

Chapter 1 - When Do You Want Me to Start?

Cassie backed out of her parking slot in the underground garage and started towards the exit, turning on some music as she did. As she made the last turn, she slowed for a Jaguar that had just pulled into the lane ahead of her, obviously heading for the same exit.

Bz-z-z. It was her phone, vibrating on the passenger seat. She glanced at it and decided to let it go to voice, but then it buzzed again, tweaking her curiosity. Oh, what the heck. She reached down to pick it up, turning her eyes to watch as it danced across the leather seat of her little BMW X4. She tried to see who was calling but couldn't quite make out what the screen said.

THUMP! Cassie was thrown forward hard against her seatbelt as her little red car came to an unexpected stop, its front bumper pressed against the rear one of the Jaguar ahead of her.

Great! Just what she needed—some nincompoop who'd felt it necessary to stop for no reason. Shaking her head and mumbling, she undid her seatbelt and got out, ready to do battle. The driver of the Jaguar was already squatting down and looking at the two bumpers.

"Why in god's name did you stop?" she demanded angrily as she walked up to him. He looked at her surprised and stood up—way up. Cassie's quick guesstimate put him as at least six foot, two inches, a fact that sank him even lower in her book. Now she had to look up at him as she impatiently repeated her question.

"Why did you stop for no reason?" Her tone made it obvious she thought he had done something incomprehensibly stupid.

The tall stranger looked at her intently but didn't answer immediately. He was taking in the details of the very attractive young woman in her late twenties—blonde hair, honey-brown eyes, cute little figure, maybe five foot, three, possibly five foot, four inches if she stretched.

"Hello-o! Are you deaf?"

Rude, too, he thought to himself.

"We have a small problem, but I think there's been no damage done," he said finally.

"The problem is that you stopped in the middle of nowhere!" Cassie glared up at him as she spoke.

"I stopped because there's a stop sign," the tall man replied calmly, motioning with his hand towards the red hexagon affixed to the nearby concrete post.

Cassie looked at him like he was from another planet. "Do you see any other cars around?"

The man's mouth looked like he wanted to smile. "Ah, I see the problem now. I wasn't informed that, in Dallas, stop signs are optional, depending on the presence of other cars." There was a definite twinkle in the man's eyes that totally infuriated Cassie. He was laughing at her!

She was also acutely aware that he'd been studying her ever since he'd stood up, and it was making her uncomfortable. He might be a brake-happy moron, and he might be unforgivably tall, but he was also a fine specimen of the male world—full dark hair, piercing brown eyes, and a body either very familiar with a gym or some type of sport. Even his accent was attractive, although she'd swallow her tongue before admitting it.

"If you'd like, we can exchange insurance information," he offered, interrupting her analysis of his assets.

“No, just let it be,” replied Cassie with a loud sigh. She rolled her eyes for emphasis as she continued. “I’m the one behind, so, even though you’re the one with the itchy brake foot, I’ll be the one at fault. We’ll just ignore it.”

He was watching her again and paused before answering. “Fine. We’ll call it no harm done. Good day.” He nodded at her with a smile, which she didn’t return.

She watched as he returned to his silver Jaguar and drove off, and then she got back into her own car, the incoming phone call long forgotten. She’d really not wanted to prolong the interaction with the man—the tall, dark, handsome man, but she’d check the bumper more closely when she got home. If there was any damage, she could get Daddy to fix it so she wouldn’t have to make an insurance claim.

Well that was interesting, thought Kade to himself as he drove away. I wonder if she’s always that full of attitude?

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“What do you think, Daddy?” asked Cassie as she took a drink of her Evian. ‘Daddy,’ known to the rest of the world as Harper Bellingworth, Texas real estate magnate, looked at the newspaper section she’d given him. She’d circled one of the classified announcements, which he reread now.

“Ah can’t tell much about it from this, sugah plum,” he answered, watching his daughter fold her legs gracefully underneath her on his leather sofa. “Is there some reason you’re concerned?”

“No, not really. I just thought maybe you knew something about it. It sounds interesting.”

“So why are you readin’ the classifieds? Ah can keep you busy if that’s what you want.”

“Daddy, you know I like to do things on my own.”

Except fix your own bumper, he thought, smiling.

“So go find out what it is,” he answered. “Just ask the right questions.”

She nodded and took the newspaper back again.

“Are you staying for dinner?” he continued. “Margaux should be home anytime now.” Margaux was his third wife, technically Cassie’s stepmother, but the two women were more like friends.

“I can’t. I’ve got someplace I need to be.”

“All right, sugah plum. Let me know what happens with the ad, and don’t you take on any work competing with me.”

Cassie laughed as she got up and went over to kiss Daddy good-bye.

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Cassie was surprised as she entered the parking garage for her interview. This was the same place she’d run into that strange man last week—literally run into him. He’d had that interesting accent, like Irish or Scottish. Wherever it was that he was from, they obviously stopped at stop signs even if they were the only car for miles around.

She pulled into a slot and then checked herself in the rearview mirror before getting out. Not bad, she thought. She disliked it when her qualifications weren’t taken seriously, but she wasn’t so naïve that she didn’t acknowledge the importance of personal appearance, too, especially in Dallas. Sometimes it seemed to her that looks was the name of the game here.

She took the elevator up to the sixteenth floor and pushed open the door with the sign MacPherson and Ross Enterprises, LLC.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully to the woman sitting behind the desk. “I’m Cassie Bellingworth. I have a three o’clock appointment with Mr. MacPherson.”

“He’ll be right with you,” the woman replied. “He’s on a call right now.”

Cassie sat down and thumbed through a magazine entitled *Scottish Ranching Journal*, thinking to herself that she could honestly say it was the first time she’d ever read that publication in a waiting room.

“Ms. Bellingworth?”

Cassie jumped. The voice sounded oddly familiar, and, as she looked up, she froze. Him! Her eyes got big as she stared at the same man who last week had inspected her car’s bumper and made her feel slightly uncomfortable. The man in the doorway looked almost as surprised, but that look was quickly followed by one of suppressed amusement.

“We meet again,” he said, his eyes definitely laughing.

“I should just go, shouldn’t I?” Cassie asked bluntly. “We don’t need to go through the charade of an interview when we both know you’re not going to hire me.” Cassie started to collect her things but was interrupted.

“I won’t know that until we’ve spoken. Please come in.”

Cassie eyed him warily but then shrugged. Why not? She was already there, and god knows he was pleasant enough to look at.

“Very well,” she said almost primly as she rose and entered his office.

“Kade MacPherson,” he said as he extended his large hand to her.

“Cassie Bellingworth,” she replied, shaking his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“So, Miss Bellingworth, let me tell you a little about what I’m looking for,” he started, but she cut in quickly. “Please, call me Cassie.”

“Very well, Cassie. I look after some ranching and oil interests in America for my mother, who’s back in Scotland. Right now I’m trying to do a financial assessment beyond what we normally do in daily operations, so I’m looking for an assistant who’s good with statistics. The interests aren’t all local, and, while we receive reports here on a regular basis, I’ll be doing some traveling, mostly to Wyoming and other parts of Texas. Would that be a problem for you to travel with me?”

Cassie was listening, amazed. It sounded like he was seriously considering her, but, after the way she’d spoken to him in the parking garage last week, she couldn’t imagine why.

“Cassie?” Kade interrupted her thoughts. “Do you have family or other obligations here that would prevent you from traveling with me?”

“No, I’m totally free.”

Kade had already interviewed several people who had strong credentials for what he needed, but there was something about this woman that fascinated him. She was beautiful, but Dallas was full of beautiful women. Maybe it was her attitude. She wasn’t all that tall, but what she lacked in height, she certainly made up for in spunk. He had a feeling that having her around would liven things up immensely.

He studied her a minute and then said, “Well, Cassie, why don’t we give it a try?” He mentioned a figure that was quite generous and was surprised that she didn’t seem to pay much attention to it. She gave him a blinding smile and said, “Okay. When do you want me to start?”

“As soon as you can.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” They shook hands again, and she left.

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Kade sat staring out his office window for a long time. He had a fantastic view, but right now he wasn't thinking about the city lights spread out beneath him.

What am I doing? he wondered. She's not the best qualified, she's got a mouth and an attitude, and she's beautiful in a distracting way. Have I lost my mind?

After the encounter in the parking garage last week, he'd found himself thinking about her many times since. She was a complete stranger to him, and yet he'd found himself strongly attracted to her—the way she'd hopped out of her car on the offensive, oblivious to the fact that the accident was her fault. He was close to a foot taller than she was, and that hadn't slowed her down one iota.

He'd found it amusing the way she'd lit into him for stopping at a stop sign, and he'd had very irreverent thoughts as he'd listened to her tart tongue. In the way that minds can do, his had presented him with lightning-quick images both of kissing her and of spanking her—the first, just because he wanted to, and the second, because he'd never met someone who seemed to need it more.

So what had he just done? He'd hired her, not only to come to his office on a regular basis but also to travel with him and spend long hours alone with him. He was either incredibly clever, naively brave, or hopelessly dumb.

He would soon find out which one.