the steps. Upon his approach, Dan introduced him as Uncle Hank.

“Eva works at the Brighton Valley Medical Center,” Dan added. “The kids and I met her at the park yesterday.”

“You a nurse?” the old man asked.

“No, I’m a medical technologist.”

“Sounds important.”

Eva smiled. She liked to think her job and her contribution to the hospital were more than important; they were critical.

“Do you know Oliver Westfield?” Hank asked. “He’s a dermatologist at the clinic.”

“We’ve met,” Eva said. “But I believe Dr. Westfield is a specialist in internal medicine, not dermatology.”

“What the hell difference does it make?” the old man asked. “Far as I’m concerned, those doctors all skin ya.” Then he chuckled to himself, pleased with his own humor.

“Actually,” Dan said, “Hank likes Dr. Westfield, even if it sounds as though he’s complaining.”

“Liking him has nothing to do with griping about the bills he’s been giving me.” Hank leaned against his cane. “There was a time I could have given Doc Graham a couple of chickens and called it good. But now these young doctors want you to give ’em an arm and a leg, even when the ones you got ain’t all that good anymore.”

“Maybe you should see the princess doctor,” Kaylee said. “She fixed my owie and didn’t make us give her anything.”

“So there you go,” Dan said to his uncle. “You need a new doctor.”

Hank chuffed. “I need a whole new body. This one’s falling apart.” He looked at Dan, challenging the man whose body was young and strong to disagree.

“You heard what Dr. Westfield said, Hank. All that whooping it up when you were younger is taking its toll on you now.”

“I suppose that’s true. Too bad I didn’t listen to my Mama. She told me to quit smokin’ and drinkin’, but I didn’t listen to her.” He gave Kevin a little nudge. “Let that be a lesson to you, boy. Pay attention to what your elders tell you.”

Dan placed a hand on his uncle’s frail and stooped shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You want to take a tour of the ranch with us, Hank?”

“No. You go ahead. I’ll have lunch ready for you when you get back.” Then the old man gave a respectful nod to Eva. “Nice to

meet you, ma'am."

She smiled. "Same here."

Hank turned and shuffled back to the house.

"Come on," Dan said to Eva, "we'll start by showing you the barn."

The kids ran ahead, followed by the cattle dogs, and Eva fell into step beside her host.

"Hank's a good man," Dan said. "He's just a little old and crotchety. But he means well."

"You don't need to explain. I have a soft spot for the elderly. In fact, I've been volunteering my time at the Brighton Valley Senior Center."

"You don't say." He sketched a gaze over her, sending her senses reeling and knocking her off balance.

She did her best to shake off the inappropriate reaction to the look he tossed her way, telling herself there hadn't been anything to it, that her admission had merely surprised him.

But she hadn't done anything special. On a whim, she'd gotten involved with the center, hoping to fill and brighten the days and evenings when she wasn't working at the lab.

The game plan had worked, and as an unexpected bonus, she'd acquired a better understanding of those who were lonelier than she was.

"I wish I could tell you that Hank didn't always used to be cranky and ornery, but it wouldn't be true. He's been short-tempered and snappy for as long as I can remember. But for what

it's worth—deep inside—he's a good man. And loyal to a tee."

"Buena jente," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's a Spanish term for 'good people.' You know, one of the white hats."

"Then that suits Hank just fine. You'll never find a man whose word holds more truth and follow-through."

Eva's steps slowed. "It must be frustrating for him to not be able to do the things he once could do with ease."

"I'm sure you're right. Hank used to be the king of the ranch, and now he sits in a rocker and guards the front porch. And instead of riding herd or breaking horses, he's babysitting Kaylee and Kevin."

"Is he good with them?" she asked.

"They're getting used to him."

What did that mean?

When they reached the barn door where Kevin and Kaylee had been waiting, Dan pulled it open and waited for them to all go inside. Then the tour began in earnest.

The twins introduced Eva to a pregnant broodmare named Sugar. Then, as Dan began to lead them back outside, Kevin said, "Don't forget about Midnight. She catches all the mice and rats that like to eat the hay and grain."

"Where is she?" Eva asked.

"Either napping or working," Dan said. "Midnight is a great mouser and a real asset on the ranch."

Once outside again, Dan showed Eva a few things around the immediate yard, like the corral where he kept a couple of cutting horses. Then they piled into the pickup and drove along a dirt road, where he pointed out the creek that ran through the property.

When he showed her a small, private lake surrounded by cottonwood trees, she decided it was a beautiful stretch of land and told him so. What she didn't admit was that she was glad that she'd accepted the kids' invitation to visit. She couldn't remember having such an enjoyable day.

Kevin and Kaylee had both warmed up to her, and she'd felt a part of something for the first time in her life.

Okay, so she was an important member of the Brighton Valley Medical Center team, but she'd earned her spot by hard work and attention to detail. This was different. She'd been temporarily drawn into a family situation, and she hadn't done anything out of the ordinary to be completely accepted.

When they returned to the house, Dan parked near the barn. Eva wasn't sure how long they'd been gone—an hour or so, she suspected.

"Thanks for giving me a tour," she said. "I had a good time, and I'm glad I came." It had certainly been a lot better than hanging out at home, watching television or reading a book.

"You're welcome," Dan said, "but don't take off yet. Hank probably has lunch ready for us, although I hope you like bologna sandwiches. It's his specialty."

“Oh, not again,” Kaylee groaned. “How come he doesn’t like peanut butter and jelly? Or grilled cheese?”

“’Cause he’s a cowboy,” Kevin explained. “And that’s what real ones eat.”

“Then I’m going to be a princess instead. At least I’ll get better food.”

Once inside the house, Dan led Eva to the kitchen, which was cleaner than she’d expected it to be with two men and a couple of kids living here.

“You sure keep things tidy,” she said.

“We try. But to be honest, I have a woman who comes in every two weeks to clean, and she was just here yesterday.”

“Can she help you with the kids?”

“No. She’s got an outside job. When she comes here, she looks after them. But for the most part, it’s just Hank and me.”

Apparently the situation worked for them, but it was too bad they couldn’t get a full-time nanny to come in and help more often. Hank didn’t appear to be all that sweet and loving, and it seemed to her that the kids were missing a woman’s touch. Not that Eva was of the mindset that men weren’t able to nurture children. But Kevin and Kaylee had lost their mother recently, and with the way they both had seemed to draw close to her, she suspected there was some kind of maternal hole in their lives that hadn’t yet been filled. And for that reason alone, her heart went out to them.

“I wish there was someone we could hire to come in more

often," Dan said, "but I'll be darned if I know where to look. I'm under the impression that a bad sitter is worse than no sitter."

"I'm sure you're right about that. Maybe you should advertise and request references."

He shrugged. "That might work."

She was just about to tell him that she was sure it would, when an idea struck.

She'd really enjoyed her time with Dan and the kids. And last night, as well as earlier today, she'd found herself wondering if her life would soon be filled with similar days, with happy chatter and heartwarming smiles.

"Would you like me to help out for a while?" she asked.

"With daycare?" His brow furrowed into a V, and she could tell he'd been taken aback by the offer.

"I guess that's what I'm offering. I can come out to the ranch on my days off. At least until you find someone to take the job permanently."

The tension on his face eased some. "I hate to put you out."

"Well, it'll actually give me an opportunity to polish my mothering skills. And if you'd like me to, I can help you interview nannies. I'll need to hire my own daycare provider one of these days, so the research and the hiring experience will be eye-opening."

He seemed to struggle with the decision, and for a moment, she was sorry she'd offered.

"I hate to take advantage of your kindness," he said, "but to

be honest, I could use someone in my corner."

"Then it's a deal." She reached out her hand in a playful but businesslike fashion, but when they touched, when their hands clasped, an unexpected thrill shuddered through her, and her heart skipped a beat.

She could have pulled away, could have ended the connection, but she'd never felt the like before. And for some reason, she wanted to relish the rush for as long as she could.

Eva returned to the ranch the following Saturday morning, but she didn't go empty-handed. From what she'd been told, Kaylee and Kevin were tired of bologna, which she assumed meant there hadn't been much variety to their meals. So she planned to make them a nice dinner tonight.

They probably had a few staples she could use, like flour, sugar and salt, but she doubted they'd have everything she would need. So after gathering a few items she had in her fridge and cupboards, she packed a box and carried it out to her car. Next she climbed behind the wheel, backed out of her driveway and headed for the ranch.

She wasn't sure what she'd do with the kids once she got there, but she'd think of something. Her few, precious childhood memories were of the time she spent in her abuelita's kitchen, where they made homemade tortillas.

As she left Brighton Valley city limits, an idea came to mind. Maybe she ought to make cookies with the kids. Assuming that Dan wouldn't be prepared with vanilla or brown sugar, she

stopped at a little mom-and-pop market along the way. On the back of a package of chocolate chips, she found a cookie recipe, and she was set.

It was late in the morning when she finally arrived at Dan's place. One of the Queensland Heelers, although she wasn't sure which one, seemed to recognize her as a friend rather than a foe on this visit, hardly barking at all.

"Hey, doggie," she said, as she got out of the car. "Remember me?"

It certainly seemed to.

She hadn't taken two steps when the kids rushed out of the house, greeting her with happy smiles and chatter.

About that time, Dan stepped onto the porch wearing a blue plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing the muscular forearms of a man who worked the land. He also had on a pair of worn denim jeans and scuffed boots—nothing fancy—but he was certainly a sight for sore eyes.

Ever since heading home last Sunday afternoon, she'd had repeated visions of the man—and she wasn't always dreaming when he came to mind. But today, in the flesh, she found him more attractive than ever.

"Here," he said, closing the distance between them. "Let me take your bag."

"I'm afraid I've got more than just this to haul in." She clicked the remote on her key ring and popped open the trunk, which was full of groceries.

“You didn’t need to bring food,” he said. “I’ve got plenty. And what we don’t have, I’ll buy.”

“I know, but I wasn’t sure what you had in your pantry. And since I’m determined to make dinner tonight, I wanted to make sure I had all the ingredients. I hope you like Mexican food.”

He brightened like a kid who’d been offered an early birthday present. “I love it.”

As he reached into the trunk to lift the box, she noticed the edge of a bandage on his forearm.

“What happened?” she asked, pointing to the gauze.

“This?” He glanced down at his arm, then shrugged it off. “I got snagged by a nail in the barn. It’s no big deal.”

“Are you sure?” It must have been bad enough to warrant first aid.

He gave her a don’t-worry-about-it grin, then lifted the box of groceries and closed her trunk.

Eva grabbed her purse from the front passenger seat of the car, pushed the lock button on the remote, then followed him to the porch, where two potted geraniums flanked the steps.

The wood slats creaked all the way to the front door, and they entered the house with the kids on their heels.

“I appreciate your help,” Dan said, “especially today. I’ve got a lot of work to do and can’t spare Manuel to help me. He’s got to stick close to the barn this morning.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “That’s because Sugar is going to have a baby, just like Jill.”

“Not just like Jill,” his sister corrected. “Sugar’s baby is going to be a horse, and Jill had puppies.”

Kevin nodded. “We’ll take you to see them. Come on.”

“Just a minute,” Eva said. “I need to put away the perishable items in the fridge first.”

“What’s that?” Kevin asked.

Before she could explain to the kids, Dan excused himself and headed through the service porch and out the back door.

Eva couldn’t help but watch him go, with that long, lean cowboy swagger of his. Nor could she help missing his presence. He might think she was a pro at dealing with children, but she knew better.

“Can I help you cook lunch?” Kaylee asked.

“Me, too?” Kevin chimed in.

Back to work, she thought, tearing her gaze away from the handsome cowboy and offering the children a smile. “Sure, you can help.”

Kaylee pulled a chair from the table and dragged it to the counter. “What are we going to do first?”

“I’ll tell you what,” Eva said. “As soon as I get the beans going, we can make chocolate chip cookies for dessert. How would you like that?”

Kevin let out a little whoop for joy, and Kaylee seconded his opinion with a clap of her hands.

After she’d settled into the kitchen, Eva opened the pantry to see if the men did, indeed, have the staples she’d need—and they

didn’t.

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