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# *My First* **RODEO**

HOW THREE DAUGHTERS,  
ONE WIFE, AND A HERD OF OTHERS  
ARE MAKING ME A BETTER DAD

**STONEY STAMPER**  
*of The Daddy Diaries Blog*

*My First*  
**RODEO**

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ONE WIFE, AND A HERD OF OTHERS  
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## MY FIRST RODEO

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*To April, not a single word of this book would have been possible without you. My real life started the day our paths crossed again. You are the June to my Johnny, and I love you more than you can know.*

*To my daughters—Abby, Emma, and Gracee—thank you for giving me the only job that has ever really mattered in my life. Being a dad. Pineapple.*



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# Introduction



ONE SUNNY DAY MORE THAN five years ago, I sat down with my then six-week-old daughter, Gracee June. I was a man in my midthirties who had sworn time and again that I'd never be a father. I'd tell anyone who would listen. While nearly all my similarly aged friends and family had already started families, and several of them had children in their teens, I was only just beginning mine. Gracee was my first, and only, biological child. A few years prior to this sunny day, I had married my childhood sweetheart, and she had two daughters, Abby and Emma. Those two little girls had spent the last two years giving me daily lessons on how to be a father, and I was learning, albeit slowly. A baptism by fire, of sorts. I had no idea what I was doing, but I tried hard. Gracee—she was my first baby. I was thirty-three years old and had never changed a diaper. Never given a baby a bath. Never fed or burped a tiny little body over my shoulder.

On that fateful day, my wife, April, had decided to use her Mother's Day gift from me and the girls: a spa day complete with a deep-tissue massage, facial, manicure, and pedicure. A day of relaxation that she certainly deserved. When she left that day, we had no idea it would put into motion something beyond our wildest dreams. It was the first time I had ever spent the day alone with our precious

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little girl. I was blindly confident that the day would go smoothly. I am a competent person, after all. This couldn't be that hard, right? As it would turn out, it was harder than expected. And everything that *could* go wrong, *did* go wrong. And just like Abby and Emma had done, Gracee, in a mere matter of moments, shattered any illusions that I knew what I was doing. But I'm an optimist, and I believed something good was going to come from that day, shattered illusions and all.

That evening, I decided to take my sense of humor and knack for storytelling to pen and paper. I told the story of all of the craziness that had occurred that first day alone as daddy and daughter. I posted our story that night to my personal Facebook page, sort of hoping to get a few laughs. The story was shared over one thousand times in the first day. Our funny little story brought more laughs than anticipated, and it continued to make the rounds on social media for a few more weeks. Now I had been a writer, in my own mind, for most of my life. I kept journals and wrote poems and short stories. But nothing anyone had ever really read, besides myself. April began encouraging me to start a Facebook page for my writing, maybe even a parenting blog. I confess that writing was a good release for me. I enjoyed it. And it was free, wouldn't cost us anything except maybe a little bit of ego, if it didn't take off.

I told April that I would try it but only continue to do it if I could get at least one thousand followers. I thought this was a lofty goal. Well, much to my surprise, I had more than one thousand followers in the first day. Next thing I knew, I had five thousand. And then ten thousand. We had officially gone viral. Today, my blog—



## Introduction

*The Daddy Diaries*—reaches more than one hundred thousand people every day. April and I still sit around sort of shocked. Who could have ever seen that coming?! Well, not us, that's for sure. *The Daddy Diaries* has evolved into its own community, even being a place where people come to help others. In the last five years, we have raised more than sixty thousand dollars for families and children in need. We have been fortunate enough to help more than fifty families in times of trouble or tragedy. Again, we never saw that coming.

We've tried to take this opportunity and use it to make the world a little better place. But we've also been able to use it to show our daughters what a joy it is to help others, to show kindness and love to people that haven't been as fortunate as we have. Actually, *fortunate* is not the best word choice. The better word is *blessed*. If you had told me ten years ago I would be the dad to three generous-hearted daughters, husband to my very best friend (April Skinner, more about her later), and the author of a popular parenting blog, I would've laughed in your face after I'd picked myself up off the ground from laughing so hard. And I expect that most anyone who knew me would have fallen down laughing right alongside me. But for some reason, God decided to do one of those “old chunk of coal but gonna be a diamond someday” routines. He took the reins of my life and steered me right where I was supposed to be. Yep, God dropped me right in the middle of a whirlpool full of estrogen and laughter and a few tears, because girls cry a little. And just as he did on the day he finished making the heavens and the earth, he looked at me knee deep in it and said, “Now that's good.”

And as usual, God was right. It's so good.

I was born on June 29, 1979. I was born into a quarter-horse ranching family. Back in those days you had to stay in the hospital for at least three days before you could take your baby home, so I was exactly three days old the first time I sat on a horse. It was my grandad's tradition. Bring the babies home and then put them on a horse—with him holding us, of course. This went for me and all my siblings and cousins. Stampers were meant to be on horseback, he believed, so you started them young. As young as possible. We all had our own horses as soon as we were physically able to ride by ourselves. Many of these horses had been passed down from generation to generation. We had a couple of Shetlands for the smaller kids, and these were actually the same ponies my own dad had ridden as a kid, before graduating to a full-sized horse. Their names were Surprise and Teeny Tonette. Surprise was Teeny Tonette's mother. By the time I came along, Surprise was thirty-six years old, and Tonette was thirty-two, which is extremely elderly in equine years.

If you aren't familiar with horses, Shetlands have a bit of reputation for being ornery, and sometimes having flat-out mean dispositions. But they were little, and they were broke to death, so anyone could crawl all over them and they'd take good care of us. That doesn't mean they wouldn't take a small bite out of you if they saw the opportunity. But according to my grandad and dad, that was just part of growing up a rancher. I was the oldest grandson. So I was expected to be tough. My grandpa would tell me that the ranch would be mine someday and that I had to learn all I could about horses and cows. Learn to train, learn to have a good eye for horse flesh. Know when someone is trying to swindle you. Horse traders don't have a great reputation for a reason. They are well-known for

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doctoring up a lame horse and trying to sell him for a retail price. I was taught to look beyond that and see the horse, see the details most people don't see. And I was pretty dang good at it.

We had bucking chutes on one end of the arena and had bull buck-outs often at the ranch. Hundreds of people would pile into our indoor arenas on Friday and Saturday nights to watch people riding bulls. We'd buck out fifty on a Friday night and fifty-one on a Saturday night. It was called the Stamper Ranch 101 Bull Buck-Out, and it was fun. We had them for years until one of the promoters that helped put the event on wanted to start selling alcohol in the concession stands. My grandfather, the son of an evangelist and a very devout member of the Murphy Church of God, was having none of it. No way. Not a chance. He was a man of principle. He didn't care if it meant losing money. He wasn't going to do it. He'd say a prayer before each of the bucking events, asking for the safety of those participating and for everyone who came to have a safe trip home. It was a great childhood, I'm not going to lie. We also had a kids' event at each performance.

When I was five years old, I was entered into the calf-riding event. I straddled the little black calf; my dad tightened my rope around my hand and told me, "Squeeze tight with your legs, buddy. Keep your right hand up, stay in the middle of him, and you'll do fine." I slid up close to my rope like I'd been taught, squeezed with my legs, and nodded my head for the gate to be opened. The little calf jumped out of the chute and began to buck down the pen. I did everything my dad told me to. And I rode him! As I fell off after the buzzer, the little hundred-pound calf stepped on my head, scuffing up my forehead a little bit, but more importantly, he stomped a hole

in my black Resistol cowboy hat. I was not a happy boy. I wasn't as concerned with my bleeding head as I was with the hole in my precious hat. I picked it up and dusted it off and stared in horror at my hat. My uncle Larry came running out to me and gave me a high five. "Good ride, Stone!" I won the money that night. A whopping twenty-dollar bill. My uncle, being funny, folded it up and stuck it in the hole in the brim of my hat. My dad ran up to me with a big smile and said, "You did great! Exactly what I said. Good job, buddy."

That was my first rodeo. My first *actual* rodeo. I went on to show cutting horses, which is what my family actually did for a living. As a teenager, and on into college, I broke young horses to ride that we raised, and rode some outside horses for other people who didn't want to risk getting bucked off. I liked it. I made enough money in college to keep my head above water, and I always enjoyed it. Now that I am getting a little older, and I've had back surgeries and hip surgeries and knee surgeries, getting on a young bucking colt isn't exactly ideal. I miss it, and I'd love to do it, but I'm pretty sure my wife would kill me if she saw me crawling on the back of a waspy, snorting two-year-old. But nothing beats the feeling of taking that wild animal and becoming one with it. Teaching it manners and giving it a purpose. Making a good horse for someone to rope calves on, or taking it to do hard ranch work. Nothing beats that feeling.

However, in 2011, when I met the trio of girls from Ketchum, Oklahoma, I was embarking on a journey that was most decidedly something out of my comfort zone. It was new. It was scary. I had no idea what to say and do with little girls. This ol' cowboy may get

## Introduction

threwed, as the saying goes, but I was still gonna saddle up and give it a try. And my goodness, what a ride it has been. Trust me, I've been "threwed" more times than I can count. But just as I was taught once when I was four years old, riding Teeny Tonette in our arena and something spooked her, causing her to jump out from under me, a real cowboy dusts himself off and climbs right back on. Sometimes, that is hard to do. Fear, pain, pride—all of that has to be put aside. You grit your teeth and you mount back up and try to learn from what you did wrong the last time. Some problems are harder than others. Some are more difficult to overcome. I've had seven years of fatherhood now, and I still get "threwed" from time to time, but certainly less often than I did in the beginning. And just like breaking in new colts, sometimes just when you think that you've got a good seat, and that the colt's had all the rough ridden off of him, he decides to break in two, blowing and snorting and bucking. And you may find yourself laying in the dust, wondering what in the world just happened. It may hurt a little. But you can't give up on him, just like you wouldn't give up on your kids. You walk back over to him, or limp over to him in my case. You calm him down and remind him that you're there to help. And then you climb right back into the saddle for another run.

Kids aren't so much different. They start feeling comfortable; then something happens. Who knows what it is? But I have learned there is only one way to approach them. And that is with patience. You can't rush it or they'll get spooked and run away. Show them you're not going to hurt them, that you're only doing what's best for them, and eventually they'll realize you are their partner and not

## My First Rodeo

their enemy. Turns out, rodeos and raising kids aren't so much different after all.

That's what the rest of this book is about—learning to be a dad. But also about learning to be a husband, and a brother, and a son, and a man.



## The Story of Us

**S**INCE I AM A ROOKIE AUTHOR here in the realm of book writing, or a greenhorn, in cowboy terms, I have tinkered around with several different ways to begin the book. Maybe a funny story? Perhaps a touching story of the first time I finally bonded with Abby, my then-new eleven-year-old step-daughter? Or possibly the time I sent Emma to school wearing only pantyhose. Trust me, I've got a lot of options. But I guess before I can tell you about any of that, I have to tell you how we got here in the first place. So I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning (duh). I'm asked this question quite often, "How did the story of you and April begin?" And that's a pretty good story actually, so that's how I'll get things started.

Even though we have only been together now for seven years, our story started long before that. I grew up in a little place called Murphy, Oklahoma. It's between Locust Grove and Chouteau, off of Highway 412. Growing up, I lived in two different houses, and they were only about four hundred yards from each other. No matter how long I've been gone, when I think of home, I think of Murphy.

When I was ten years old, this little girl and her family moved in just down the road a ways. She was just over a year younger than me. A little brunette with a few freckles. And she was spunky—coincidentally, a lot like my daughter Emma. This little girl's name was April Skinner. We rode bus number five to school together, then back home, every day. She started going to church at Murphy Church of God, where my family and I went and where my grandpa was the preacher. So we saw each other almost every day. We became friends.

But here's the deal. She had a *wicked* mad crush on me, and she wasn't subtle about it. She flirted with me constantly. We have a close mutual friend who was always the mediator, and even into our teenage years they were always plotting. They think I didn't know what was going on, but I did. When we went on trips with the church, it was always the three of us together, with April in the middle. One time, we went to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, to watch the passion play, and it was freezing. "Hey, Stoney, we've got a blanket we could cover up with. But we'll need to cuddle, you know, for the warmth." Wow, how convenient. And as usual, April was in the middle.

I remember another example from the time our church had a lock-in for the youth group. Now a lock-in is basically just a big sleepover in the church building, and you play games and watch movies and stuff all night long. I was fourteen, almost fifteen, and



April was thirteen. After several hours of activities at the lock-in, most of the kids started winding down around three or four in the morning. The sleeping bags, blankets, pillows, and such were spread out on the floor to make pallets for us all to lie on. April and I ended up “near” each other. Wow, how convenient. Actually, very near. Too near. Near enough that we probably should’ve been reprimanded because of the nearness that we shared in the house of the Lord. And we almost kissed. *Almost*. We were having a moment, and the fourteen-year-old me choked. I just couldn’t do it. I don’t know why. Maybe it was because I thought Jesus was watching. Or maybe it was because we were in a church. Of course, it may have been that I was just chicken. Yeah, that’s probably it. Anyway, we didn’t kiss, and April turned fourteen not long after. And then she moved away.

I don’t think I saw April again until our crafty old friend Jennifer got married. April was a bridesmaid, and I was an usher. April wasn’t fourteen any longer. She looked more grown up, and very pretty. Except she had this weird, short haircut, and it was maroon. But hey, it was the nineties. We all had some funky haircuts back then, so no big deal. But get this. At the wedding, I could hardly even get her to pay attention to me. I tried smiling, saying hello. Yes, she was undoubtedly doing her best to ignore me. She’ll even admit to it now, she was trying to be cool. So I saw April for a bit, sort of, and then not again for another twelve long years.

Then one day I got a friend request on Facebook. It was from a lady named April Johnston. Her profile picture looked fairly familiar, but different. Yet I swear I knew those eyes and smile. I messaged her and asked, “Is this April Skinner?” To which she emphatically replied, “YES!” We chatted briefly, and then a few months went by

with no contact. One afternoon, I was enjoying a much-needed break on a patio in Fort Worth, Texas, and posted a picture on Facebook of me giving a thumbs-up. She saw it, thought I looked cute (I guess), and liked the picture. And then she proceeded to like every other picture I had on Facebook. My phone pretty much exploded and melted down from all the notifications. Now from a guy's perspective, you've got to weigh your options here. From looking at her pictures, I knew she was a very attractive woman. But after she liked all my photos, I got a little worried she might have a bit of the *Single White Female* in her. Or maybe even the lady in *Fatal Attraction* who boiled the bunny rabbit. Yeah, scary. But thankfully there were no rabbits or single white men harmed in this story, and April turned out to be the most awesome woman I've ever known.

It's been almost thirty years now since we first met. I could've never imagined back then the impact she would someday have on my life. That we'd someday be married and have three beautiful daughters. That we'd live in a beautiful spot in Texas. I couldn't have guessed any of that. But I guess that's the cool part about life. It has a tendency to work itself out if you'll just have a little faith and let it. I spent at least a dozen years chasing this elusive happiness. I looked for it in my job. I looked for it in relationships that were completely wrong for me. I moved to Florida for a few years. I moved to Virginia for a few more after that. I drove a Mercedes and wore a Rolex because that's what everyone around me drove and wore. I gradually became someone I didn't really like, someone who was so far from who he was raised to be. I felt completely lost. But then one day, as if it were a prayer I didn't know I was praying, the happiness I'd been

chasing landed right in my lap. It wasn't in Florida, laying on the beach. It wasn't in Virginia, driving fancy cars or wearing expensive watches. It was living on a little farm in East Texas, with one wife, three daughters, and tons of animals. And absolutely having the time of my life, with the very best friend I have ever had.



## Over the Hill

**M**Y BACK HURTS. ACTUALLY, MY BACK has hurt for about three years now. Honestly, I have had back problems for about eighteen years, following a pretty bad accident I had in 2000. An eleven-thousand-pound horse trailer fell on top of me, literally. It's a long story for another day, but it definitely left its mark on my body.

Usually after visiting a chiropractor and getting a cortisone shot or two I can get things back to normal, or at least what I consider normal. But this one day in November, on Thanksgiving Day of all days, I woke up with a backache. Nothing out of the ordinary, so I limped around my mother-in-law's house all day, took some Advil, and moved around as slowly as possible. A week later I went to the

chiropractor and got twisted and popped and cracked, but I was still having a really hard time. The steroid shots that generally got me over the hump did absolutely nothing. The pain in my back and the pain shooting down my right leg was different than it had been in the past, and was excruciating. The doctor decided I should get some X-rays and an MRI, so I did. After the MRI, they said they'd call me in the following week with the results. However, before I even got home that day, they called to tell me I had a severely herniated L4-L5 disk. And not only had it herniated, but it had fragmented, so there was a random piece of my disk floating around loose in my spinal canal. Although it was a relief to find out what was wrong, having back problems of this magnitude is a very scary thing. I mean, I know I am getting older, but I am not exactly ready to hang up my spurs just yet. I am an extremely active person. The best parts of my days aren't spent inside. My favorite things to do are to work outside on our property—building fences, cutting brush, working horses, mowing, weed-eating. Anything outside is where I find my happy place.

So as April and I sat in the surgeon's office listening to him tell me the seriousness of my back issues, a huge dose of reality came crashing down on me like an eleven-thousand-pound horse trailer. He told me, "You'll never be 100 percent again. You've got a lot of damage in there, and we can make you better. However, you are going to have to slow down. You aren't going to be as strong as you once were." Maybe I am a little bit slow, but it wasn't until he said these words to me that I realized exactly what was happening to me. I was getting old.

Getting old! I had always heard my parents and grandparents

talk about it but had never knowingly felt it firsthand. All my life, I have pushed myself to the limit in just about anything I have ever done. I've broken bones. I have had concussions. I have pulled muscles and gotten stitches. I wrestled, played baseball and football, and ran track. As an adult, before I married April and had kids, I lived hard. I spent too much time in saloons, with late nights and little to no sleep. And as they always do, people would tell me I needed to slow down. My parents and siblings worried about me, but I would always laugh and shrug off their advice as nonsense. I knew what my body could handle better than they did, right? One of my coworkers once said about me, "Stoney doesn't burn the candle at both ends. Stoney just throws the whole candle into a bonfire." We all laughed.

But now, as I sit here typing this, I can feel my hip aching. It's a dull ache that stems from that horse trailer accident years ago, and I think to myself, "It's going to rain today. My joints are aching." Goodness, I am getting old. The life expectancy of an American male is seventy-eight years old, and by those numbers, I am almost exactly middle aged. My best days are behind me. Now, I know I'm not *that* old. But by the same token, I know I'll never again be quite as strong as I once was. I know I can't work eighteen hours out in the sun, hauling thousands upon thousands of bales of hay, like I once could. And if I get bucked off a horse, I won't bounce back quite as quickly as I used to. Of course, this hurts my cowboy pride. It's hard to admit to myself that I am not the man I was ten years ago.

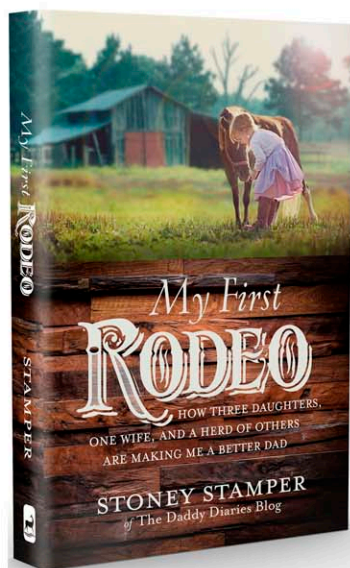
And then I think back to all the times I was told to "slow down" or to "be careful" or that I was going to "regret that when you're older." And sure, I can see how that may have been wise advice, judging from the scars and aches and pains I have. But I wouldn't change

a single thing. I cannot imagine a life where I was more careful. I cannot fathom a younger me slowing down or playing it safe. Going all in, 110 percent is who I am at my core, and I wouldn't trade that for a million dollars, because I know I have been true to myself and lived my life exactly how I have wanted to, even if it wasn't always smart. Besides, if I didn't do all those stupid things when I was young, then I wouldn't have any funny stories to tell when I am old. And there's nothing I enjoy more than telling funny stories.

So yesterday, I watched my crazy little daughter Gracee run 110 miles per hour around the backyard. Now a responsible adult, I hollered, "You need to slow down!" And when she climbed up on top of the patio furniture, I knew there was about a 90 percent chance that she would fall off. So I said to her, "You'd better get down from there. You're going to hurt yourself." And guess what? She ignored me, just like I ignored my parents. Then I grinned and watched as she jumped around like those monkeys on the bed, until the inevitable happened and she fell to the ground. Still grinning, I limped my beaten-up body over to her, dusted her off, and gave her a kiss. Want to make a guess as to what I said? "You've got to be careful. You'll wish you'd listened to me someday." Because apparently that's what you're supposed to say when you get old. Something tells me Gracee's probably not going to realize how true that is. Until she's older, like me. But that's just a hunch.

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