



Back in the Saddle (Wed in the West)

By Karen Templeton



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A SECOND CHANCE IN THE SADDLE



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Since 1998, three-time RITA-award winner (A MOTHER'S WISH, 2009; WELCOME HOME, COWBOY, 2011; A GIFT FOR ALL SEASONS, 2013), Karen Templeton has been writing richly humorous novels about real women, real men and real life. The mother of five sons and grandmom to yet two more little boys, the transplanted Easterner currently calls New Mexico home.

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"So I gather you know a fair amount about horses?"

With an actual sigh, the getting-up-there Boston terrier slid down on the exam table in front of Zach Talbot and promptly went to sleep. *This might take a while, wake me when she's done.*

She being the auburn-haired Texan female of indeterminate age who'd brought the dog into Zach's clinic three times in the two weeks since she—and her daughter, she'd mentioned more than once—had moved into the old Hufsteter place a ways out of town. Completely renovated, she'd said. Beautiful house. Reminded her of home.

Not that Zach minded chatter, as a general rule. At least it kept him from curling up in a ball inside his own head. However, since he'd yet to find anything really wrong with the little dog, other than a general slowing down due to old age, he was guessing Dorelle Keyes had ulterior motives. Motives that Zach strongly suspected had something to do with this hitherto unseen daughter.

One hooded doggy lid briefly fluttered open as if to say *You got it, buddy*, before drifting closed again, and Zach met Dorelle's sharp—oh, *so* sharp—green gaze.

"As part of my practice, sure." After gently rubbing the dog between the ears—which got a soft groan—Zach scribbled down a couple notes for Shantelle at the front desk to add to Edgar's chart, then glanced back at Dorelle. Remembered to smile. "Why?"

"Oh. Well, Mallory—" the daughter "—is thinking about buying a horse for her boy. She's..." Dorelle glanced around, then practically mouthed, "Divorced. And his daddy has custody at the moment—" Her red-lipsticked mouth slammed shut, as though she'd realized she'd gotten stuck in that narrow wedge between discretion and oversharing. "Anyway, when we noticed the stalls out back, that was the first thing we thought of, how much Landon might like to have a horse to ride when he's here. So I was wondering if maybe you knew of someone local who might be selling. And you strike me as somebody we could trust."

His mouth twitching, Zach adjusted his glasses. Although his own mother had always said he had one of those faces. However...

"Horses take a lot of work, ma'am—"

"And while I appreciate that your mama obviously taught you to respect your elders, trust me, no woman past a certain age actually likes to be *ma'amed*"

"My apologies, m—Mrs. Keyes."

"Apology accepted. And second. I know how much work horses take. Mallory's daddy was a rancher. So we know what to do. We just don't know who to see. Landon's eleven, by the way. Far as I'm concerned he should've had his own horse long ago. But life had other ideas."

Not for the first time, Zach got the feeling the woman was deliberately baiting him. As though she'd been given instructions not to blab about personal matters, but if someone asked...well. It would only be polite to answer, wouldn't it? Too bad for her, then, that Zach was sorely lacking in the curiosity department.

Although his own full plate probably had something to do with that. Not to mention a deeply entrenched sense of self-preservation that kept most locals from developing anything even remotely like real relationships with the outsiders who flitted in and out of Whispering Pines. The town was no Taos or Santa Fe, heaven knew, but northern New Mexico's clear, high desert air and pristine forests attracted its fair share of tourists and temporary residents. Especially during ski season, which was right around the corner. Granted, Zach could be as cordial to visitors as the next townie. Friendly, even. Especially since they often brought dogs, and he was the only vet in town. But get himself all tangled up in their lives?

Nope.

However, he smiled, focusing on the topic at hand. "Has your grandson said he'd like to ride?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes! He already has, actually. A few times out on a farm north of LA. Where we were living, you know."

Clearly Zach's cue—again—to ask what had brought them to Whispering Pines. Except he honestly didn't care.

Heidi would've, though. Because his wife hadn't known the meaning of *aloof*, embracing—often literally—everyone she saw as if they were best friends...

"Dr. Talbot? Is everything okay?"

With an actual jerk, Zach pulled his head out of his butt to meet Dorelle's gaze again. "Yeah, sorry..." He cleared his throat. Smiled. "Actually, my brother Josh is the foreman up at the Vista Encantada Ranch nearby—"

"Oh, yes, we passed it the other day when we were out exploring. And your girl out front, she said your brother worked there. One of 'em, anyway."

Shantelle was young yet. She'd learn. "The Vista breeds champion quarter horses—which wouldn't be suitable for your needs—but from time to time they foster rescues, too. I seem to recall Josh saying something about an older gelding that'd been used to teach another rancher's kids to ride. I haven't seen the horse yet myself, but I'm sure you and your daughter would be welcome to go out and meet him."

Dorelle lit up as if someone'd flipped a switch. "That sounds perfect—"

"Dad-deeee!"

"Liam! No!"

The groggy little dog scrambled to his feet as, at the doorway to the exam room, Zach's older son grabbed his baby brother around his middle and yanked him back. "Sorry, Dad!" Jeremy grunted out around the redheaded, windmilling blur that was his three-year-old brother. "Grandma just dropped us off. Man, he's *fast!*"

"So were you at that age," Zach said, then squatted in front of the pair, ruffling the little one's rust-colored curls. "I'm almost done, squirt. You wait outside with Jeremy, okay?"

But Liam threw himself so hard into Zach's arms he nearly knocked him over. He had no idea why the boy was so clingy—certainly a lot more than his older brother had been—but his hugs never failed to overwhelm Zach, with love and fear, both.

"Oh, don't send them out on my account," Dorelle said behind him, more gently than Zach would've expected. Yes, it was obvious she loved her daughter and grandson, but until that very moment he wouldn't've pegged her as a softy.

Even so, the boys knew the rules. Or at least Jeremy did. To Liam, the concept of boundaries was still a little sketchy. So Zach detached himself from his son, then stood, trying for stern and failing miserably when those big, brown, getting-wetter-by-the-second eyes tilted up to his. So who was the softy now?

"Go with your brother," he said, steeling himself against those eyes, so much like his mama's Zach's own stung. "I won't be long. Why don't you think about what you want on your pizza while you're waiting?"

That did the trick. "Peesa?" Liam breathed, as if this was the most awesome suggestion ever.

"Yep. Now scoot."

After the boys left, Zach turned to find Dorelle watching him with one of *those* expressions, God help him.

"Neither one of 'em looks much like you."

"Truth," Zach said with a smile. "Although I was apparently as blond as Jeremy when I was his age."

"Which is?"

"Seven. Eight in a few months."

"And the little one?"

"Liam's three. He looks..." His throat caught. Damn. "He looks exactly like his mother."

"She must be one gorgeous creature." Zach hesitated. "She was."

Dorelle sucked in a short breath. "I'm so sorry, Dr. Talbot. I didn't know."

Somehow, he doubted that. And it was the end of what had been a very long day, one that had left Zach so tired he could barely see straight. Meaning he found himself sorely lacking patience for whatever game this woman was playing.

"Really?"

The woman's eyes briefly widened before she released a short laugh. "I suppose I deserved that. Since I'm sure it'll come as no surprise that digging up information is a hobby of mine. Especially when I find myself in a new place and don't know anybody. But I swear to you, this is the first I'm hearing of it." She hesitated, then asked,

"How long?"

Oh, what the hell. "Two years," he said, and she bit her lip, shaking her head. Then she pushed out a little breath. "Folks tend to keep to themselves around here, don't they?"

"Pretty much." Although Shantelle's keeping it to herself was nothing short of a miracle. Town nosy-body in training, that one.

"Yeah, it was the same way back in Springerville," Dorelle said. "There were absolutely no secrets between neighbors, but we had that circling the wagons thing *down*. And oh, dear Lord—" Her hand flew to her cheek. "You thought I had matchmaking on my mind, didn't you?"

Zach's mouth twitched. "I had wondered."

"Oh, dear boy, *no*. Not that you're not cute as a damn button, but I did think you were married. Not a whole lot to do around here. Just like Springerville. One learns," she said with a slight, almost regal, bow, "to make one's own entertainment. Although we really are looking for a horse. Talking about it, anyway. And I thought."

Her eyes clouded. "My daughter Mallory's had some challenges of her own, this last little while. And this past year or so has been particularly hard on her. Not that she'd ever admit it, God knows. But if you ask me, she didn't buy a house out here in Nowhere, New Mexico—no offense—"

"None taken."

Dorelle nodded. "Anyway. She didn't buy that house except for one reason, and that was to hide."

"From?" Zach asked before he caught himself.

"Life. Her life, anyway. And I don't like it, not one little bit. Frankly it scares me, if you want to know the truth.

Like she's given up. And that's not like her." Her forehead puckered, the brunette looked down at the dog, who'd fallen back asleep. "So it occurred to me that getting her looking for a horse for Landon might... I don't know...break whatever this is that's got hold of her. Start to, anyway." Softly smiling, she met Zach's gaze again. "That's all I was about, I swear. I wasn't trying to fix you up."

"I appreciate that."

"Good." Dorelle reached over to snap a leash on the snoozing dog before lowering him to the floor, where he blinked, yawned, then sat back down, slightly shivering. "So you'll call me after you talk to your brother?"

"I'll ask him later. I don't have regular appointments on Saturday afternoons."

"Thank you so much."

However, as Zach herded his sons to their little blue-and-white house next door to the clinic, Dorelle's comments about her daughter swirled inside his overworked brain like afternoon dust in the sunshine.

Clearly he needed a hobby. Or at least a nap.

"Hi, Mom!"

Seeing her son's ginormous grin swallowing up the entire, if admittedly tiny, phone screen, Mallory Keyes felt her heart swell in her chest. If her precious boy was happy, then she was happy. Nothing else mattered.

Even though it killed her, not being able to touch him, smell him, every day. But Landon deserved a normal life. Well, as normal as the son of a shattered Hollywood power couple—God, she hated that term—could expect. And never let it be said that Mallory couldn't roll with the punches. Or set her own druthers aside in order to do what was best for her son.

And at least they had smartphones.

"Hey, baby," she said, steeling herself for that inevitable moment when the kid would groan and go, "Mom? Really? *Baby?*" He was eleven, after all. But that moment apparently was not today. Thank God. "How's it going?"

"Good." He shoved his hand through shaggy, blah-brown hair that softened what promised to be some pretty fine bone structure, heaven help them all. "Got an A on this project we had to do in science. *Without* Dad's help, you'll be happy to know."

"I am. What was the project on?"

"How mold grows. I had to keep samples in the fridge, it was so cool. Except Cristina kept trying to throw them out."

Their housekeeper. Sixty if she was a day, built like a warship, heart of gold. "Sounds about right. She making you keep your room clean?"

"*You better believe it,*" Mallory heard in the background, and Landon rolled his eyes. Gray, like hers.

"This is not a bad thing, Poky."

"So I guess I can't pull the 'I'm just a kid' thing, huh?"

"Nope."

"Too bad." Then he grinned again, and her heart went *kaplooeey*. "So when can I come see your new house?"

"We already discussed this. Over fall break." Landon's new school was on some weird year-round schedule, so he got two full weeks off in October. "Did you get the pictures?"

"Yeah, it looks really cool." He frowned slightly. "Hey. You okay?"

Mallory's chest pinched again. Five years ago, Landon had been too young to fully understand the implications of the accident that changed all their lives. But more recently he'd apparently become more sensitive to her ongoing challenges, even though she rarely gave voice to them. Partly because the less she did, the less power they had over her, partly because she'd always detested complaining. Mostly, though, because she never wanted Landon to feel sorry for her. Or more importantly, that his mother's being in a wheelchair would have any negative impact on his life.

Sometimes, though, when the pain snuck up on her, she couldn't hide it from him as well as she'd like. And considering everything leading up to his new living situation, trying to pretend her life didn't affect his was probably naive. If not downright stupid.

"I'm doing okay, honey."

"Really?"

She smiled. "Yes, really. Okay, the move wore me out some, but it was worth it. It is so gorgeous out here. Sometimes you can drive for miles without seeing another car."

His brows crashed. "That must be weird."

Mallory laughed. "It is, a little. But you'd be surprised, how fast you get used to it—"

"Gotta go, Cristina's calling me to dinner. Talk tomorrow?"

"You bet, sugar."

The calls were never long enough. And every single time, when they ended, Mallory felt as if somebody'd hollowed out her chest. Which in turn made her question, yet again, whether she'd made the right choice, leaving behind her only child.

Except the only other option would have been selfish. If not downright cruel. Granted, the kid was a toughie, but she could tell he needed a break. Not from her, but from the attention she invariably attracted every time she set foot—or wheelchair—outside—

The landline's shrill ring made her jump. Mallory glared at the thing for a good second or so before wheeling over the tiled floor to answer it. A little testily, maybe. Why Mama'd insisted on installing the blasted thing, she'd never know, since they both had cell phones, for pity's sake.

"Hello?"

"Oh. I'm sorry," said a nice male voice on the other end. *Real* nice. Granted, in all likelihood it probably belonged to someone who did not match the voice, because that's the way these things usually worked, but a girl could dream. "I was trying to reach Dorelle Keyes?"

"She's not in right now," Mallory said in a somewhat less pissy tone. "May I take a message?"

A pause preceded, "Is this her daughter, by any chance?"

Mallory tensed. It was highly unlikely the paparazzi would've sniffed her out way up here, let alone unearthed an unlisted number. But these days she wasn't taking any chances.

"If you leave your name and number," she said, grimacing at her reflection in the mirror on the other side of the room, "I'll be sure to have Mrs. Keyes get back to you."

"It's Dr. Talbot. Edgar's vet? She'd asked me to check with my brother about a horse for her grandson?"

The relieved breath Mallory had been about to release snagged at the base of her throat. To hear Mama tell it, this Dr. Talbot would put Michelangelo's David to shame. And say what you will about her mother, the woman definitely knew *hot* when she saw it.

So much for not matching the voice.

"Um...you still there?"

Mallory wrenched her gaze away from her wretched reflection. Way too many nights of lousy sleep had definitely taken its toll. "Sorry. She was supposed to run that by me first."

"I take it you're Mallory, then?"

Call her crazy, but she was guessing this guy had no idea who she was. Meaning either he hadn't put two and two together, or Mama had—for once—kept her trap shut. Or maybe he was just playing it cool?

"That's me. Only nothing's been decided about the horse. Since we're still getting settled in—" a half-truth, since once the renovation had been completed all they'd had to do was dump stuff in closets and drawers and they were basically done "—I hadn't really given it much thought yet."

Users Review

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