

MANY LIVES RANCH

by Barbara Ellin Fox

Chapter One

The first time her aunt threw her on the back of a horse, a month had passed since Kate Malloy placed her precious baby boy into the hands of his adoptive parents. She hadn't yet turned seventeen. Heartbreak for coloring outside the lines so young.

Sudden burn in the back of her throat forced a swallow. Don't dwell on pain you can do nothing about. Aunt Erma called it wasted emotion.

A horse snorted into the crystal air of this last December evening. Here on the Lazy R Ranch, Kate'd had stability during the thirteen years after giving up her son, and had ridden a pot load of horses. Oklahoma had become home.

A squeal startled Kate from her mental recess into the past. She glanced toward the screen door's complaint to see her aunt push through with a hip, her hands laden with hot tea and bowls of steaming cinnamon bread pudding, evident by the sweet aroma swarming the porch. "Woo, you can feel the nip in the air. Ain't that moon the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?" She nodded toward the sky. "A couple could go for a moonlight ride tonight."

Romantic Aunt Erma had tried to set her up with the foreman's nephew for the past year. She wasn't sure the ranch owned a horse that could accommodate his huge doughy frame on a moonlit ride anyway. He might be a nice guy once you got past the remnants of his previous meal hanging in his beard. Kate let her voice sing with the same answer she'd given at least fifty times. "Not interested."

"Well, it beats sittin' out here in a rocker, wallowin' in the past. You're too young to waste your life with regrets."

"Hah. I'm enjoying the last of the Christmas lights and thinking how grateful I am for all you've done since the day you picked me up at the Okmulgee bus station."

Aunt Erma grumbled and set bowls on the table between them, then passed Kate a mug of tea before settling into her seat, snugging her polar fleece jacket close.

Kate shifted in her cushioned chair and leaned toward the other woman. "I've also considered why Buttercup was the only gentle horse you ever let me ride. Everything after her had a rogue issue or head problem or fear. For months I figured I was your crash dummy."

She caught her Aunt's mouth quirk right before seriousness took over. "The first time you rode the old mare, I knew you were trainer material. An intelligent trainer's a problem solver. By the looks of the trophy cabinet in my livin' room, I was right."

Warmth flooded her at the memory of horse shows and ranch competitions she'd entered with Aunt Erma's horses. Places she'd made friends and first attended cowboy church. "We had some great runs, didn't we?"

"We did." Aunt Erma reached for her bowl and spooned pudding into her mouth.

Kate cocked an eyebrow at her aunt. "Those classes with the police force took a solid horse to handle smoke bombs and gunfire. I kind of enjoyed riding through the wall of pool noodles." She turned away before Aunt Erma could see her laugh at the memory of a horse bolting the arena while Aunt Erma pulled herself straight in the saddle. Police training separated the brave horses from the chickens in a big hurry.

"Yeah, well I should'a let you ride Goldie instead of me. By the time I stopped her, and we got back to the ranch you'd finished. Mare hasn't tolerated long dangling hunks of Styrofoam since."

They rocked in silence a while, enjoying mouthfuls of sweet, warm pudding and swallows of tea. George Strait messed with Kate's mind. Why his tunes?

The back and forth thud of her aunt's rocker ceased. "I've never told you this enough, but I'm sure proud of how you've turned your life around." She rested a hand on Kate's arm. "A master's in social work is quite an accomplishment. In four years, you've moved up the ladder with Health and Social Services, too. The plaque you brought home was somethin'."

Katy cleared her throat. "Local. Nothing big."

"Big enough the department named you Social Worker of the Year. That ain't nothin' to spit at."

"Thanks, Auntie."

Aunt Erma scrunched her face like she hated the nickname. Kate knew otherwise. Her aunt had a heart of gold, unlike the grandfather who kicked Kate out when she got into trouble. Too bad he hadn't lived long enough to see her graduate from college.

"Is the fellow you tangled with before you came here what keeps you from committing to anyone?"

Memories of dancing in a pickup bed brought warmth to Kate's cheek. "You can't get any sweeter than honey. Why try saccharin?"

"Humph, then why don't you look him up and see how he's doin'?"

Even her sweet aunt respected her wishes not to say *his* name. No good came of wishing for what she couldn't have. Giving up one love and one baby left her in agony. When she'd weakened and done a google search, Blake had beautiful women on his arm. "We've discussed this before. It's same as the baby. I want him to be happy and have every good thing the world has to offer. I couldn't bear being a spectator, but that doesn't stop me from hoping he achieved his dreams."

"Give me his name. I'll look him up for you."

Kate shook her head. "Not happening."

"After all these years you're still not lettin' his name loose?"

"There's no need." Kate stared at the moon. It had gotten smaller but still held the bright orange glow. "I want to combine horses and social work." She turned toward her aunt. "You know, give disadvantaged kids the opportunity to try something different."

Aunt Erma patted her arm again. "I know, and if I had a fortune hidden away I'd do that for you on this ranch." She sat back and rocked twice. "You might have to look at one of those not-for-profit groups." Her aunt slammed her feet to the floor and stood. "Rats. I forgot." She fished a paper out of her pocket and held it toward Kate. "Messin' around on the internet this afternoon, I found a job, sounds perfect for you. What do you think?"

Kate laid the paper across her thigh and smoothed out the creases, as her aunt sank back into her seat. *Foundation looking for Equestrian Director. Must ride, teach others to ride, and work with at-risk young adults and children. Must be outgoing and willing to work hard.* A flicker of excitement tightened Kate's chest as her gaze scanned the paper. The job sounded...perfect, even if the description was vague. "Where'd you find this?"

Aunt Erma shrugged, her rocker creaking with each sway. “Oh, you know how it goes. You’re lookin’ at horse pedigrees, and the next thing you know you’re five rabbit holes deep, starin’ at somethin’ like that. She motioned to the paper. “The URL is at the top.”

Kate bit her lip, swaying slightly as she forked another bite of bread pudding. The sweet cinnamon flavor did little to settle the churn of thoughts in her head. Could she leave Oklahoma? Leave Aunt Erma? Her pulse quickened, and she pressed her spoon against the bowl to ground herself. Maybe she should stick with her job at Human Services where she already knew the ropes. Safer. Simpler.

Aunt Erma slapped her hands against her thighs. “Good heavens, girl. Quit sittin’ there like a wart on my big toe and go check out the job.”

Her shoulders squeezed. “This is New Year’s Eve. No one will bother with a resume tomorrow.”

“Look young lady, I didn’t spend all these years years teachin’ you how to live to have you spend your life in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. Take a chance for once. Go.”

With the knot in her stomach warring with the buzz in her chest, Kate settled at the computer and typed in the URL. A few minutes passed before the scent of her aunt’s newest fabric softener wafted over her shoulder as she leaned in. “Sound interestin’?”

“There’s not much more here than on your paper. Just that the foundation was owned by a sports group. My gut jumped when I read. Does that make me weird?”

“I hope it means you’re weird ‘cause I wouldn’t want my bread puddin’ messin’ with your gut. How long did we have the pudding in the refrigerator, anyway?”

Kate smiled. She didn’t need to answer. Her aunt made the dessert this afternoon. “Should I send my resume?”

“Can’t hurt.”

When midnight threatened, her aunt tapped her. “Ain’t you finished tweakin’ your credentials yet? It’ll be next year before you’re done. If they can’t see you’re a gem, you don’t want this job.”

Kate sighed and reread the information. Would her email get lost over the holiday?

Aunt Erma knocked her knuckles on the desktop. “Come on. Push send. The only way I’m staying up after midnight is if you’re on a moonlight ride with your sweetie, and I can see that ain’t happenin’ soon.”

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