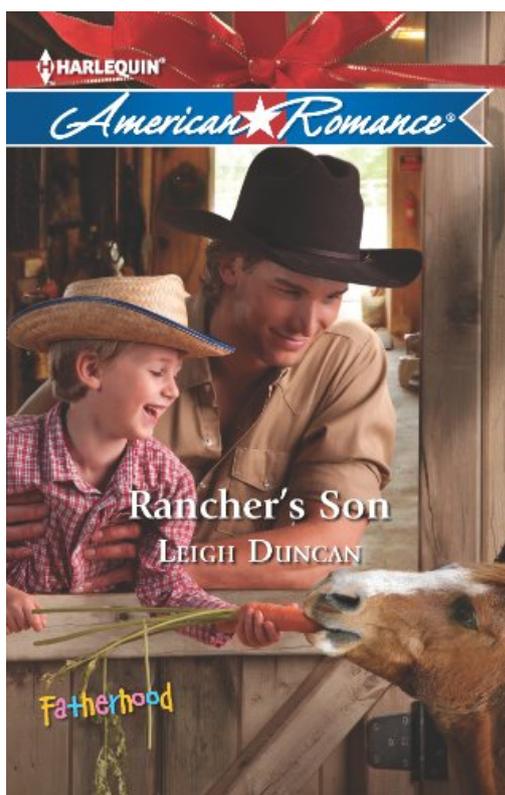


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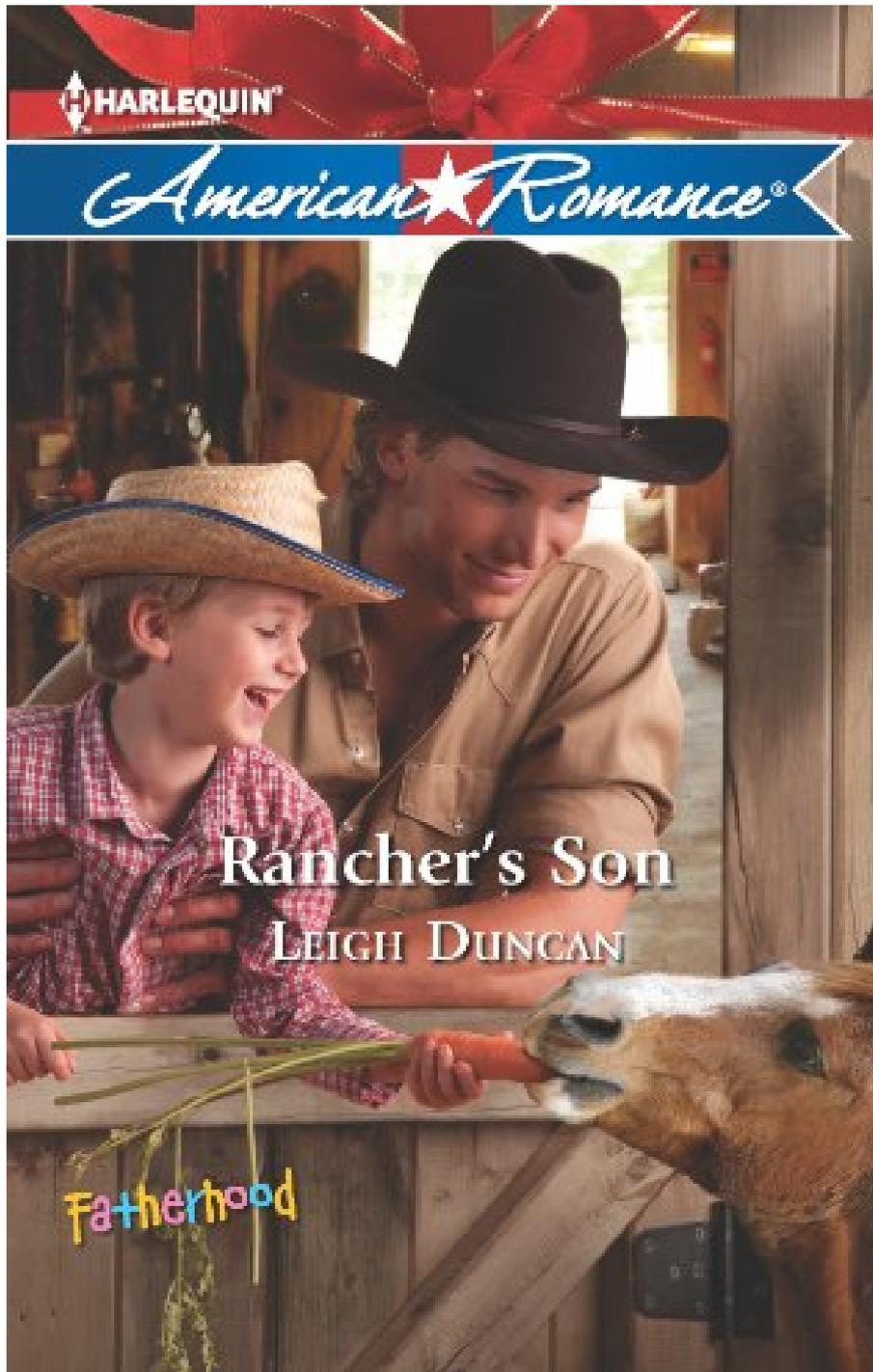
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## About the Author

Leigh Duncan spent years moving about the country, but now calls central Florida's East Coast her home. Married to the love of her life and the mother of two, she writes the kind of books she enjoys reading, ones where home, family and community are key to happy endings. When she isn't busy writing, Leigh enjoys curling up with a cup of hot coffee and a great book. Visit Leigh at [www.leighduncan.com](http://www.leighduncan.com)

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Sarah Magarity rose to her tiptoes on the stepladder. The large silver star atop the Christmas tree wobbled when her fingers brushed against it. As she wrestled the heavy ornament from the center post, it tipped, threatening to throw her off balance. For a second, Sarah saw herself lying on the floor, alone and injured, through the long holiday weekend. Normally hectic on a Thursday afternoon, the Department of Children and Family Services in Fort Pierce, Florida, had slowly emptied once the tech guys shut down the computers for a system-wide upgrade. Now only a tree that smelled more like plastic than pine stood between her and a much-needed two weeks out from under a crushing workload.

Two weeks of white, sandy beaches and a cell phone that didn't buzz with a new crisis every ten minutes. Two weeks of gathering plants for her growing collection of tropical flowers. Sarah took a deep breath and braced herself against the wall. She could almost smell Hawaiian orchids and plumeria.

Dreaming of ukuleles and fruity concoctions decorated with tiny umbrellas, she whistled a slightly off-key version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Carefully, she toted the star down the ladder. Her foot had barely touched the worn carpet when one of the doors at the main entrance swung open. Sounds of heavy traffic on U.S. Highway 1 blared into the office before the door swished closed. Silence, broken only by the noisy hum of an air conditioner, once more filled the room.

"C'mon, Jimmy." A voice whined over the warren of empty cubicles. "We hav'ta find someone pronto. It's late."

Late for what?

Sarah swallowed a groan. Whoever had arrived at four-thirty on Christmas Eve, they were late, all right. The

holiday party for kids in foster care had ended at two.

"Can I help you?" Sarah prayed the curvy brunette rounding the last of the partitions wanted nothing more than grocery money. A couple of ten-dollar gift cards, and not much else, remained in the emergency fund.

"This is Jimmy Parker." The woman's plunging neckline dipped perilously low as she placed her hand square on the back of the little boy at her side and shoved. The child stumbled forward. "His mom asked me to drop him off."

Sarah mustered a smile for the pair of sad brown eyes that peered up from beneath a thatch of sandy-blond hair. The boy's hollow gaze met hers only briefly before he looked away. When his focus dropped to a pair of tattered sneakers, Sarah hiked an eyebrow. She skimmed over high-water jeans, frowned at a shirt Goodwill would reject. Fighting a protective nature that made her want to wrap the little boy in her arms and make everything right in his world, Sarah stiffened her spine.

The brutal truth was, a dozen kids just like this one walked into the DCF offices each month. She had a hundred more open cases in her file cabinet. She couldn't give every child assigned to her the attention they deserved. Not and still keep her sanity. The situation was far from her idealistic dream of how things ought to work. But there were too many at-risk kids, too few dollars to go around and too few workers to do the job.

Letting her eyes narrow, she faced the older of her guests head-on. "You're too late." She grimaced when a little more vehemence than usual crept into her voice. "The party was hours ago. You should have been here then."

Despite herself, Sarah glanced across the room at a whimsical mural of a sleigh propelled by eight flying porpoises. Were there any presents left? Not a chance. Every gift from Santa's bag had been distributed into the eager hands of other kids who were just as needy as this one.

"Party?" The latecomer's dark eyebrows lifted. "Who said anything about a party?" The brunette chewed a wad of gum and swallowed. "I promised to deliver the kid, and here he is."

An uneasy feeling settled in Sarah's chest when her visitor dropped a worn duffel bag to the floor.

"Hold on a sec," she ordered. "Maybe you'd better start at the beginning and tell me exactly what brought you here. I'm Sarah Magarity, the senior caseworker." She paused for a look around. With no husband or children of her own to rush home to, she'd offered to keep the office open until closing time. A skeleton staff would report in on Monday and man the offices through the New Year. For tonight, though, she was it. "And you are?"

"Candy. Candace, really, but everyone just calls me Candy." The woman settled one hand on a cocked hip. "Candy Storm. And this little guy," she said, tapping a bloodred fingernail on the boy's head, "is James Tyrone Parker. Jimmy. He's five. His mom was my best friend."

The implication sent Sarah's stomach into free fall. She swept another look at the child who studied the stained carpet at his feet. "His mom is...?"

"Yeah." Candy blinked several times before patting the skin beneath lashes so long they had to be fake.

"I think you and I should talk privately." Sarah motioned toward a nearby cubicle. "Jimmy, I need you to watch TV or play with some toys while Miss Candy and I chat for a few minutes."

Without waiting for a response, Sarah took the child's tiny hand in hers. His thin shoulders and bony frame raised troubling questions. When was the last time this kid ate? How long ago had his mother passed? Who had been taking care of him since then? And where?

Her tone softened. "I think we have some cookies in the break room. Would you like some?" When Jimmy didn't answer, she called to Candy. "Does he have any allergies?"

The woman's gum snapped and popped before she shrugged a vague "Nope?"

As the child scrambled onto the couch near the bare Christmas tree, Sarah overlooked his soiled shirt and grimy fingernails, knowing that if she accused the parents of every unwashed youngster of neglect, the foster system would collapse under the load. Bruises or injuries were another matter, and she scanned the child for visible signs. Her breath eased at the sight of pale, but unblemished, skin. Relieved that the boy wasn't in immediate physical danger—and thus, not really her problem—she clamped a heavy lid over the urge to take him under her wing.

She couldn't get involved. Not now. Not when doing so would ruin her plans for the holidays and dash her hope to rest and recharge. And, after five years with the DCF in Melbourne and two more in Fort Pierce, it was either that or quit. No, she shook her head, this little boy was Candy's problem and he had to stay that way. At least until next week when her coworkers would be back in the office. Steeling her heart, she settled him in front of a cartoon video with a small plate of cookies and a juice box she took from the office refrigerator.

"Okay, what's this all about?"

With Candy lagging behind, Sarah led the way to a cubicle where a line of red X's across the bottom of the calendar marked the vacation days she had to use or lose according to DCF's policy manual. She waved her guest into the only other chair in the cramped space and swung to her computer. She stilled. Until the IT department completed their work, no one could access the DCF database. Or learn whether Jimmy Parker already had a caseworker to look after him.

With a sigh, Sarah pulled a yellow legal pad and a pen from a drawer and hoped Candy would quickly get to the point. Across the desk, the woman gave her a petulant look, her jaw jutting forward.

"Millie, Jimmy's mom, made me swear if anything ever happened to her, I'd bring the kid to Florida," she said, with an accent from considerably north of the Sunshine State. "She said his dad owns a ranch somewhere near Lake Okeechobee. Jimmy's named after him."

James Tyrone Parker.

Sarah pursed her lips at the memory of a tall, broad-shouldered rancher with sun-bleached hair. She brushed a speck of dust from the desktop, chasing the image away. Surely there were thousands of Parkers in the hundreds of square miles bordering the largest lake in Florida. There were probably a dozen Jims and Tys among them. The odds against this little boy's father being the same Ty Parker she'd run out of DCF's offices last spring were practically astronomical. Still, it wouldn't hurt to move the rancher's name to the top of the list.

"And where's home, Candy?"

"New York, of course." The brunette slid one slim leg across the other. "Me and Millie met at a casting call for an ad agency when Jimmy was just a baby. We was both trying to break into movies." She leaned

forward, nodding the way people did when they had a secret to share. "It's tougher than anybody thinks. Anyways..." Candy thrust her shoulders back until the fabric of her T-shirt tightened. "I got the gig and Millie didn't, but we hit it off, you know? Millie, she didn't have much acting experience. And the kid only made it harder. I'd babysit when I could, but eventually Millie gave up and took a job waitressing. That's what got her killed. Some guy knifed her f' tip money."

Candy studied the floor. "After Millie died, it wasn't easy. I did my best by him, but it's been three months, and the kid still asks f' her. I took a job in Tampa over the holidays just so's I could bring him to you. I guess you'll take it from here." She shrugged and uncrossed her legs. "I got a life, too. You know?"

"Look." Sarah placed her hands flat on the desk. "The system doesn't work that way."

She scanned the notes she'd taken while Candy had rambled on. Like acting, there was more to transferring a child into DCF's custody than one might think. And nothing, absolutely nothing, could be done before the first of the year when the computer system was up again.

"I'd need proof Jimmy is who you say he is. His birth certificate. Millie's de..."

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