



The Texas Ranger's Nanny (Lone Star Lawmen)

By Rebecca Winters



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SON OF TEXAS

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Sweet young Jeremy wasn't the only male Claire would miss when the chemistry grad left her nanny job to start a career in Houston. But all that matters now is helping Vic find his son. When they do, will she be able to leave, proud of her part in his rescue? Or will her Lone Star lawman realize what she's known all along—that they share something too wonderful to lose?



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Rebecca Winters lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favourite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her romance novels because writing is her passion, along with her family and church. Rebecca loves to hear from readers. If you wish to e-mail her, please visit her website at: www.cleanromances.com

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"There is a storm warning in effect in the Denton area, where two tornadoes have been confirmed this morning. Those driving toward Denton are advised to take shelter beneath an overpass or to abandon their vehicles and find a ditch, if possible, until the storm pas—"

Unable to listen to any more, Texas Ranger Stephen Victorio Malone—better known as Vic—shut off the radio as he drove from his house to headquarters in downtown Austin Monday morning. Though the weather was in the mideighties and had been for the entire month, he broke out in a cold sweat after hearing the warning. He always listened to the news in the car, but any mention of a tornado triggered a response he doubted he would ever overcome.

Three years ago he'd lost his parents and his wife, Laura, in a tornado near his hometown of Blanco, Texas. His initial grief might have passed, but the pain of losing three people he loved at once would stay with him to the end of his life. If it hadn't been for his four-year-old son, Jeremy, who wasn't with the family at the time, he didn't know if he would have survived it.

Austin didn't usually get the tornadoes that other parts of the state experienced. For the first three months after the tragedy, Vic had stayed in Blanco while he put up both his house and his parents' home for sale. During that period, his sister-in-law, Carol, and her husband, Dennis, had helped take care of Jeremy while Vic commuted to work in Austin. Carol and Dennis had two children: Sarah, who was eight, and five-year-old Randy. Randy and Jeremy had become close buddies.

Vic hadn't been prepared for the pushback he got from Jeremy when he told him they were moving to the suburbs of Austin to be closer to his work. But as much as it pained him to tear his son away from his cousin and new best friend, Vic *had* to get on with his life. And so did Jeremy. Austin represented a new beginning for the two of them. He couldn't continue to depend on Laura's sister to be a mother to his son.

The first thing Vic did when they moved was hire a professional cleaning service to clean his new house. That part was easy. The hard part was finding the right nanny for his son. Through an agency he'd found a woman in her early fifties who was a good fit. But after two years she moved to Dallas to be near her older sister. Then Claire Ames, a college student finishing up a master's degree at the University of Texas, came into their lives.

Out of the four women Vic interviewed for the position, Claire was the one Jeremy liked the most. Although he felt a little awkward about it, Vic asked her outright if she was in a relationship with anyone that might interfere with her taking care of his son. Claire assured him there hadn't been anyone since she broke up with her last boyfriend because he didn't like being put off when she had to study. Her explanation convinced Vic

to take a chance on her.

Since then everything had been great, but now Vic was faced with the possibility he might lose Claire, as she had just graduated from her master's chemistry program. He and Jeremy had gone to the ceremony on Friday. Claire let Jeremy keep her tassel, which he'd proudly hung from a knob on the chest of drawers in his room.

Now Claire was looking for a full-time position as a chemist. Once she found a job in her field, she'd be leaving them.

Though Jeremy had known that Claire wouldn't always be his nanny, the fact failed to register with his boy. When it came time for her to leave, his son would have a terrible time letting her go. Over the past nine months they'd forged a strong bond. Jeremy was crazy about Claire, who had brought laughter and fun back into the house. Vic couldn't bear the thought of another loss bringing more pain to his son.

Vic's buddies at headquarters knew of his dilemma and encouraged him to pay Claire more money. Maybe she could be bribed into staying another year before leaving to work for some company who knows where. His fear was that she'd be leaving the state. He'd grown used to her presence and couldn't imagine her living so far away. And Jeremy would have a real problem accepting that he might never see her again.

Vic had substantial savings in the bank from the sale of both homes and his income as a Ranger. And his house in Austin came with enough property to keep his horses there. Money wasn't a problem, and the idea of offering Claire a substantial raise was tempting.

If she didn't get the right job offer soon, he'd discuss with her the option of accepting a raise in her salary to keep her with them a little longer. But to be truthful, the reason he was having such a hard time letting her go wasn't only because of Jeremy. Claire had a fun-loving nature that he liked to be around. They shared the same sense of humor, and she was very respectful of his privacy, which made him feel relaxed around her. You couldn't bottle her positive attributes any more than you could bottle the coppery red-gold color of her hair. That's why he knew he could never replace her.

Selfishly, Vic hoped a great job offer wouldn't come along for at least another year—let alone another man. When he'd hired Claire, she'd told him she didn't have a boyfriend, and as far as he knew, that was still the case. But knowing how hard she'd worked to earn her graduate degree and make a place for herself in the world, made him feel like a terrible person for wanting to hold her back.

After the house cleaners left, Claire drove the three blocks to Pinehurst Elementary School to pick up little dark-haired Jeremy. The bell rang at three fifteen, but she always got there early because she didn't want Jeremy to worry. He was usually the first of the kids to run out of the second grade pod. The moment he saw her four-year-old red Honda Civic, he would wave and practically fly to reach the car.

Through school programs and class parties, she'd become acquainted with a lot of the moms who were picking up their kids. She waved to them. They were lined up in their cars all the way down the street. Claire couldn't imagine loving a child of her own more than she loved Jeremy Malone.

With Vic's help she'd learned how to ride a horse. The three of them rode on his property when he was able to get home early from work. Vic's black gelding was named Midnight. Claire rode Marshmallow, the bay Vic's wife once rode. Jeremy had his own pony, Comet. At seven, he was already quite a horseman. He was the cutest, funniest boy she'd ever met, and he had an amazing imagination.

One day quite recently Jeremy told her he was part Apache. She thought he'd made it up because he loved stories about the frontier days. When she told Vic what his son had confided, Vic had let go with a burst of rich laughter. The tough-looking Texas Ranger had another side to him his son brought out. When the man smiled, her insides melted.

His jet black eyes zeroed in on her. "For once that wasn't his imagination, Claire. We have Lipan Apache blood flowing through us. Not a large amount. You know that photograph on the wall in my den?"

"If you mean the one of the Sons of the Forty Texas Rangers surrounding Jack Hayes, Jeremy showed it to me."

"Two of the men were deputized Lipan Apaches fighting for Texas at Bandera Pass in 1842, and *one* of them is our ancestor through the Malone line. I have a second cousin named Clint who works on the police force. He has a smattering of Apache blood like me and lives in Luckenbach with his wife, Sandra, and family. I occasionally take Jeremy to visit them. We ride and do a little washer pitching." *"Washer pitching?"*

"It's like playing a game of horseshoes, Texas style. We'll drive there with the horses when Jeremy's school lets out. After a ride you can try your hand at it."

The explanation fascinated Claire. "I had no idea. From now on I'll try to believe everything your Mini Me tells me."

Vic lifted one black brow. *"Try* has to be the operative word. We could get into a whole lot of trouble if we believed all his tales."

While Claire sat in her car waiting for Jeremy, she couldn't help smiling. That had been the day she forgot she was a nanny. A fluttering had started up in her chest as she sat across the table from Vic, looking at her tall, hard-muscled, thirty-year-old employer. The fluttering had never gone away, but she'd keep it a secret if it killed her. Were he to know how attracted she was to him, he'd fire her on the spot. She'd been hired to take care of his son, not fixate on Jeremy's gorgeous father.

As soon as the bell rang, the doors to the school burst open and children started running out. She was surprised when she didn't see Jeremy right away. Maybe his teacher, Mrs. Rigby, needed to talk to him about something. Claire waited a few minutes before she started to wonder if something could be wrong.

Deciding she'd better check on him, she got out of her car and hurried across the playground to the door leading into the second grade pod. When she peeked inside the classroom, she saw the teacher sitting alone at her desk. No Jeremy. Claire's heart started to thud.

"Mrs. Rigby?"

The older woman lifted her head. "Hi, Claire. If you're looking for Jeremy, he left the second the bell rang."

"But he didn't come out the doors."

"Did you check the office? Maybe he's there for some reason."

"I'll do that."

Claire practically ran down the hall to the main office, but there was no sign of Jeremy. "Have you seen Jeremy Malone since the bell rang?" she asked the secretary. "He's in second grade. Kind of tallish for his age with dark hair and brown eyes?"

"I know who he is, but no, he hasn't been in here."

"Would you call him to the office for me?"

"Sure. I'll do it right now."

The secretary got on the PA system and asked Jeremy Malone to report to the front office. She repeated the request three times. When Jeremy still didn't show up, fear for his well-being cramped Claire's stomach. Where could he be?

"Will you call the security guard and give him a description? Jeremy wore a blue-and-green plaid shirt and jeans today and he has a blue backpack. And can you ask the guard to check with the crossing guards, and look in all the bathrooms, the library, the gym and anywhere else Jeremy might possibly be? I'm worried about him."

While the secretary contacted security, the principal came out of her office. "Is there a problem?"

Claire nodded. "I can't find Jeremy Malone. He didn't come out to the car. I'm going to phone his father and let him know what's happened."

"Maybe you should wait until we've confirmed he hasn't gone home with a friend," the principal suggested.

"No, I have to call him. Jeremy could be in danger."

She'd been around Vic long enough to know that when a person went missing, the first twelve hours were crucial in finding them alive. "Jeremy wouldn't go home with a friend without getting my permission first. We have strict rules about that." Sick to her stomach by now, Claire pulled out her phone and called Vic.

He answered after three rings. "Hi, Claire. What's up?"

"I'm worried about Jeremy."

"What's wrong?" Tension crept into Vic's deep voice.

"I'm here at the school to pick him up, but he never came out. I got here ten minutes before the bell like I always do, but there's been no sign of him. I've checked with his teacher and with the office. They've called his name over the intercom, but he hasn't shown up. The security guard just walked in the door. He's been looking everywhere for him but he's shaking his head."

"I'll be right there. You drive home. Maybe a friend's mother dropped him off. Call the list of parents we keep by the phone."

"Okay, I will." She hung up and told the principal she was going home to see if Jeremy was there. "Ranger Malone is on his way here."

"Let's hope Jeremy made his way home and is waiting for you."

If he did that, then he'd have left the school through another entrance. Claire hurried out of the building to the car. As she drove to the house, she called out to any kids she could see who were walking home from school. No one had seen Jeremy. Adrenaline caused her heart to pound so hard it was painful.

If anything had happened to Vic's son...

She shouldn't go there, but she couldn't help it. Three years ago Vic had lived through the nightmare of losing his wife and his parents. For him to have to go through his only child's disappearance seemed unimaginably cruel. But her gut told her something bad had happened to Jeremy.

Vic's job as a Texas Ranger made him a target for felons he'd put in prison who were out for revenge. His line of work was terribly dangerous. In fact, when he'd hired Claire, he'd warned her she would have to be extra careful at all times, for her own safety, as well as for Jeremy's.

Jeremy was a very obedient kid. He worshipped his father and told Claire he wanted to be a Texas Ranger like his dad when he grew up. Because of his lively imagination, Jeremy had a spy kit he kept adding to. He'd also come up with a secret password for them to use if either one of them was ever in trouble. *Wolverine*. It was the name of his favorite action figure.

If someone tried to call him on the phone and pretended to be Claire, they had to give him the password. The same held true if someone pretending to be Jeremy called her. The two of them laughed about it when Jeremy came up with the plan, but she wasn't laughing now. If that dear boy wasn't found soon.

Too many negative thoughts ran through her mind as she called the last name on the list of Jeremy's friends. Her heart sank to learn that his friend Nate had been home from school all day with a cold and had no idea where Jeremy could be.

Vic raced to his boss's office. "Captain?"

TJ Horton raised his gray head. "What is it, Vic? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"My son is missing. I don't have a good feeling about this, and I'm headed over to Pinehurst Elementary on Wilson Drive right now. I'm going to treat it as a crime scene and I'll need backup to meet me there. Put a surveillance crew on my house. Claire could be in danger as we speak."

The head of the Rangers nodded. "Kit's in the building. I'll send him over there, too, and I'll tell Dino and Carlos to keep an eye on your nanny."

"Thanks."

Vic rushed out to his gray Chevy Tahoe in the parking area. On his way to the school, Claire phoned to tell him she was at the house, but Jeremy wasn't there.

She'd called the mothers of all the kids he played with, but no one had seen or heard from him.

"Thanks. You stay put, Claire. I'll be in touch soon. Just so you know, we're putting some men outside the house to guard you. They'll be in a surveillance van, so don't be worried when you see an unfamiliar vehicle

near the house."

"I won't."

Vic's cold sweat had seeped through his clothes by the time he reached the school. He ran into the main office, where he found the principal telling some other teachers about Jeremy. She turned to him. "Ranger Malone, we're devastated this has happened."

"Me, too. I need a list of all personnel working inside and outside the building with addresses and phone numbers."

"Here's a copy for you," the secretary said and handed the sheet to him.

"Thank you." He turned to the principal again. "Who was on recess duty today? I need to know if there were any strangers on the playground or maintenance workers from the school district."

"I'll get all that information for you right now."

Mrs. Rigby walked over to him. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault. I just want to know if Jeremy was acting any different than usual today."

"No. He's a good student and always well behaved. They were finishing their math when the bell rang. He's almost always the first one out of his desk, and today was no exception. That's all I can tell you."

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