

A close-up photograph of a man's hands and arms holding a woman's legs. The man is shirtless and has dark hair. He is holding the woman's legs, which are wearing purple high-heeled sandals. The background is dark. The text 'HONEY JANS' is at the top, and 'Roping a Runaway Wife' is in the center. The publisher's name 'Real Romance Publishing' is at the bottom right.

HONEY JANS

Roping a Runaway Wife

Real Romance Publishing

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Red Rose Publishing

www.redrosepublishing.com

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Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

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Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Roping A Runaway Wife

By

Honey Jans

For their love and encouragement I would like to dedicate
this book to My family.

* * * *



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Chapter One

"You're going to do what?"

Sarah Maxwell gazed at her cousin's mutinous expression, willing her to understand. "Rafe's reputation is in shreds since I left. I need, deep in my soul, to set things right. Please try to understand, Pipi, I have to go back."

"Back into the lion's den. "Pipi shook her head. "Listen to me, cuz. You'll be going on a fool's errand. You don't think the man will actually take you back with open arms after you deserted him on your wedding night three weeks ago do you?"

"Rafe's housekeeper is going on a long deserved vacation. I'm all set to fill in for her at the ranch."

"So she's the one who's been feeding you all these gloom and doom stories about him." Pipi scowled. "It could be a set up you know."

"No, Rafe's not that devious." Sarah added sadly, "He can't even tell a decent white lie. That's how I found out that he doesn't really love me. He only married me because of my family connections."

Pipi shook her head. "You, a housekeeper? I can't picture it."

Sarah shrugged. "How hard can it be? You mop a few floors, open a few cans. I should even have enough spare time to finish the series of endangered species photos I was working on. It's the best work I've ever done and my editor said it could lead to some prestigious work."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

"That's just an excuse, Sarah, and you know it. You aren't responsible for ruining the cowboy any more than your mother was responsible for ruining your father. That was all our grumpy old grandfather's imagination. You can't fix the past by doing this."

"That's not why." Sarah noted Pipi's disbelief and sighed. "Maybe that's part of it, but the plain truth is I love the hardheaded, stubborn cowboy and I can't see his life ruined."

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"SOMEBODY'S sure in an all fired hurry, boss."

Rafe leaned forward in his rocker. His fatigue after a long dusty day on the range melted as he watched the silver Jeep Cherokee kick up a plume of dust in its wake. It sped toward them down the long ranch driveway. "It's the wife."

"Wife." Zeke Taylor, his ranch foreman, made the word sound like a curse. "I can't believe she has the guts to show her face around here after hightailing it on your wedding night."

Rafe noted the sour expression on Zeke's wizened face, but ignored it. This wasn't up for debate. "I want you to spread the word. She's to be treated with respect."

"I don't get it. The woman runs roughshod over you and you're going to lay out the red carpet for her."

"Don't worry about it, Zeke." Rafe smiled, adding confidently, "I've got everything under control this time around."

"What you plannin' to do, sweet talk her into sticking around this time?" Zeke scowled and spat on the ground.

Rafe shook his head, his jaw tightening. "No, it'll take more than sweet talk to bind a saddle shy filly like Sarah to my side. Don't you worry, I've got her figured out and before she knows it I'll have her tied to my side."

Zeke slowly got up from the creaky rocker, slapping his battered Stetson against his leg. "I hope you know what you're doing, boy."

"So do I," Rafe said softly as he watched Zeke stomp toward the bunk house. He had to make this work. His future depended on it.

The Jeep came to a halt amid a cloud of dust. The inevitability of the moment hit him hard. He never doubted that one day Sarah would return, and when she did he would be the one in control. But first, he planned to extract a little payback before they settled down to domestic bliss. Sarah got out of the jeep and Rafe swallowed the lump in his throat. Dying embers of the sun caught the golden highlights in her long, red hair, turning it to molten fire.

As she walked toward him, Rafe was struck anew by the confident way she moved. That was what had attracted him in the first place six short weeks ago when she'd come to the area to shoot a series on the Grand Teton wildlife.

Rafe noted the proud angle of her chin and the keen intelligence in her sparkling green eyes. Dealing with her was

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

going to be a challenge. And oh, how he loved challenges. The first moment they met, he'd known he had to have her and he almost had until she ran off on their wedding night.

Three weeks later he still wasn't sure what spooked her, but he knew the best way to treat a spooked filly was put blinders on her. Instead, Rafe put up a blinder of a small white lie. Sure it was true that there'd been unmerciful gossip, but he could take it. And yes, his expansion loan had been turned down but there were ways to keep from selling up.

Rafe knew that Sarah's sense of honor would make her come back to right a wrong and he intended to capitalize on her integrity. He studied her as he would any opponent. There was strength in the proud angle of her chin, and a keen intelligence in her sparkling green eyes.

Rafe sat motionlessly in the shadows of the porch and watched her stride falter as she neared the steps. He could almost feel her instinctive desire to turn tail and run as she gazed up at him. His fist tightened on the rocking chair arm, awaiting her decision. Sarah took the first porch step and Rafe leaned back, letting out an imperceptible sigh.

He tilted his head back snagging her gaze as she drew near. "It's mighty nice of you to come a' calling, wife. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

Sarah frowned, her chin rising defiantly. "I can see that you're not surprised to see me. Rose must have filled you in on our conversation."

"That's right." He kept a tight rein on his emotions as he watched the play of emotions across her expressive face. "So

you want to sign on as my housekeeper. Have you got any references?"

"It's no joking matter, Rafe." Sarah scowled at him. "To put it bluntly, I've come to save your reputation. Now do you want my help or not?"

Rafe slowly got to his feet, feeling her simmering resentment. But he felt something else as well—the unrequited passion that hung between them. He walked past her hearing her indrawn breath as he brushed by her and opened the door. "Why don't we take this inside, wife? There's no need to give the hands any more food for gossip."

Sarah nodded and briskly walked through the door with Rafe at her heels.

"Let's go into the study," he directed.

Rafe followed her. The door clicked shut behind him with a soft finality. He watched Sarah's shoulders tense before she turned to face him, her expression enigmatic.

Rafe hastened to relieve her mind. "Don't worry, wife, there aren't going to be any tearful recriminations. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

Sarah wrinkled her nose. "That's very magnanimous of you. As you know, I've heard about your alleged problems. I've come to offer you a deal."

"Do tell." Rafe straightened and sauntered toward her. She backed away, coming to rest against his desk. Rafe inhaled her scent and his senses went into overload. She drew in a tremulous breath. He watched the pulse flicker at the base of her throat recalling it was where she dabbed herself with perfume. He was ever so tempted to nuzzle that sweet spot.

She gulped. "Yes, well, I've heard that you've been having some problems since we split."

"You mean since you tore out of here on our wedding night like your tail was on fire." Rafe closed the gap between them, put his hands on her waist and lifted her onto the desk.

She gasped and Rafe smiled, pleased by her response. Oh yes, she wanted him just as much as he wanted her. He couldn't help focusing on her slightly parted lips. It brought back memories, thoughts of when he'd tasted that intriguing line.

Sarah shimmied back and smoothed her skirt down. "Stop that! I didn't come here to be manhandled. As I was saying, I'm prepared to help you out under certain conditions..."

"What's in it for you?"

Sarah hesitated, biting her lip. "My editor has been clamoring for the series I started shooting. I could finish it in addition to my housekeeping duties."

"Hm..." Rafe's index finger slid along Sarah's silky calf drawing an outraged glower from her. He watched her shake her hair back over her shoulder. What would it look like spread out on his pillow? That he'd never found out was one of his many regrets. But he intended to rectify the error soon. "So we both win. That's mighty generous of you, wife. Just what did you have in mind?"

"Like I said before, I've come back to save your reputation. I'll fill in for Rose for the next two weeks. People will just assume we've gotten back together. The talk will die down. I'll finish my series and then I can quietly slip out of town."

He frowned at her eager tone. Could she dismiss him that easily? "Just like that, huh?"

She quickly added. "Of course, there can't be any intimacy between us."

Rafe shook his head. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, wife. We do have a natural attraction, just like a couple of magnets."

"You don't love me." Sarah glared up at him. "So this attraction you mention is meaningless. What we had was just physical on your part. Sooner or later it'll go away."

Rafe sighed as his suspicions were confirmed. "So that's why you left. Because I didn't give you the words."

"Among other things, important things..." Sarah sighed and said wistfully, "We just won't work, Rafe. I thought a sudden break would be less painful."

Sensing her vulnerability, he closed in for the kill. "Because you love me."

Sarah shrugged and looked away. "Don't worry about it. I'll get over it."

Rafe trapped her chin with his callused fingers, holding her still while he studied her face. She looked as panicked as a deer caught in a car's headlights. She was regretting her decision to come back. He could see it in her startled gaze. But he couldn't let her get away again. He didn't think he could take it if she did. "It's actions that count, to me the words are meaningless. And your actions hurt me, a lot."

Sarah closed her eyes. "I wanted to do the right thing. But I guess it was a mistake to come here, sorry."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe muttered a curse. Damn, he'd pushed her too far. He dropped his hands to his side. "It wasn't a mistake. I do need your help. But under certain conditions."

Sarah opened her eyes, her expression brightening. "Such as?"

He held up one finger. "First, if you're going to give me back my reputation, it's got to look real."

She nodded. "Of course, within reason."

Rafe eyed her sourly. "Word spread when you ran off screaming on our wedding night. People started speculating on what kind of kinky things I might have tried on you. A few even wondered whether I was over-endowed. Some tried to find out."

Sarah's mouth kicked up in a startled grin as she thought of other men trying to sneak peeks at him in the men's room. She bit her lip but a giggle escaped. "After three weeks, I'm sure the talk must have died down."

"Not in a small town like Shelbyville, especially with you coming back. The telephone lines are probably buzzing."

"I never thought of that." She let out a dismayed sigh.

Rafe nodded. "I did. Like I said, it's got to look real."

Her eyes narrowed. "How real?"

"Here's the deal. You move in with me for the rest of the summer. By then the talk will have died down. That should also give you plenty of time to complete your series." Rafe tilted his head, studying her reaction.

"Three months is a heck of a lot longer than I was counting on." Sarah scooted back on the desk. "I can't spend the rest of the summer here. I do have a life of my own, you know."

She sighed then said resignedly, "I guess this isn't going to work..."

"Ever hear of a little thing called grand theft auto?" Rafe asked dryly.

"What do you mean?" Sarah's head shot up and she gazed at him warily.

Rafe smiled grimly. "You stole my truck when you ran off."

"That old rattle trap wasn't worth a grand." She scowled up at him. "The thing is held together with bailing wire and string. I just borrowed it to get to the airport. And besides, you got it back, didn't you? I saw it standing out in the yard."

Rafe shrugged. "That's not how the sheriff saw it when I reported it missing that night."

She gasped. "You called the cops on me. I can't believe you would do such a dastardly thing."

"I wasn't exactly in a sweet, understanding mood." A nerve pulsed in his jaw as he gazed at her. "That night I would have done anything to retrieve you."

Sarah frowned up at him her chin rising with defiance. "It's a good thing there's been some cooling off time in the interim."

"You're darned right it's a good thing," Rafe said firmly. "Otherwise I might be tempted to turn you over my knee."

Sarah snorted. "Mr. Halliday, sexist remarks like that aren't going to win my good will."

He shrugged. "That's what you get for picking an unenlightened rancher like me for a husband. Now shall I call the sheriff, or are you staying?"

Sarah bit her lip. "You wouldn't call him."

"Try me."

"You win, but you don't play fair, cowboy," she said sourly while glaring at him.

Rafe turned away saying, "I don't play at all."

"So when do you want to begin this great deception?"

He turned back. "There's no time like the present."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Just how am I supposed to convince people we're a real couple?"

Rafe smiled triumphantly. "For starters, you're going to be a perfect ranch wife. Or at least as perfect as you can be with your limited abilities. You're also going to act like I'm the hottest thing in pants you've ever seen."

"That's a stretch." Sarah ignored Rafe's disapproving glower and stood up.

"That brings me to item number two," he said. "You owe me a wedding night. I intend to collect."

Sarah poked his chest with her index finger. "No way. There is absolutely no way I'm going to sleep with you!"

Rafe smiled back at Sarah like a cat with a bowl of cream. "Sure you are, sweet Sarah. You want me as much as I want you. You won't be able to resist the temptation."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

"WHERE DO YOU think you're going?"

Sarah stopped in her tracks half way to the study door, and turned toward Rafe. She noted the challenge in his dark eyes, and the way a muscle twitched in his tight jaw. Even if she wanted to escape, there was no way he would let her. It was a good thing she had no intention to do so. "I'm going out to the car to get my things."

Rafe took a step toward her. "I'll help you."

Sarah turned away, avoiding his penetrating gaze. "No thanks, there isn't that much to carry." She heard his boots thud on the wood floor as he followed her, and groaned. He didn't even trust her not to run away. The knowledge that she'd caused him so much pain appalled her.

She grabbed her duffel bag out of the passenger side of the Jeep and glanced back toward the house. Rafe was leaning against a post in the shadows, watching her. He thought she was going to bolt. She could see it in his eyes. And he had good reason to doubt her word. He conjured up the image of a coiled lariat, prepared to reach out and snag her. She hesitated for a moment, suddenly unsure of her ability to handle him.

He pushed away from the porch railing as she walked up the steps. "Is that it?"

"I travel light," Sarah said, following him into the living room.

"So I see. I'll show you to our room."

He must have heard her quickly indrawn breath because he turned to look at her. "Our room?" she asked, eyes narrowed. He didn't think she was going to capitulate that easily, did he? She might be in love but she wasn't stupid.

Rafe frowned. "What did you expect? We can't make people believe we're a couple if we sleep in separate rooms, can we?"

She studied his implacable expression for a moment. His line of reasoning was correct, even if it did irk her. "No, I suppose not. But I'm not sleeping with you. I told you that before. Remember?"

A smile played about the edges of his hard mouth. "I know what you said. And if you'll think back, you'll recall that I said you won't be able to resist the temptation."

"Your ego is about to take a beating. You, sir, are very resistible. And you don't have to show me the way to the bedroom. I remember where it is." Sarah strode past him totally embarrassed by what she'd blurted out. Good heavens, she'd have to watch her tongue around him. Reminding him of their wedding night was a dumb move.

She opened the door to the master bedroom, feeling as if she were caught in a time warp. This was where it had all gone wrong three weeks ago. Rafe had carried her into this room on their wedding night. He'd left her alone to get ready for bed as he went in search of champagne. On the bed she'd found an envelope addressed to her lying on the bed. It explained in no uncertain terms that Rafe had married her for her business connections. She didn't know who had tipped her off and in the end it didn't really matter.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe wanted to convert part of the ranch into a country inn and Sarah was the granddaughter of Samuel Maxwell who owned a worldwide consortium of hotels and inns. It was a match made in heaven.

Then she noticed a rolled up blueprint on the dresser and unrolled it to find the conversion drawings. She went to confront Rafe and overheard him telling Zeke that his plan to add a dude ranch was going to move forward. In that cold moment of realization, her dream world shattered.

So she ran off into the night, just as Rafe had said. She'd run as far and as fast as she could go, using her credit cards to buy an airplane ticket. She even fell so low as to allow her grandfather's lawyers to brush off Rafe's inquiries. She was told that Grandfather said he was disappointed that she'd taken up with a common rancher, but it was understandable considering the stock she'd come from.

Sarah sucked in a deep breath and entered the room. No use dwelling on the past. This was a different place and time. She was determined to set things right and walk away even if it did break her heart. It was better than love with strings attached.

Rafe walked into the bedroom behind her. "I cleared out a few drawers for you."

Sarah laid her bag on the bed and pulled out a bunch of wadded up garments. She glanced at Rafe. His face was a gambler's face, closed and calculating. Not wanting to delve too deeply into his emotions, Sarah turned away and went to the closet. "Thanks, but I probably won't need all the space."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

The bed creaked as Rafe sat down on it. Sarah could feel his gaze on her as she shook out a green dress and hung it up. She walked back to her bag, only inches from Rafe, and hesitated for a moment with her hand on a stack of frothy undergarments, unwilling to share such intimate things with him. She glanced at him. There was a softness in his brown eyes, and a slightly dazed expression on his handsome face. The sensual awareness sizzling between them took her breath away.

Suddenly, he frowned and got to his feet. "I've got some paperwork to do. I'll be back in half an hour."

Sarah could only gape at him when he strode from the room, as if the devil himself were on his heels. She finished putting her few things away. It didn't take long. In her line of work as a nature photographer, she had to be able to move quickly.

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Rafe strode down the hall and made his way to his study. His hand shook as he shut the door behind him. Oh, God, how he ached to throw her on the bed and ease his frustrations inside her beautiful body. And she'd like it, too, he knew she would. He stalked over to the desk and slumped into his desk chair. To have her in his lair, smell her perfume, brush up against her, was almost more than he could handle.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

He jerked open the bottom desk drawer and pulled out the bottle of whiskey he had stashed inside. Reaching for a glass, he poured out two fingers of the amber liquid. He brought the glass to his lips, swirling the liquor around and inhaling its intoxicating aroma. Gazing unseeing into its honeyed depths, he saw the fiery flash of her green witchy eyes, and the pouty curve of her mouth. Would her lips still have the potent kick of the alcohol? He groaned at the tantalizing thought, and closed his eyes. Shifting his hips, he tried to loosen the hold his jeans had on his burgeoning erection.

Scowling, he slammed down the glass, splashing his hand with whiskey. Damnit, he wasn't going to turn into a lovesick fool over her again. Last time, she'd nearly cost him his sanity. Picking up the bottle of whiskey, he stuffed it back into the desk drawer. He wasn't going to let the little witch in the bedroom make him weak, either.

He wiped his hand on his jeans, stretching his legs out in front of him. His gaze fell on the paper lying on the desktop. He picked up the document and scowled at it again, although he knew the words by heart. That skunk, Nevell Blackthorn, had been a burr in his side since they were kids. And now the polecat was trying to force him to sell the ranch. Rafe crumpled the offer from the realtor. He'd see Blackthorn in hell before he'd fork over the deed to the Double-H to him.

He threw the paper in the trash and leaned back to think of a more attractive subject. Sweet Sarah, with her witchy eyes, soft sexy body, and fiery hair. Would she be just as hot? He smiled at the thought because he was going to do his best to find out.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

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Sarah gathered her sleep wear and went into the bathroom to change. She wasn't willing to take the risk of Rafe walking in on her.

When she came out, Rafe was sitting on the bed, pulling off his boots. He did a double take when he saw her. "What in the heck are you wearing?"

Sarah smiled and glanced down at her red long johns. "My pajamas." She walked around him and got into bed.

"It looks like an old union suit that's seen better days." Rafe frowned at her obstinate smile. "In case you haven't noticed, it gets kind of hot around here in the summertime. You're going to roast in that thing."

She decided sourly that he looked as disappointed as a child being denied a piece of candy.

"Tough, it's what I feel like wearing to bed." She watched him unbutton his shirt, pulling the tails free of his jeans. When he unsnapped his fly, she cleared her throat. "Aren't you going to go into the bathroom to change?"

"Nope."

The wicked twinkle in Rafe's eyes made Sarah grit her teeth. He was well aware of the effect he had on her nerves and he was enjoying it. The rat! She laid down and turned her back to him, determined to hide how rattled she was. As the

covers flipped back, she cautiously glanced over her shoulder. Rafe was standing there, naked as the day he was born. Good heavens, he was magnificent.

"Slide over, Princess, I'm ready for bed."

"Naked?" Sarah squeaked and sat up. Rafe's nude body was everything her imagination had conjured up, in spades.

"That's right. Nothing is what I feel like wearing. Any objections?"

"Suit yourself. Makes no difference to me." She clung to her side of the bed feeling it sag as he climbed in. He took up way too much room, making her feel terribly small and vulnerable. She watched his muscles ripple as he reached across her to turn out the light. As his chest brushed against her breasts, she gasped. He smiled down at her, a gunfighter's smile, cool and certain of victory. Sarah shrank away from the contact and turned her head.

"What, no goodnight kiss?" he asked.

Sarah glared up at him. There was a need in his eye that didn't correspond with his mocking tone. "Dream on, buddy."

It was going to be a long night.

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Sarah felt the bed move. She murmured in her sleep and rolled over. Something shook her shoulder, but she ignored it.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

A swat to her bottom made her sit up in bed. Rafe was already dressed and there was a strained look on his face.

"What did you do that for?" she sputtered.

"It's time to start your new life as Mrs. Raphael Halliday, wife. Rise and shine."

Sarah yawned. "What time is it?"

"Four-thirty. Mrs. Murphy starts breakfast right about now. If you plan to take over her duties you'd better get a move on. You do know how to cook, don't you?"

Sarah frowned. She glanced up and saw the crease between his mouth and cheek deepen as he smiled in response. "Don't worry. You won't starve."

Rafe grinned. "It's not me I'm worried about, it's the hands. They're used to Rose's good home cooking. I don't want them to up and quit after they get a taste of yours. Good hands are hard to find."

Sarah yawned, then scowled up at his smiling face. Maybe being a housekeeper wouldn't be the snap she'd expected. "So cold cereal and toast isn't what they're used to?"

"Afraid not, sugar. They want a hot hearty breakfast and they want it in an hour." His brown eyes twinkled. "Think you can handle it, wife?"

"Stop calling me that," she grumped back at him. "You stink, Halliday, you know that?" His answering smile made her grit her teeth. "Get out of here so I can get dressed." She scowled at Rafe as he walked to the door. His cocky attitude made her blood boil!

He'd been right. Sleeping in the long johns had been a bad idea. She'd roasted all night. But roasting wasn't half as bad

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

as lying next to Rafe and not reaching over to hold him. She had spent weeks fantasizing about what sleeping with him would be like. Now when she had the chance, she couldn't let herself touch him. If she did, she had a feeling she'd be trapped. And would that be so bad? a little voice in her head echoed.

Rafe stopped in the doorway and turned to look at her. "Time's a wasting. You won't have time to primp and preen in front of the mirror this morning."

Sarah threw her pillow at him. It bounced off his head.

Rafe grinned, picked it up, and lobbed it back at her. "If you wanted to play, you should have done it while I was still in bed. Although you're about as sexy as old Zeke, dressed in that union suit."

Sarah glanced down at her red long johns as she heard the door close. They were warm and serviceable, and about as sexy as warm mush. That was why she'd chosen them. She'd used them toward him off like garlic with a vampire.

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Sarah hastily scraped the burned bits off a stack of frazzled toast when she heard a step behind her. She made to hide the evidence behind her and then gave it up as a lost cause. How could you hide a disaster as big as the Titanic?

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

She turned to glance over her shoulder, blowing a sweaty tendril of hair away from her damp face. Rafe stood in the middle of the kitchen, hands on his hips, eyebrows raised, as he surveyed the mess. Sarah resisted the urge to throw a piece of burned toast at him, and reminded herself that it had been her idea to save his reputation. "Well, what did you expect? I didn't say how well I could cook. Especially not for twelve hungry hands at five in the morning for Pete's sake."

A smile curved the edges of his mouth. "I didn't know it was possible to burn oatmeal." He looked into a large pot on the range that was sending up whiffs of smoke then glanced back at her. "It is oatmeal, isn't it?"

Sarah's ire increased at his amused tone. "Yes, it's oatmeal. This is starting to look like a pretty rotten deal from my end of things, Halliday. I'm not so sure I'm housekeeper material."

The smile left his face. "You'd better try, Sarah. You were going to be a perfect ranch wife, remember? Did you at least make coffee?"

She scowled at his overly patient tone. "Of course, I'm not that big of a screw up."

He nodded. "I'll carry the urn into the dining hall. You grab some bowls. We'll have to make do with burned oatmeal this morning. Lunch can be cold sandwiches and lemonade but by supper time you'd better have figured out how to cook."

"Or else what?" Sarah asked suspiciously as they walked into the dining hall.

He smiled at her surly tone. "Or else you're going to be sitting across from a passel of ornery, starving cowboys."

Sarah cringed at the thought. "Actually, I figured I'd take my meals in the kitchen."

"Well then you figured wrong. We eat together like one big happy family."

He went back to the kitchen and made one last trip to the dining hall with the platter of scorched toast.

Sarah sighed as she viewed the unappetizing mess. At least she'd made enough to feed an army. Which was what she was feeding, judging from the sound of a dozen pairs of boots coming toward them down the hallway.

Rafe reached out to take her hand drawing her to his side when she would sooner have backed out of the room.

"Remember," he said softly, "you promised to make this look real."

Sarah looked up at his hard face uneasily and wondered how she could have ever thought a tough hombre like him needed rescuing. Quickly, she turned her attention from his enigmatic expression to the ranch hands that were filing into the room.

"Well, I'll be damned, will you look at that god-awful spread."

Sarah glanced at the speaker, a young cowboy barely out of his teens.

"Watch your language, Travis. There's a lady present," Rafe said in an authoritative voice. "I'd like you all to meet my wife. You will all mind your manners in front of her, understood?"

Sarah was well aware that Rafe was chastising the cowboy, and at the same time staking his claim publicly. She

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

turned to scowl at him and said acerbically, "Why don't you just slap a brand on my behind and get it over with?"

Rafe raised an imperious eyebrow at her. "Now, honey, is that any way for a sweet young wife like you to talk? The boys won't know that you're kidding."

Sarah heard the challenge in his voice and knew that she was beat. If she went against him now, she would break their bargain. She'd set herself a chore and she intended to see it through for her own peace of mind.

"Don't worry about it," she said, turning and smiling at the men. "Come on in and try to enjoy the food." The group filed past her. There were plenty of "thank you ma'am's," and curious glances shot her way. It was apparent that she had been the subject of gossip the night before. If she remembered right, Zeke couldn't keep a secret to save his soul.

The cowboys were a mixed bunch of sizes and ages, but they all had one common denominator; they were deeply tanned and looked tough as nails. There was one tall blond, older, cowboy that stood apart from the rest. He gave her a probing glance as he passed by. Sarah was wondering why he was so interested in her when Zeke passed by. Sarah smiled and held her hand out. He scowled at her and brushed on by without speaking. Surprised by his sullen expression, she hastily withdrew her hand. It was plain to see that he wasn't happy to see her.

"Go ahead and get started," she said brightly. "There's more food in the kitchen if we run out."

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Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans



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Sarah was loading the dishwasher after breakfast when she heard the screen door slam as the last of the hands left the dining hall. At least she didn't have to worry about doing all these dishes. Now all she had to do was find a cookbook and figure out what she could make for supper. Whatever she chose it was going to have to be enormous because they ate like horses.

After pouring herself a cup of coffee, Sarah sat down on a porch chair and sighed. It was going to be a difficult summer, and it had only just begun. She wasn't sure that she was up to the task of cooking for this mob. Let alone defending her heart from Rafe's assault. The man had only married her for her family name. It was still a bitter pill to swallow.

No doubt if she confronted him with it, he'd deny it to his last breath. Sure Rafe might desire her for other reasons but marrying into the Maxwell Family didn't do any harm to a man that wanted to turn his large working ranch into a dude ranch on the side. What he didn't know was that she'd walked away from her heritage years ago because there were too many strings attached. Just like there were too many strings attached to their marriage. There was no way that she could be all Rafe expected her to be.

No doubt the extra income would come in handy, she thought as she glanced around the slightly shabby

surroundings. Zeke's exasperated voice broke into her reverie.

"I still think you're a damned fool, Rafe. Sleep with her if you've gotta, but then get her the hell out of here before she screws you up again."

"Don't worry about it, old pal. I know what I'm doing this time around. But sleeping with her does sound like a damned good idea. Maybe then I'll be able to think straight around the little witch."

Sarah got out of the chair and tiptoed into the kitchen. Her hands shook as she set her coffee mug on the counter. So he was going to get her out of his system. How? By using her until he used her up? It served to increase her resolve to remain immune to his charms.

The doorbell rang. She swung open the door to see a petite, brunette with a little moppet in tow. "Can I help you?"

The lady pulled back the screen door and grinned. "I'm not surprised you don't remember me. We only met once at the Ramseys' barbecue. You and Rafe only had eyes for each other that night."

Sarah blushed remembering that night; It had been the star-filled night when Rafe had proposed. It seemed like ages had gone by since then but it was only a few weeks ago.

The lady grinned and held out her hand. "I'm Lisa Halliday, Rafe's sister-in-law. And this is my daughter, Mandy."

Sarah couldn't help smiling back. Lisa's cheeriness was infectious. "Hi there. Come on in. I don't know what brought you here, Lisa, but you're a life saver."

Lisa's eyes opened wide in alarm. "Why, is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing like that," Sarah hastily reassured her. "Do you know how to cook?"

Lisa's nose wrinkled as she grinned. "Sure do. I heard that Rose is on vacation. That's why I stopped by to see if Rafe needed a hand."

Sarah sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. I've taken over the cooking and it's a disaster. Would you be willing to give me a few cooking lessons?"

Lisa grinned. "No problem. When do you want them?"

Sarah bit her lip. "Now. I need to learn by supper time."

"Well in that case we'd better get busy." She turned to look at Mandy. "Go play, honey. And stay out of trouble."

"Okay." Mandy dashed outside.

"I wish I had her energy." Sarah smiled at Mandy's exuberance.

Lisa laughed. "Me too. She went on a sleep over last night, and I bet she did more giggling than sleeping. She ought to be exhausted, instead she's ready for more."

Sarah smiled. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love some."

Sarah led the way. "Come on into the kitchen. I'll pour you a cup." She filled two mugs with coffee and carried them to the dinette.

Lisa took the cup Sarah proffered and smiled. "Rafe is sure a fast worker. He told me he'd get you back but I hadn't thought it would be this soon."

Sarah was taken aback by the statement. "He did, huh? I'm beginning to think Rafe and Rose were in cahoots." Maybe Pipi was right and this was a trap; a sensual trap.

Lisa smiled. "No doubt. Rafe usually manages to get what he wants. But what do you mean about them being in cahoots?"

Sarah looked away from Lisa's curious gaze. "Rose has been writing telling me how much trouble Rafe's had since I left. She actually said he might be forced to sell the ranch. So I came back to make things right."

Lisa glanced at her probingly. "For good."

Sarah thought back on her promise to make it look real. "Of course." The lie came easily to her lips, too easily for comfort. Did a part of her wish it was true?

"I'm sorry for prying. It's just that I'd hate to see Rafe hurt again." Lisa reached out to pat Sarah's hand. "Don't be embarrassed. Passion is a natural thing in a marriage. So you two started out a bit rocky, it's how you end up that matters."

Sarah muttered under her breath, "Passion's one thing, but what about love?"

Lisa continued, "Why, I thought Rafe was going to pine away after you left. Then he turned so ornery most of us just stayed out of his way."

Sarah looked at Lisa intently. Had Rafe really pined for her? It seemed too much to hope for. "I didn't know that he missed me that much." No, he probably just missed my help in opening the dude ranch.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Lisa put a hand over her mouth. "Oh me and my big mouth. I hope I didn't upset you by bringing up the past. No offense, I hope."

Sarah smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. "I suppose it was hard for Rafe. After all, his expansion plans hinged on me."

Joan shook her head. "I wouldn't say that. Don't worry, if he wanted to expand he'd do it with or without you. It's been a hard year for ranchers all over, but Rafe is too good a manager to fold. Actually, he was pretty resistant to Gabe's suggestion that he take in tourists. Afterall, Rafe is a dyed in the wool traditionalist. But Gabe and I explained that we could throw a lot of business his way through our travel agency.

"He's got this big empty house going to waste. So why not add on and make a little extra income to take him over the lean times. Heck it would help grow our business, too. In the end he was coming around to our way of thinking. Now that his home life is back to normal he can concentrate on the changes."

Sarah stared at Lisa agog. "Let me get this straight. It was Gabe's idea that Rafe turn part of the Double-H into a dude ranch. When did he first suggest this?"

"Oh, about three months back. Like I said, Rafe didn't take to the idea much at first. But Rafe's a smart guy. Eventually he saw the light. He was drawing up the plans when you met. I'm sure he must have told you about them."

Sarah thought back to the night she'd found the plans and nearly groaned. Could she possibly have been wrong about

Rafe's motive for marrying her? If so, somebody had deliberately set her running. But who?

Lisa brightened. "So Rafe tells us that you're a nature photographer. Well, you'll have no end of beautiful nature to shoot around here. And your skills could come in handy with the guests. You could offer a course on nature photography. That is if you wouldn't mind helping out."

Sarah smiled wistfully. "No, I wouldn't mind. A photographer could spend a lifetime here and never run out of new subjects."

Lisa grinned. "And you'll get to do just that."

Sarah kept her smile, but felt a pain deep inside. The lady didn't know this was just a sham. By the end of the summer she'd be gone. And Rafe seemed to want it that way. At least he hadn't tried to talk her into staying. He wanted her back to satisfy his sexual itch. At least that's what he'd told Zeke.

"You know, I'm so glad that you came back. Rafe may seem tough as nails, but he really needs a wife to soften those hard edges."

Sarah cringed at Lisa's confident words. "I suppose so."

"Now, how about I teach you Chicken and Dumplings 101?"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Sarah sighed as she looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Three days of stress had taken its toll. Dark circles underscored her eyes, weary from the restless nights she spent lying next to Rafe. She glanced at the prickly heat that covered her chest and couldn't resist giving it another scratch, even though it only made the itch worse. She shuddered as she contemplated getting into the hot, irritating, long johns again. Still, she couldn't bring herself to back down from her original position. It would make her look weak, and weakness was a luxury she couldn't afford in her battle of wills with Rafe.

Even though she loved him, he didn't love her back and that was no basis for intimacy. She needed the words even though he seemed incapable of saying them.

He never missed an opportunity to brush against her in the house or cuddle her in bed, always pushing the barrier of her resistance a little farther. A tap on the door caused her to spin toward it while covering herself. When it didn't open, she slumped against the counter. Relief washed over her. "Yes?"

"Hurry up." Rafe's voice was impatient. "Are you going to stay in there all night?"

Sarah gritted her teeth. He'd been as grouchy as a wounded bear lately. "I'll be out in a minute." She'd been worked to death, between cooking and cleaning, the first two days. Thanks to Lisa's coaching, she'd fallen in sync with the routine of ranch life by day three. But the worst part of her

day was having to act like a loving couple in front of the men. Only the strain she saw on Rafe's face made it all worthwhile. At least it let her know that he was suffering too. She pulled on the long johns and opened the door.

Rafe leaned against the door jam. His sensual mouth curved into a rueful smile at the sight of her. "You know, wife, that union suit is getting a bit ripe. Maybe you should throw it into the wash tomorrow."

Sarah snorted and moved past him. "If I find a little time, I just might do that." She walked to the bed, pulled back the covers and got in. Leaving the covers down, she rolled onto her side, not wanting to see Rafe's nudity.

The other side of the bed sank as he got in. He flipped the covers over the two of them and her body temperature immediately elevated. It was going to be another unbearable night. She squirmed, stifling a moan when the wool rubbed against her abraded skin. Then she scratched her shoulder.

"Does that abomination have fleas too?"

Sarah shot a dirty look his way. "Of course not."

He was leaning up on his elbow watching her. "Then why are you scratching like my old hound dog, Luke?"

Sarah inched away from him, irritated by his mocking tone. "Just drop it. It's none of your business."

His dark eyes narrowed with suspicion as his free hand went to the top button on her long johns. As he started to unbutton it, she jerked away. The last thing she wanted was for him to see her painful rash, the penalty she'd paid for being stubborn.

"Don't worry about it, okay."

His gaze grew concerned. "No, it's not okay. You're burning up, damnit."

Why did he care? Sarah thought back to Zeke's comment that she had nearly ruined Rafe, and wondered again exactly what toll her leaving had taken on him. He seemed to be functioning well, as far as she could see. Rafe reached for the button again and she shrank back.

He whispered dangerously, "Don't even think of moving away. I'm a lot stronger than you are. I'll hold you down if I have to."

Sarah froze. Rafe wasn't given to idle threats. He carefully pulled the garment away from her skin, a look of pure outrage passing across his face. As his index finger smoothed lightly over her abraded skin, Sarah sighed with bliss and closed her eyes. His harsh voice broke into the silence.

"Go put on something light, and I'll get the calamine lotion."

Sarah knew it was the sensible thing to do, yet she balked at the idea. Seeing his exasperated glower, she realized he'd probably strip the clothes right off her if she hesitated much longer. She got out of bed, walked to the dresser and got a blue satin slip out of the drawer. You couldn't see through it, and it would feel wonderfully cool against her skin. Rafe's gaze followed her to the bathroom door. She hurriedly closed it behind her, blocking his view.

Sarah climbed out of the long johns and slid the slip over her shoulders. She gasped when she studied her reflection in the mirror. The garment clung to her breasts, highlighting the peaks. She stepped back and it swung around her hips,

making the movement look enticing. This was probably a very bad idea, but it was too late to change now without looking stupid.

Opening the door slowly, she peeked around it, looking for Rafe. He was nowhere in sight. Wonderful. She could make it to the bed without him noticing her skimpy attire. Shutting the bathroom door behind her, she made a beeline for the bed. When she was halfway there, the bedroom door opened.

Rafe stood in the doorway, clad in a pair of briefs that gleamed in the shadows. He stepped forward, a bottle of pink liquid in hand. His briefs were almost the same shade as the result of a laundry mishap. The fact that he wore them with nary a comment had softened her heart toward him a bit.

She stood motionless, alarmed by his heated gaze, feeling bare to the touch as he stepped nearer.

Rafe opened the bottle, poured the cooling liquid into his hand. He set the bottle on the dresser, and rubbed his large, callused hands together, evenly distributing the solution.

Sarah felt mesmerized. His hands were so strong, and she'd dreamed of having them touch her. As he stepped into her space, she sucked in a deep breath, drawing in his masculine scent.

His hands came up to her shoulders. The instant he laid them on her, she shuddered, her treacherous body responding to a call as old as time. His hooded gaze locked onto hers as he smoothed his palms along her oversensitive shoulders. His sensual smile ignited a fire that made her nerve endings supercharged. Rafe's index fingers flicked at her spaghetti straps. The thin strings of fabric skittered off

her shoulders, leaving them bare. Sarah was rooted to the spot.

The slip dropped down to dangle from her upper arms, allowing him a generous glimpse of her cleavage. Rafe sucked in a ragged breath. His hands slid lower, gliding over the tops of her breasts. Sarah gasped, feeling a pull deep inside her. It was hot, elemental passion, and all her instincts for self-preservation fought against it. She couldn't allow herself to fall under his spell again and lose herself in the process.

She stepped back, breaking the contact and the sensual spell between them.

Rafe let out a deep breath, his nostrils flaring, his mouth curving into a rueful smile. He slowly assessed her shell-shocked expression. "That should make you sleep a little better, wife."

"I doubt it." Sarah still trembled from the force of her desire. Regret and loss were evident in Rafe's eyes when she stepped away. He wanted her, but could he ever love her? His steady gaze as he watched her walk toward the bed, told her that he may have lost the battle, but he was still going to try to win the war.

He needed to sleep with her to get her out of his system. He'd said as much to Zeke. This little setback wouldn't stop his march on her defenses.

Sarah glanced at him warily after she climbed into bed. Rafe smiled when he saw her lingering gaze on him. With slow deliberate motions, he slid off his briefs.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe climbed into bed next to her, his upper body raised on an elbow. "Honey, if you want me, all you have to do is ask."

Sarah thought back to his boast that she'd have to ask for it, and frowned. "Forget it, big boy. There isn't going to be that kind of contact between us."

"Honey, if I'd wanted to, all I had to do was continue spreading lotion all over your delectable body." His dark eyes flared. "And right at this moment you'd be under me, screaming out my name."

Sarah cocked an eyebrow at his vivid description. "You think so, huh?"

"Yeah, I think so. But hey, I'm progressive. You can get on top if you want."

"Oh, shut up." Sarah turned her back on him, the big overconfident lug. She vowed to do everything she could to keep from succumbing to his sexual magnetism. To give in to the fire between them, would be to lose herself. Rafe had never given her words of love. She doubted he even thought in such terms. He wanted her, plain and simple, but it wasn't enough.

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Sarah woke before the alarm rang. She was used to getting up at four-thirty now. She shifted in bed and realized

Rafe was sleeping against her, spoon fashion, his hand clinging softly to her breast. The growing bulge at her rear told her he had a morning erection. A fleeting thought of giving in to her desires ran through her mind. Why shouldn't she make love with him once, just to see what she was missing? She shook off her sleepy lethargy, and stifled the idea. She softly placed her hand over Rafe's, so as not to wake him, and began to lift it from her breast. His hot palm tightened around her.

"What? No good morning kiss?"

Sarah turned to look over her shoulder at Rafe. Stubble shadowed the bottom of his face. Instead of making him look dissolute, it heightened his masculine appeal. His sleepy bedroom eyes and soft smile wordlessly invited her to stay put. She pulled away, but only pushed herself more firmly into his palm. He fingered her nipple, instantly making it hard and sensitive. She gasped at his seductive, predatory gaze. "You said you wouldn't take me unless I asked you to."

He smiled and continued to circle the budding nipple with a callused finger. "But I didn't say I wouldn't encourage you."

Sarah kicked at him. Her heel made soft, but determined contact with his leg. He yelped and let go. Sarah slid out of bed and spun around to glare at him. "That's what you get for trying to manhandle me. From now on keep your hands to yourself." He doubled over with laughter. Sarah glared down at him, incensed by his reaction.

He straightened, tears of mirth beading the corners of his eyes. "Wife, you kick like our old lame mule, Clyde. You've got more spunk than I figured you for but it's going to take a

heap more than that to keep me away. You might say, I just can't help myself when it comes to you."

Sarah saw his dark, heated gaze drink in the sight of her as she gathered her clothes from the dresser and headed into the bathroom. She felt like a lamb watched by a timber wolf.

Sarah was flipping pancakes when Lisa's daughter Mandy walked into the room. "I want some juith, Aunt Sarah."

Sarah smiled at the little girl's cute lisp. She had agreed to keep her for the weekend so Lisa and Gabe could escape for a short holiday. During the past week while Sarah learned to cook, she and Lisa had become fast friends. She'd even taken to little Mandy although she hadn't been around children much. In the end, Sarah knew walking away from Rafe and Lisa would prove difficult.

Sarah put down the spatula she was using to flip pancakes and turned to smile. "I'll get you some, honey. How'd you like to go on a nature hike today?"

Mandy grinned. "Oh boy."

Sarah gazed at the sparkling dark eyes that looked so much like Rafe's. If she and Rafe stayed together they might have a child that looked like this. The thought was both compelling and scary. Could she open herself up to that kind of risk?

Rafe walked into the kitchen and smiled. "Something smells awfully good."

Mandy piped up, "Aunt Sarah is making pancakes, my favorite."

Rafe picked her up and twirled her around making Mandy giggle. "Hey there, munchkin. How's my favorite girl?"

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah leaned back and watched the affection between them. Rafe would definitely make an excellent father.

"I'm good," Mandy lisped. "Aunt Sarah is going to take me on a nature hike today."

"That's great, munchkin." Rafe set Mandy down. "We'll have to thank Sarah for being so nice." He walked over and planted a quick hot kiss on her surprised mouth.

Sarah blinked up at him when he pulled away. "What was that for?"

"Do I have to have a reason? Let's just say it's for learning how to cook. I'm impressed, very impressed. You fit into my life beautifully, wife." He reached out to snag a slice of crisp bacon from the warm platter.

Sarah slapped at his hand while she gazed up at him stunned and warmed by the compliment. "Save some for the hands."

"A fella can't live on love alone," he joked.

Sarah gaped at his mention of love and noticed Zeke enter the room. It was probably all part of the public show. Feeling flustered she turned to fix a plate for Mandy. "Let's fix you a picnic tray to eat in front of the TV."

"Oh goodie," Mandy said.

Rafe poured himself a mug of coffee from the big, steaming pot on the table. It smelled wonderful. Mrs. Murphy was due back from vacation in two days' time, but Rafe considered extending her vacation for a while longer. He enjoyed having Sarah take care of him. Reaching for the sugar bowl, he stirred in two teaspoons of sugar and took a

sip. He gagged and glared at Sarah. "Good Lord, woman, are you trying to kill me?"

Several of the men made choking sounds, too.

"What's the problem?" Sarah asked in a bewildered tone.

Rafe grimaced. "This coffee's saltier than Hades!"

Sarah frowned. "It can't be."

Rafe picked up his cup and passed it to her. What was she trying to do, get back at him for their cuddle this morning? Somehow this childish trick didn't seem like her style, although a week ago he might have thought differently. "Try it." He watched her taste it. Her eyes widened with surprise.

"Oh, good grief! I must have mixed up the salt and sugar canisters." Sarah stood up and started to gather up the cups. "I'm so sorry. I'll go get some fresh cups."

Rafe couldn't help chuckling. So much for her cooking attempts. They were hit and miss but he sure admired the dedication she put into learning something new. He had to admit that he probably wouldn't have learned something from her world of photography as easily.

Tab Whittacker, a tall blonde older cowboy, ginned and said, "Hey, Rafe, maybe your wife is dosing you with saltpeter. That's one way to keep a good man down."

This brought a series of guffaws from the hands. Rafe frowned at the lingering glance Tab gave Sarah as she rushed from the room. Oh, hell. He was getting jealous. Tab was a good hand, and he knew enough not to poach. Rafe smiled, going along with the ribbing. He watched Sarah blush as she entered the room, and thought back to the evening before.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

He'd almost had her last night. It was a tantalizing taste of what was to come.

Sarah put a fresh bowl of sugar on the table and walked around, distributing the cups. Rafe watched as Zeke grudgingly took the cup she proffered him. Zeke, who was as close to Rafe as a father, still didn't trust her. He hoped the two would mend their rift because Rafe was counting on her coming to the realization that this was where she belonged by summer's end.

Rafe's hand lingered on hers for a moment. He felt her pulse race. "So, are the boys right? Are you trying to slip saltpeter into me?"

Anger flared momentarily in her eyes but then she smiled back at him. "It wouldn't hurt."

The men at the table responded with laughter. Rafe watched her take her seat at the table with complete aplomb, seemingly unfazed by the sexual double entendre. Yes, sweet Sarah was definitely more than he'd bargained for.

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After Sarah finished the breakfast dishes, she went to the bedroom for her camera. Mandy watched her as she walked back into the kitchen with it.

"What are you gonna do with that?" Mandy asked.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah smiled at the little girl's natural curiosity while she began to load the Nikon Camera with thirty-five millimeter film. It was nice to experience old familiar things through a child's bright inquisitive eyes. "I'm going to take a few pictures of ranch life."

"Why?" There was more than a hint of interest in Mandy's voice.

Sarah noted Mandy's lingering glance at the inner workings of the expensive camera. "I'm a nature photographer, honey. It's what I do for a living."

Mandy tilted her head and leaned forward to get a closer look. "I never heard of that."

Sarah held the camera still so Mandy could get a good look. "If you'd like, I'll give you a few photography lessons."

Mandy grinned and clapped her hands. "Yes, yes, please."

Sarah grabbed the sack lunch she'd packed and followed Mandy out the door. They walked toward the corral where there was some kind of commotion going on. "Let's see what's happening, Mandy."

In addition to her Endangered Species Shoot she decided to do a series called "Western Life," and feature Rafe's ranch and men. It would give her something productive to do and keep her mind off Rafe.

"Are we going to ask Zeke to saddle us some horses to take us on our picnic and hike?" Mandy asked.

Sarah winced at the thought. She'd been afraid of horses since childhood. "No, I don't think so, Mandy. I'm not very comfortable around horses."

"Why?" Mandy gazed up at her inquisitively.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

"I had a bad experience on a horse once. So if you don't mind, honey, I'd rather walk." Sarah thought back to her grandfather's insistence that she take riding lessons because it was expected of a young lady, and shuddered. She'd been terrified of the hulking beasts and as a result had a bad fall, breaking a leg. Thankfully after that he hadn't pressed the issue.

Feeling someone's scrutiny, Sarah looked up and saw Zeke listening. Tab and Travis gazed at her intently from their perches on the fence. She didn't like being spied upon but she supposed she was a novelty to the men. At her notice, the younger men turned away but Zeke scowled at her.

"That's okay. I like to walk, too." Mandy ran ahead stopping to clamber up the side of the corral.

Sarah took in the flurry of activity as they drew near the corral. Men hung around the railing, cheering and watching what was going on in the center. Sarah gasped when she saw a wild, black horse jump off the ground and turn in a half circle. It took her half a second to realize Rafe was astride the animal. Sarah winced at the jarring leaps that shook his body. *He could be killed.* The horrible thought held her motionless. The horse jumped to the left and pitched to the right. Rafe went flying off the furious animal, landing on his behind in the sand.

Rafe let out a laugh, got to his feet and walked over to the horse that threw him. He crooned softly to the wild-eyed animal. Sweet sounds came from Rafe's mouth as he put a hand on the horse's shoulder and stroked his palm down its quivering side. It calmed, ears coming forward. Who would've

thought such sweet coaxing sounds could come out of the man's throat?

Sarah scowled, she couldn't be jealous of a stupid animal, could she? She had to turn away from the sight, unsettled by Rafe's carefree attitude. She'd been terrified, and he'd acted like he was having the time of his life. She angrily picked up the camera from its neck strap and began to snap a series of shots. Tab climbed on the back of a fresh horse and she got several great shots of his handsome face. This would definitely sell. The sunlight glinted off Tab's blond hair and muscular, tanned body.

She smiled, loosening up now that she was in her own element, and moved on to the other busy men. Turning a little farther to the right, she brought Rafe's scowling face into focus. He strode toward her at a furious pace. Sarah snapped off a final shot of his angry face. It would be a keepsake to put this fiasco in proper focus after she left.

Rafe stopped a few paces in front of her, a frown furrowing his brow. "I thought you specialized in nature photography?"

Sarah was surprised by his angry reaction and embarrassed by the attention it was drawing. The men nearby stopped what they were doing and looked their way. She let the camera dangle from its neck strap and leaned against the wooden corral. There was no way she was going to let him get to her this time. "There are horses in the shots."

Rafe crossed his dusty arms in front of his chest and scowled down at her. "There are also cowboys and you're in their way. Knock it off."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah cocked an eyebrow at his imperious tone. Could the man actually be jealous? She decided to egg him on to see if it was true. "Maybe I should do a beefcake catalog, 'Men of the West'."

Rafe put his foot on the bottom rung of the corral and leaned toward her. His expression became more determined, but his voice grew softer. "I said no. Go take pictures of prairie dogs or something."

Sarah couldn't help staring at the way his worn jeans conformed to the shape of his well-muscled body. He was a walking advertisement for hot, cowboy love, and all she had to do was say the word and she could have him.

She was tempted. Instead she sighed, turned her back on him. "Fine. I don't have to put up with your foul temper. Come on, Mandy, let's go out onto the south pasture for our picnic."

Rafe was actually jealous. But what did it mean? Was he really beginning to care for her? She grinned as she heard his parting words because they sounded as confused as she felt.

"Damned fool woman."

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Sarah took a shot of a hawk swooping majestically overhead while Mandy picked wildflowers nearby. Suddenly, the pristine silence was shattered by the thunder of hooves.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

She looked to the left. A speeding black horse barreled down on them, followed by several other dark dusty shapes. Sarah shouted, "Get behind the tree, Mandy." She heard Mandy's high-pitched scream and saw her duck behind the big oak tree they'd spread their lunch under.

Sarah froze momentarily, then started to climb onto the first branch of the tree for safety when Rafe came into view on his horse, Umbriago. He leaned and Umbriago veered in front of the wild horses, changing their path just in the nick of time. Rafe muttered what could have been a curse or a prayer as the horse stopped short and he turned in the saddle to look at her.

Sweat ran down his face and his breath was coming hard. A nerve pulsed tightly in his jaw as he sidled his horse up next to her. Reaching up he plucked her out of the tree and pulled her effortlessly onto the saddle in front of him. As he held her close, Sarah was enveloped by the scent of cologne, sweat, and horses.

He was the most reassuring thing she'd ever smelled in her life. She slumped against him, feeling his heartbeat thunder in his hard, muscular chest. As she lay trembling against him, it began to slow. She was too stunned to even worry about being astride a horse.

Rafe's voice shook. "My God, woman. You could have been killed."

Sarah mumbled against his chest. "I know. Thank you for saving me." She heard the sound of running feet and saw Mandy racing toward them, tears running down her face.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe turned the horse so it faced her. "Mandy, baby, are you okay?"

"Yes, Aunt Sarah saved me."

"I guess that's one more thing to thank you for, wife," Rafe husked.

Tab rode up followed by several other hands.

Rafe said, "Mandy, honey, go back to the house with Tab."

Tab bent down to scoop up Mandy after giving Sarah a thorough once over. "Everything okay here, boss?"

Rafe said tightly, "No harm done. They're both just a little shaken up."

"I can't think how that latch came loose, Rafe. Sorry about that," Tab added, apologetically.

"It's not your fault. Somebody must have bumped it."

Rafe turned to look at Sarah as Tab rode away. "I've got a question for you. Why didn't you get out of the way sooner?"

Sarah clung to the bouncing saddle and closed her eyes. "I'm scared of horses. I guess I kind of froze."

"Of all the damned fool things," Rafe said sourly. "Tomorrow, I'll get you used to them."

Sarah gritted her teeth. Riding a horse wasn't part of the deal. "I won't get on a horse."

He chuckled, drawing her up close against him. "In case you haven't noticed, wife, you're on a horse now."

Sarah scowled at his mocking tone and overly friendly hands, but didn't dare pull away from his embrace for fear of falling.

Rafe abruptly reined up the horse. Sarah gasped as he swung her off the saddle. Before she could let out the

panicked scream caught in her throat, she was standing. She slumped to the ground. Rafe slid out of the saddle and picked her up. He brushed the gravel off the seat of her jeans. "Are you sure you're okay, wife?"

Sarah pulled away embarrassed by her weakness. "I'm fine."

His eyes narrowed as he looked her over. "No, you're not." He scooped her up and carried her all the way back to the house, going inside and placing her on the sofa. Grabbing an afghan off a chair, he carefully covered her with it, tucking it in around her.

Sarah frowned up at him. "Rafe, really, I'm not some china doll you have to coddle. I'm perfectly fine."

"I say you're not fine." Rafe frowned. "Besides, if I want to coddle you, I'm going to coddle you. Now you just sit back and relax and I'll brew you a cup of the tea you like so much. Then I'll go up and check on Mandy."

Flustered, Sarah sat up. "Oh my gosh, Mandy. I'd better go check on her."

Rafe gently pushed her back. "I'll take care of it. You sit tight."

Rafe carried a tray into the living room fifteen minutes later. "Mandy's fine. She was more worried about you than anything else. She's down for her afternoon nap, so you should have some quiet time."

Rafe set the tray down on the coffee table and handed Sarah a cup of the fragrant tea she enjoyed. How out of place this big cowboy looked pouring tea and how endearing, Sarah

thought fondly. "Those horses that stampeded, were they the ones you were breaking?"

"Yeah. I'm still trying to figure out how they got out of the paddock. I suppose in all the commotion someone forgot to make sure the gate was latched and then something must have spooked them." He added regretfully, "I'm awful sorry for putting you in danger, Sarah."

Sarah reached out to touch his arm feeling his contrition. "It wasn't your fault, Rafe. Don't blame yourself."

"I don't see it that way. I'm your husband. I'm supposed to take care of you. To say nothing of Mandy."

"But we're not really man and wife," Sarah said wistfully.

"We could be." Rafe gazed at her intently before exiting the room.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

Rafe wandered into the kitchen for a cool drink. He'd been going over his books, a job he didn't relish, and he felt totally wiped out. He'd been having a run of bad luck the last few months, ranging from broken equipment to torn fence lines that hurt his bottom line.

If his plan to open the ranch to tourists went through, he'd be sitting pretty. Everything hinged on an acceptance for an expansion loan from the bank. Now that he had a more stable home life things were looking up.

Rafe saw Sarah and Mandy making sandwiches. Their heads bent together as they worked and Mandy giggled at something Sarah said. It made him smile. "Hey, what are my two girls up to?"

Sarah's head shot up. "We're packing a picnic lunch." Her radiant smile lit up the room.

Mandy grinned and skipped up to him. "Aunt Sarah's teaching me how to use her camera. And we're gonna take a picnic lunch with us."

Rafe sidled up to the table and grabbed one of the peanut butter cookies they had packed. He nibbled on it as he glanced at the fiery top of Sarah's bent head. She studiously ignored him. She'd been more watchful around him of late and he wasn't sure why. It was as if she was waiting for something.

"It's mighty nice of you to teach Mandy photography, Sarah. Maybe I can take a few lessons from you, too."

Mandy tugged on Rafe's sleeve, her cherubic face beaming. "Aunt Sarah is lots of fun. She's a really good teacher, too," she chirped.

"I'll just bet she is. I wonder what else she could teach me." He watched Sarah's eyes narrow at the sexual undertone. She was still fighting the sexual attraction between the two of them.

Rafe stood up, watching Sarah as she put the sandwiches into the picnic basket. He studied her beautiful face. Maybe he didn't know her as well as he thought he did. "So where are you ladies headed?"

Sarah picked up her camera from the counter and hung it around her neck. "The north pasture. There are some interesting rock formations there, and a nice big shade tree to have our lunch under."

She looked relieved to be on a safe subject. Rafe narrowed his eyes. He rather liked having her on edge. It made her more aware of him. "That sounds fine."

Mandy tugged on his sleeve. "Hey, Uncle Rafe, why don't you come along with us?"

He grinned at the horrified expression that washed across Sarah's expressive face. The tension had been building between them and it was at the boiling point. He had to admit he hadn't been the easiest fellow to live with of late. Being in a state of constant semi-arousal when she was around made him cranky. "Sorry, Mandy. I for one have to work on Sunday." He saw Sarah's shoulders relax and the predatory male in him made him add, "But I might join you for lunch."

Mandy grinned. "Promise?"

He laughed and picked her up. "Promise." He looked over at Sarah, standing by the back door, camera slung around her neck, picnic basket in hand. She smiled softly as she watched him nuzzle Mandy's neck. His heart melted at her poignant expression. "I'll see you both at noon."

Rafe rode his bay gelding over the ridge at quarter to twelve. He saw Sarah and Mandy lying on their bellies on the ground facing a prairie dog mound. He dismounted and tied the reins to a tree. He walked the rest of the way, not wanting to disturb their concentration.

He saw that Mandy held the camera, patiently aiming it at the burrow. "Is this right, Aunt Sarah? I don't wanna mess it up."

"That's right, honey. And don't worry about messing anything up, it's good to try new things. Now I'm going to show you how to adjust the lens." She reached over and took Mandy's little hand, placing it on the mechanism. "See? You slide it like this to bring it into focus. Now look through the view finder and tell me when it gets crystal clear."

"That's good right there," Mandy said excitedly.

Rafe saw a prairie dog sit up on its haunches and look around. Sarah and Mandy grew still.

Sarah whispered, "Okay, honey, now hold your breath and snap the shutter."

Mandy pressed her finger down on the shutter. Several shots whirled off in rapid progression. The alarmed prairie dog ducked back underground. Mandy jumped up, grinning. "Thanks, Sarah, that was so much fun."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah got to her hands and knees, giving Rafe a beautiful view of her generously curved derriere encased in faded jeans. He locked in on the sight like a thirsty man would water.

Sarah stood and pulled Mandy close for a hug. "You're welcome. I'm glad we could spend time together."

Rafe's heart stopped in his chest at the sight. Rafe stepped forward and rasped, "Your lunch guest has arrived, ladies. Are you two ready to eat?"

Sarah spun toward him, her smile bright. "We were having a marvelous time, but now we're hungry." She reached down to pat Mandy's head. "Right?"

Mandy ran to get the basket. "That's right. Let's eat."

Rafe spread out the blanket under the pinion tree. He sat down, leaning back against the rough bark. Mandy plopped down on the left side of him, leaving the right side for Sarah.

As Rafe delved into the picnic basket to help Sarah get the sandwiches and cool drinks, their hands bumped each other's. He glanced at her questioningly. Sarah didn't immediately pull away. Instead she smiled. Rafe's breath caught in his throat. She was warming to him. Rafe unwrapped the ham and cheese sandwich she handed him and cleared his throat. "So what have you two been up to?"

Sarah looked down while opening her can of juice. "We were taking some shots of the rock formations over there." She pointed to a jagged outcropping ten feet away. "Then we ran into the prairie dog burrow." She grinned conspiratorially at Mandy. "We had to sneak up on the little buggers."

Mandy giggled. "Yeah, Aunt Sarah showed me how to use her camera. Maybe when I grow up I can be a photographer."

Sarah nodded and sipped her drink.

Rafe felt himself falling into their jovial mood. He smiled at Mandy's hopeful expression. "Munchkin, you can be anything you want to be." Rafe glanced fondly at the two of them and found himself wishing he could trap this day in a bottle. This was what it would be like when they were a real family. The thought only strengthened his determination not to let Sarah slip away again.

Mandy reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of stones. She handed them over to him with a smile. "See the rocks we collected?"

Rafe turned the cool golden substance over in his hand.

Mandy leaned forward. "See how they shine, Uncle Rafe? I bet it's real gold. We're gonna be rich."

Rafe looked into her eager eyes and smiled. "It's only fool's gold, honey. It shines bright, but it's worthless."

He glanced at Sarah. Her suddenly hollow expression left him no doubt that she thought it was an apt description of their relationship. But it wasn't, damnit. She loved him and he needed her. Couldn't she see how right they were together?

She blinked her eyes and looked away. He could have sworn there were tears in her eyes. But he knew she was happy with the status quo. He quickly finished his lunch and got to his feet. Once he got her into bed she'd see the light, he was counting on intimacy to cement their relationship.

"Come back to the corral when you two finish," Rafe said, his voice raspy. "I've got a surprise for you, Sarah."

Mandy grinned and jumped up. "Did Dazzle Air have her colt?"

Rafe smiled at her inquisitiveness. "You'll just have to wait and see." He walked over to Umbriago and climbed back into the saddle. "I'll see you both later."

Sarah felt sad as she watched him go, despite Mandy's excitement. Rafe's words about the shining rocks being pretty but worthless struck close to home. Their marriage might seem genuine to an outside observer but they both knew it was fake. Still, Sarah knew in her heart, it was the closest she would ever come to the real thing. She loved the hardheaded, cowboy. Maybe instead of hoping for more she should hang onto what she had.

Mandy started tossing the remains of their meal into the hamper. "Come on, Aunt Sarah, don't you want to see what your surprise is?"

Sarah couldn't help smiling at her excited chatter. It didn't take much to make a five-year-old happy. If only adult life were that uncomplicated. "Okay, let's get going."

Mandy raced in front of Sarah toward the ranch.

What could her mysterious surprise be? Sarah wondered. And why would Rafe want to give her a present, anyway? It was probably something to increase their mock closeness and impress the men. Just like his soft words and husband-like pecks when others were around.

Sarah and Mandy walked up to the corral where Rafe was waiting for them. His dark eyes carried a soft, but enigmatic, expression. She still didn't have a handle on what he was

thinking even after all these days together. "So what's the big surprise?"

He smiled and pointed to a speckled horse that was munching on some hay. "I'm going to give you your first riding lesson."

Mandy giggled. "Uncle Rafe, that won't be any fun. Bay Rum is as sleepy as my old rocking horse."

Rafe tipped back his head and laughed. "Well, honey, we want to start off slow. Remember, Sarah's not used to horses."

Sarah scowled at his mirthful face and backed away. How dare he pull this on her! She'd made it plain that she wasn't getting on a horse. "We're not going to start at all."

Mandy looked up sharply. "But, Aunt Sarah, I thought you said it was good to try new things."

Sarah looked down into the child's bewildered gaze and felt tongue-tied. How could she explain that there were separate rules for adults and kids? "I did, but this is different."

Mandy frowned. "How?"

Rafe's snug smile made Sarah want to kick him. He knew she was trapped, the rat.

He said softly, "Come on, Sarah, you'll be safe as a baby in a cradle on old Bay Rum."

Sarah looked from Rafe's challenging grin to Mandy's questioning expression and knew she was defeated. There was no way out. How could she back out without destroying her credibility with Mandy? She sidled up to Rafe while

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

keeping a wary eye on the speckled horse. "I'll get you for this Halliday, if it's the last thing I do," she whispered.

Rafe leaned close to her ear. "Now is that any way for my sweet little wife to talk?"

Sarah crossed her arms over her chest, pulling away from him. "Sweet little wife, my Aunt Fanny."

Rafe smiled. "What was that, honey?" he said loud enough for Mandy to hear.

Sarah gritted her teeth, well-aware little ears were listening. "How do I get started?"

Rafe stepped behind her and put his hands on her waist. Sarah's skin burned from the contact and she had to fight herself not to pull away. He nuzzled the nape of her neck with his warm lips, his breath stirring the tendrils. It tickled like hell, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting it. "First you place your foot in the stirrup and your hand on the pommel. Then on the count of three you're going to pull yourself up and swing your other leg over."

Sarah shivered and pulled her head away from the distracting contact. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

He tightened his grip on her waist and husked, "Don't worry, honey, you're in good hands."

Sarah snorted. She gave him a repressive glare over her shoulder. "Just keep your mind on the riding lesson, okay?"

Rafe nodded, his smile widening. "Your wish is my command, wife. One, two—"

Sarah shrieked when he swung her up and plopped her behind hard on the saddle. "Hey, what about three?"

Rafe shrugged. "Sorry, I got mixed up."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah glared down at the big, macho cowboy. "Sure you did." She heard Mandy giggle and shot an embarrassed look her way. Bay Rum shifted and Sarah let out a startled shriek, clutching the pommel as if it were a lifeline. Bay Rum blinked her eyes at the noise and then seemed to go into a daze.

Mandy laughed and pointed. "Look, Uncle Rafe, Bay Rum's falling asleep."

Rafe patted Bay Rum on the head, and the horse nuzzled his hand, making wuffling noises. Rafe tipped back his hat and looked deep into Sarah's wide eyes. "You look right natural up there, wife."

Sarah burned under the scrutiny while she slowly came to the realization that she wasn't going to fall off the horse, dead from fear as she first imagined. Still, this was all the riding lesson she was prepared to try. "I'm ready to get down now."

Rafe's eye's crinkled as he smiled. "Sarah, we haven't even started yet. I'm going to lead Bay Rum around the corral so you can get the feel of the saddle."

Sarah scowled. "I've already got the feel of the saddle. It's hard and too high off the ground."

Rafe threw back his head and laughed, barely waking up the horse. "Come on, old girl, let's put her through her paces." He walked to the front of the horse and looked back. "Now hold lightly onto the pommel and try to relax."

Sarah held her breath when the horse started to move. By the third time around the corral she had loosened her grip and accustomed to the rocking of the saddle.

They stopped in front of Mandy who was sitting on the rail. Rafe stepped back and handed the reins up to Sarah.

Sarah took one hand off the pommel and took the leather straps reluctantly. She figured Rafe had stopped in front of Mandy on purpose. He thought that she wouldn't want to look like a coward, and he was right. "What now?" she said churlishly.

Rafe smiled. "Now you get to take Bay Rum for a spin. Just remember not to saw on the reins. Nudge him nice and gentle and he'll go where you want him to."

Sarah stiffened her spine and gave the horse a little nudge with her knees. He took several slow steps. This wasn't so bad, she decided. She might even be able to handle this. Then she nudged him to the right but he kept plodding straight ahead. She spun her head and looked at Rafe leaning against the fence by Mandy. "How do I turn this thing?"

Rafe yelled, "Bay Rum is a little bit stubborn. Keep nudging him and he'll get the idea."

"Come on, you fugitive from a glue factory," Sarah muttered, as she pulled on the reins. The horse snorted and kept heading straight. Sarah gave an embarrassed glance Mandy's way when she heard Rafe chuckle. "If you turn like a nice horsy, I'll give you a carrot," Sarah crooned. The horse nickered and turned, plodding back toward Rafe and Mandy. He came to a stop in front of them.

Rafe pushed away from the fence and took the reins from Sarah's hands. He dropped them and placed a hot hand on her denim-covered thigh. When he looked up into her eyes there was a soft smile on his face. "That's enough for today." He turned to look at Mandy. "Why don't you run off and play, honey."

"Okay, Uncle Rafe."

Sarah watched Mandy skip away feeling terribly vulnerable. Stuck on top of a horse with only Rafe nearby made her easy pickings. Was he getting Mandy out of the way so he could make advances? More importantly, did she want him to? She glanced at him and bemused by his tender smile.

"I'll give you lesson two tomorrow," Rafe husked.

Alarm bells went off in Sarah's head at his suggestive tone. She was way too near the fire. She shook off the sensuous spell and looked away. "If I can find time out of my busy schedule."

"Mrs. Murphy is coming back from vacation tomorrow." Rafe's voice carried more than a hint of determination. "That way you'll have time for other things."

Sarah could just imagine the other things he was thinking of as his heated gaze locked onto hers. His strong hands went to her waist and he tugged her unresisting body off the saddle, toward him. He slowly slid her down the length of his muscular body and she gasped as her breasts brushed against his lips. He placed a damp kiss in their cleavage. Sarah whimpered as her nipples formed tight buds. They dragged against his chest until she was standing on shaky legs. Sarah closed her eyes as Rafe's lips claimed hers for a soft kiss. Sarah's breath came rapid in her chest.

The sound of a car coming up the driveway brought her to her senses. She pulled away, blinking up into Rafe's heated gaze. A car door slammed and she glanced over at it.

A tall, sandy-haired man got out of a sleek white Cadillac. He shrugged, rearranging his dark suit, and put a matching

Stetson on his head. Rafe looked furious at the interruption. Who could the stranger be? And why didn't Rafe seem to like him?

The man rapidly crossed the yard to where they stood. His cool, gray eyes roved over Sarah, still in Rafe's arms. Sarah bristled at the scrutiny. What business of his was it if she and her husband wanted to share a cuddle?

Rafe kept a snug arm around her waist. He didn't notice the questioning glance she shot his way because his gaze was locked on the stranger with utter contempt. Sarah was shocked. Why was there such animosity between them?

"You're not welcome on the Double-H, Blackthorn." Rafe's voice was curt, his stance rigid.

Sarah started at the vehemence in Rafe's voice. She felt his grasp on her waist tighten. Rafe was usually so controlled. This wasn't at all like him.

"This isn't a social call, Halliday. Besides, the way I see it, this land should really be mine." Blackthorn's voice was cool and cultured as he took a step closer.

"I've heard that old song before," Rafe snarled. "I don't want to hear it again. Get back in your car and get out."

Blackthorn grinned, seeming to relish Rafe's animosity. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Your great-grandfather cheated my great-grandfather out of this claim, Halliday. Just because you don't like to hear the facts, doesn't change them."

Rafe snorted. "That's your version, Blackthorn. You never had anything to back it up and you still don't. Your great-

grandfather lost that card game fair and square. It's not my fault he didn't have the guts to admit it to his family."

Blackthorn jerked his hands out of his pockets, clenching them into fists. He took a rigid step forward, his face contorting with rage. "Bull squat."

Rafe let go of Sarah and stepped toward him. "Well, now that the pleasantries are over..."

Sarah had horrible visions of the OK Corral. "Rafe," she quickly interjected. "I need to talk to you."

He ignored her and took another step toward Blackthorn. "Now," she added sharply.

It drew both men's attention. Rafe scowled at her and Blackthorn looked intrigued. She smiled at Blackthorn, hoping to defuse the situation.

Blackthorn seemed to relax. He smiled back at Sarah, but his eyes were cool. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely wife, Halliday?"

"I see you heard about her." Rafe crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned back against the corral as he scowled at Blackthorn.

Blackthorn laughed. "Of course. The whole town is abuzz that the lady you scared off has come back for more."

Rafe's eyes narrowed while he tipped his head in Sarah's direction. "Nevell Blackthorn, meet my wife, Sarah Halliday."

Blackthorn doffed his hat. "Charmed. I hear you're one of the Maxwell family, a rather distinguished and wealthy clan. Quite a handy connection for a man that wants to open a dude ranch."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah was put off by both his words and his smarmy gentility. She instinctively stepped closer to Rafe linking her arm with his. "You seem to hear a great deal, Mr. Blackthorn, none of it any of your business. But yes, my maiden name was Maxwell."

Blackthorn watched the move with narrowed eyes. "So, are you going to bail hubby out of his financial difficulties?"

Sarah decided then and there she didn't like this man any more than Rafe did. "I'm sure my husband can take care of himself and any difficulties that might come up."

Blackthorn nodded and looked back at Rafe. "I came here to up my offer, Halliday."

Rafe put an arm around Sarah's shoulder and pulled her close. "No dice, Blackthorn. I'm not going to sell."

Blackthorn shrugged. "Very well, if that's the way you want it."

"It is."

Blackthorn glanced scathingly at Sarah standing in the shelter of Rafe's arms. "Maybe you'll change your mind if your wife walks out again." The barb was aimed at her and she bristled at the intimation. Their relationship was none of this man's business.

Rafe pulled her close. "Don't count on it, Blackthorn. The ranch isn't up for sale no matter what the circumstances."

Blackthorn raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Is that right? Last time she walked out, you went off the deep end. I think I'll bide my time. You know what they say—good things come to he who waits."

"I don't care what the hell you do, just get out."

Blackthorn smiled. "Nice meeting you, ma'am. I'm sure I'll see you at the Barclays' Barbecue tonight. It's the high point of Shelbyville society and I'm sure a city girl like you could use the distraction. After all, you must not have very stimulating conversation around here. Most likely you're bored to death in this rustic setting and will soon grow tired of it again."

Sarah felt Rafe tense at the barb. "I can see you don't know me very well. And like I said what's between me and my husband is none of your business. Now why don't you get in that big lumber wagon of yours and get out of here."

Blackthorn smiled coolly. "Very well. I'm sure we'll talk more at another time."

Sarah let out a sigh of relief when he drove away. She glanced over at Rafe but instead of concentrating on Blackthorn he was gazing at her with admiration.

"You're really something, wife. You just keep on coming to my rescue, don't you?" He smiled warmly.

Sarah was a bit embarrassed by his praise. "Well, somebody's got to. You handle everybody else's problems. It's high time someone looked after you."

He grinned. "And you've taken over that position?"

Sarah shrugged. "Just consider it my wifely duty."

"There are a few other wifely duties I'd like to see you perform." Rafe said with a wink.

Sarah frowned as the talk inevitably got down to sex again. The man never gave up. "What was all that business about the ranch really belonging to Blackthorn?"

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe snorted. "He's been telling that story since we were kids. Blackthorn's great-grandfather used to own this spread along with several others. He lost it to my great-granddaddy in a poker game. It sticks in Blackthorn's craw, even though he still owns most of his family holdings. He usually isn't such a jackass about it, but something's been riling him up lately."

Sarah sighed. "I can see there's no love lost between you two."

Rafe looked at the dust cloud Blackthorn's car left with narrowed eyes. "You can say that again. Nevell's been dogging my heels since we were kids. The jerk rubs me the wrong way."

Rafe walked onto the Barclays' patio with Sarah at his side. He glanced at her usually animated face now set in serious lines. There'd been a certain stiffness in her expression and manner since their confrontation with Blackthorn in the driveway this afternoon. He was still amazed at the way she stood up to Blackthorn for him.

Jim and June Barclay were old friends and owners of the largest spread in the area. Their annual Barbecue was always well attended and tonight was no exception.

Rafe guided Sarah through the crowd to their hosts. He glanced at her closed expression. She was probably regretting her capitulation this afternoon. Well, he wanted a whole lot more than the burning kisses they'd shared. And from her passionate reaction, deep down, so did she.

All through the day, he'd thought about the enigma that was his wife. All his preconceived notions about what made her tick had been wiped away since she'd moved in. The way

she always came to his rescue was amazing. It was rather novel having someone protect him and he had to admit he liked the feeling.

"Hey there, Rafe, why don't you introduce us?" Jim Barclay, a tall man with silver hair, said jovially.

Rafe came out of his reverie. He nodded at Jim then reached out to draw Sarah to his side. "Sarah, these are my neighbors, Jim and June Barclay."

Sarah reached for Jim's extended hand and shook it. "It's nice to meet you both. You have a lovely home here."

Jim grinned and patted Rafe on the shoulder. "I can see you've got yourself a pretty little filly, Rafe. You'll have to make sure no other stallions come sniffing around."

June nudged her husband in the ribs. "Pay no attention to Jim, Sarah. He suffers from hoof and mouth disease." She grinned and reached out to shake Sarah's hand. "Hello, Sarah, I'm glad to finally meet you. We'll have to get together for a cup of coffee sometime this week."

Rafe relaxed when Sarah grinned back at Jim and then shook June's hand. Sarah was a bit on edge probably from her showdown with Blackthorn, damn his hide. He'd been worried Jim's joking remark might set her off. He reached out to caress Sarah's shoulder feeling the tension ebb away. "That would be nice, wouldn't it, honey?"

Sarah smiled at June. "Yes, I'd like that." She turned back to Jim. "It was nice meeting you both."

June said, "Same here, honey. I guess I'd better see to the refreshments. You two have a good time now."

Jim said, "Rafe, I'll call you next week about your proposal. So far it sounds good."

Rafe was relieved. It was the news he'd been waiting for, now he could move forward with his plans to convert part of the ranch into an inn. This would help create a more secure future for his family. "Great, I'll be waiting for your call." He turned and guided Sarah toward the bar. "What would you like to drink?"

Sarah shrugged. "I don't know. What are you having?"

"A beer."

"I'll have the same."

His eyebrows lifted. "You, a beer?"

Sarah grinned. "Maybe I don't have the high falutin tastes you assumed I'd have. I'm going to try to fit in with your crowd."

Rafe smiled back, happy that she was starting to relax. Her attempt to fit in with his neighbors was a good sign. "I appreciate it, darlin'. Two beers it is. I'll be right back."

Sarah looked around the crowd while Rafe went for the drinks. She saw Blackthorn. Wrinkling her nose, she turned her back on him. Then she saw Lisa and Gabe.

Lisa walked up to her trailed by Gabe who bore a striking resemblance to Rafe but a little smaller. "Hi, Sarah, I see you beat us here."

Sarah smiled back. "We just got here. Rafe's up at the bar."

"I think I'll join him," Gabe said eagerly. "I'll bring you back a cold one, honey."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Lisa shooed him away. "Go on and have your man talk. Sarah and I will do some talking of our own."

Lisa led the way to one of the benches on the lawn. "Thanks a million for watching Mandy for me this past weekend. It gave Gabe and me a well-needed rest."

"Don't mention it. It was a pleasure to have her," Sarah hastened to reassure her. "I hope she wasn't too shaken by the stampede Saturday."

Lisa shook her head. "No, it doesn't seem to trouble her. She did tell me you saved her though. I owe you a big one, Sarah."

Sarah felt herself blushing by the praise. "All I did was tell her to get behind a tree. She would have figured that out on her own."

"But not as quickly. What I can't figure out is how the stampede happened," Lisa said softly. "As far as I know it's never happened before."

Sarah shrugged. "Who knows? Rafe figured that somebody forgot to latch a gate."

"Oh look," Lisa said. "Here come our two Western Romeos."

Sarah grinned at Lisa. "Western Romeos, huh?"

Lisa grinned back unrepentant. "Sure, tonight's a perfect night for romance. The stars are twinkling, music is playing, and we've got a night out with our hubbies. I don't know about you, but it gives me ideas."

Sarah looked up to see Rafe and Gabe making their way across the crowded dance floor. Rafe looked especially happy

tonight she thought wistfully. And why not, like Lisa had just said it was a special night.

Rafe handed her a beer. "Here you go, sweetheart."

Sarah smiled up at him. He was her Western Romeo.

"Thanks."

Rafe looked startled by her change in attitude. He leaned down to brush a kiss across her lips.

"What's that for?" Sarah said softly.

His mouth curved into a smile. "Just for you being you."

Lisa got up. "Gabe and I are going to take a turn around the dance floor."

"Have fun," Sarah called out.

"Dance with me," Rafe asked.

It wasn't an order but a plea. Sarah smiled instantly agreeing. "I'm not sure I know this dance."

Rafe led her to the plank dance floor. "It's a country waltz, just follow me."

Sarah stepped into Rafe's strong arms and surrendered to the music. They twirled around the floor and she gazed up at the stars wanting to press this night in her book of memories.

After the dance ended, Rafe led Sarah off the floor.

"Hungry?"

"Not really."

"What do you want to do then?"

Sarah smiled up at him. "It's such a beautiful night why don't we take a stroll?"

Rafe linked his arm with hers. "Sounds good to me. But you're the one that's beautiful."

She was warmed by the compliment and the sincere way he'd said it. Come what may she knew she didn't want to resist his advances any longer.

She gazed up at Rafe's profile as they walked. "What proposal was Jim talking about earlier?"

Rafe leaned closer. "I might sell him a parcel of land from the Double-H."

She'd come back to keep him from losing the ranch. Why would he sell off a parcel? "Why?" she asked sharply.

"It's a good business deal, and nothing for you to worry about, sweetheart." Rafe said softly. "I want to make some changes at the ranch and I need an infusion of cash to do it. Once the deal goes through, we'll be in good shape."

This was serious. She hated to just stand by and let him sell off part of his birthright. "I thought you were going to reapply for an expansion loan."

Rafe nodded grimly. "I did, it was a no go. Blackthorn is on the board of directors at the bank. I guess he persuaded the loan committee that I was a poor credit risk."

"He must be pretty influential." Sarah scowled at the thought of Blackthorn meddling in Rafe's business.

Rafe nodded. "You could say that he's got his finger in just about every important pie in town."

Sarah placed her hand on Rafe's arm, bringing them to a halt. "You can't sell off part of the ranch. It's part of your heritage."

Rafe glanced at her intently. "The way the Maxwell Consortium is yours."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah met his gaze implacably. "Not quite. I've got some news for you Rafe, I'm not the heiress you assumed I was. I walked away from my birthright years ago but there's no need for you to do so."

She gazed at his sweet expression looking for any sign of disappointment. "So, you're not put off by the fact that I have no ties to my grandfather's empire?"

Rafe frowned at the question. "I didn't marry your grandfather. I married you."

Sarah was touched by his sincerity and she wanted to help. "I've got some money saved up. It's yours if you need it."

"I don't want your money, sweetheart."

"But..."

He cut off her protest with a kiss. Pulling back he said softly, "It's too nice a night to argue. Just look up at the blanket of stars overhead and think about us."

Sarah settled into the crook of his arm and they strolled about the grounds. When they neared the parking area, she gazed up at him and came to an instant decision. He was her Western Romeo and she wanted him. She'd take whatever he had to offer. In time he'd grow to return her love.

Rafe looked down at her. "Want to go back to the party, sweetheart?"

She knew what he wanted. She wanted it too. "I want to be alone with you. Let's go home, Cowboy." His brilliant smile told her he got her meaning and she'd made him a very happy man.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah slipped into the blue slip and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were bright with excitement. Drawing a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and went out to meet her destiny.

Rafe stood by his dresser, unbuttoning his blue cotton shirt. The color highlighted his tan skin and the fire in his eyes. Sarah's heart stopped in her throat when his gaze locked onto hers.

His shirt hung open, tempting her to reach out and touch his hot silky skin. She froze. What if she didn't please him? Mesmerized, she watched the easy play of the muscles in his chest as he shrugged off his shirt. He reached down for his fly. The audible snap of the button undone made her flinch.

Sarah looked deep into his scorching gaze. She wanted him with an unreasoning hunger that could be stifled no longer. Her hands went to the hem of her slip, drawing it up and off her body. She carelessly tossed it onto the floor. Rafe's sensual mouth arched up in a grin and he stepped toward her, rapidly closing the distance. Sarah breathed in his masculine scent, shaking with the hunger it stirred deep inside her.

Rafe stopped inches from her, his expression sobering, his breathing ragged. "Want me?"

"Yes," Sarah said with a breathy sigh. "More than you can possibly know."

"Oh, I think I've got a pretty good idea." He glanced down at his too tight jeans. "You've made an impression on me, too."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah blushed when she followed his gaze to the ever-growing bulge. She sucked in her breath, shocked at how much he wanted her. "So I see."

Rafe scooped her up in his arms, turned, and carried her toward the bed. "You've had me tied up in knots, wife. Now we're going to do our best to unravel them." He leaned down to plant a passionate kiss on her lips.

Sarah opened her mouth to him. Oh God, the taste of him was heavenly. The rough texture of his tongue against hers was driving her wild. He slowly lowered himself onto her, pressing her heated body into the cool sheets.

Sarah reached up, embracing his broad shoulders as she continued to kiss him. When his mouth lifted, she pulled him back down, scattering kisses across his face, trying to memorize every part of it. Rafe's powerful hand moved down to cup her breast, bringing the peak to aching tightness. She moved against him, delighting in the sweet friction. He bent down to tease the tight bud with his wet tongue and Sarah squirmed beneath him, gasping out her pleasure. Pressing herself tightly against him, she silently begged for more. Her legs thrashed restlessly against the cool sheets. With maddening slowness, Rafe's hand moved down, gently cupping her mound. His index finger insinuated itself between the folds.

"Open yourself, sweetheart," he husked. "Let me touch you."

Sarah hesitated momentarily, looking up into his heated gaze. He wanted her with a fire that matched hers. Her legs flowered open, and his hand slid home while he bent down to

kiss her. Sarah gasped into his mouth when his finger touched that exquisitely tender place. She felt his lips curve into a smile at her blatant reaction, but she didn't care. Sarah cried out, burying her face in his muscular shoulder to stifle the sound. Her tongue flicked out, savoring the salty taste of him.

Rafe laughed. "That's it, honey. Go wild for me."

Sarah reached out to touch him and he stopped laughing. He gasped and surged like hot, steely, velvet into her hand. She reveled in his reaction.

Rafe groaned. "Oh, sweetheart, that feels like heaven, but if you don't stop, I'm not going to be able to control myself." He pulled away from her hand and came down gently on top of her, making a place between her thighs.

Sarah reached up to grip his shoulders, her body humming with excitement. His shaft slid smoothly between her damp petals and she cried out at the sudden aching discomfort.

Rafe's eyes widened with surprise. "This was your first time?"

Annoyed by his shocked tone, Sarah glared up at him, the wispy, sensual spell she was under, evaporating. "Well, we never did consummate it last time."

Rafe looked at her probingly. "But still, how old are you? Twenty-eight? And you mean to tell me in all these years you've never..."

Sarah frowned and looked away. "Thanks a lot for pointing out what an anachronism I am. Now get off me." She pushed at his chest, but it was like trying to move a boulder.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe's rigid face broke into a delighted grin, his hand absentmindedly caressing her thigh. "Oh no, sweetheart. You're not getting away from me now. Not ever!"

Sarah frowned at his satisfied smile. "But..."

Rafe leaned his head down to nuzzle her neck while slipping his hand between their bodies to touch that tender spot. Sarah gasped at the sweet pleasure that rocked through her. Her eyes drifted shut as she concentrated on the sensation. When Rafe took his hand away and moved gently against her, she met his thrust, smiling at the feeling. This was going to be all right. He surged into her increasing the pressure and she gasped, her hips springing up to meet his.

"That's right, honey, let me pleasure you," Rafe murmured against her ear. "That's all I want to do."

Sarah moved against him, her pleasure building. Rafe reached down, pulling her hips against him and Sarah screamed, coming apart. Rafe's muffled shout followed her over into the land of bliss.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Sarah awoke to songbirds singing outside her bedroom window. She lifted her head off the pillow and looked around. Judging from the sunlight streaming into the room, it had to be at least eight o'clock. Why hadn't Rafe woken her to fix breakfast? Then it dawned on her; Mrs. Murphy was home. There would be no need for her to do all the wifely chores she'd grown used to. More than grown used to, if she was honest. She'd actually started to enjoy taking care of her family.

Even so, Rafe could have roused her with a kiss. She would have welcomed a morning show of affection. He'd started a fire in her last night that would have joyously responded to a morning cuddle. She sat up in bed, fluffing the pillows behind her. A twinge in her nether regions was a vivid reminder of their lovemaking last night. It had been the thrill of her life. Now, she felt used and abandoned.

Could she accept being shuttled off to one corner of Rafe's life? Was she to be the accommodating little wife at night and a polite stranger during the day? What choice did she have? She loved Rafe. She knew that now with every fiber of her being.

Well, she couldn't hide in the shelter of their bed all day. Sarah got up, showered, and made her way to the kitchen. It seemed vigorous love making was a spur to the appetite.

Sarah turned the corner and peered into the kitchen. Relief surged through her at the sight of the deserted room. She

wasn't sure she'd have been able to hide her distress or engage in any awkward morning-after conversation, should Rafe have been waiting. She went to the cabinet, got a mug, and poured herself a cup of the coffee that smelled so good.

"There you are my dear," a cheerful voice said. "I was wondering how long to hold your breakfast."

Sarah spun around to see Rose Murphy, a tall, plump, woman with sparkling blue eyes and salt and pepper hair. "Welcome back, Mrs. Murphy. Rafe said you'd be resuming your duties today."

Mrs. Murphy bustled into the room. "Now you call me Rose, dearie. I don't hold with formality. You just have a seat and I'll fetch your breakfast. There's a good girl."

Sarah took a seat at the dinette, feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the motherly attention. She smiled when Rose set a plate of hot cakes and bacon in front of her. "Thanks, Rose, but there's really no need to wait on me."

Rose flustered around her. "Now, now, I won't hear such talk. It's my job to take care of you. Eat hearty and enjoy it."

Sarah watched as Rose wiped off the kitchen counter and then started to unload the dishwasher. She felt like an idle bum, but she dug into the delicious looking breakfast anyhow. Rose Murphy was an excellent cook. Sarah was sitting back, sipping her coffee, when Rose brought the pot and an extra mug to the table.

Rose poured a refill for Sarah and then sat down across from her. "So, my dear, how are my two lovebirds getting along? I could see by the smile on Rafe's face that he's happy as a calf in a field of daises."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah hesitated. How much should she reveal? "We're getting along all right I guess. We're hoping, by my staying here, to cut down on the gossip."

Rose clucked. "Bunch of busy bodies that's what the town folks are. Don't give them a second thought. So, dearie, did you sleep well?"

Sarah flushed at the question. She hadn't slept much at all. Rafe had woken her several times in the night for bouts of sweet lovemaking.

Rose chuckled. "Don't worry, my dear, young married couples are supposed to have sleepless nights."

Sarah looked down into the steamy recesses of her mug to avoid Rose's merry gaze. "I suppose so," she mumbled. Did their night of passion show that much?

"I can see Rafe's a new man now that you're back where you belong."

Sarah glanced at Rose intently. "I was wondering. Just how much talking did Rafe have to do to get you to write asking me to come back?"

Rose stirred some sugar into her coffee hesitating. "So you caught onto that did you."

Sarah grinned at Rose's guilty look. "I could tell that I was expected. Don't worry I'm not mad at you. Coming back was probably the best thing I could have done, if not the wisest."

Rose cocked her head. "Now why would you say that?"

Sarah sighed. "I might be crazy in love with him, but I can't say the same thing for him."

Rose smiled. "Would a man that isn't crazy for you cook up this crazy scheme. He sent me on an all-expense paid trip to

see my sister for goodness sake. Don't you worry, dearie, some men take a while to come around."

Sarah was bolstered by Rose's enthusiasm. She pushed to her feet. "Well, I may as well get started on that series I want to finish. The daylight's burning."

Sarah walked back to the bedroom, and grabbed her purse off the bureau top. She turned and saw the rumpled bed. It was a vivid reminder of their night of love. She put down the purse and pulled up the sheets stiffly, trying to make order out of chaos both in the bed and her thoughts. She smoothed the bedspread across the top, and then fluffed the pillows. Now nothing remained but her memories.

She picked up her purse and walked back down the hall to the kitchen telling Rose, "I need to go to town to get some darkroom supplies. Is there anything you'd like me to pick up while I'm out?"

Rose waved her away. "No thanks, dearie, I've got everything I need. Now you make sure you drive carefully, and don't forget to put on your seat belt. I'll see you later."

Sarah went out the door with a bemused smile. She wasn't used to such motherly cheerfulness. She hadn't had anyone to mother her since she was five years old.

The heat inside her jeep was stifling. It had been closed up since she'd arrived. She'd been too busy cooking and cleaning to think about going anywhere. She rolled down the windows. The breeze through the open windows quickly cooled down the vehicle to a bearable temperature.

It felt good to get out of the pressure cooker she'd been living in the last couple of weeks. She popped a CD in the

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

player and began to unwind. Maybe now that she and Rafe had been intimate, things would simmer down.

Sarah slowly cruised down the main street. When she spotted Daley's Camera Shop, she pulled into a parking space out front. Daley's had everything she needed. She filled her arms with items and went to the front counter to pay. With an "oof," she dumped the big armload of supplies on the counter.

The short gray-haired man behind the counter smiled. "I see you're fixin' to take some pictures, young lady."

Sarah smiled at the understatement, a seemingly typical western trait. "You might say that. I'm also going to need some developing fluid."

"I've got that in the back." He walked into the curtained area in back and returned with the toner. He smiled as he started to tally up her purchases. "I know most folks from around these parts. You must be new around here."

Sarah sighed. She doubted that she would get out of here until she satisfied the shopkeeper's curiosity. "I'm Sarah ... Halliday. I'm staying at the Double-H."

The man reached across the counter to shake her hand. "Why, you must be Rafe's wife." He pumped Sarah's arm vigorously. "I'm mighty pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Sarah gingerly withdrew her hand from the strong handshake. "Same here. Are you Mr. Daley?"

He beamed, showing a gold-capped tooth. "That's me, Mike Daley at your service. This is my store. Looks like you've been bitten by the photography bug."

Sarah laughed. "That happened a long time ago, I'm afraid. I'm a professional photographer."

"You don't say. I've got a little granddaughter that I'd like to get some pictures of."

Sarah grinned. "I'd be glad to oblige some time, but that's not really my line. I'm a nature photographer. You know, scenery and animals."

Mike nodded. "That's quite a coincidence. I just developed some slides of scenery and animals, except they were dead."

Sarah recoiled from the thought. Who on earth would want to take pictures of dead animals? Probably a hunter, showing off his kill. She tried to erase the repellent scene from her mind. She'd been around the wild long enough to understand the survival of the fittest. When you got right down to basics, every living thing was either predator or prey. Still, she could never fathom the joy of killing a magnificent wild beast.

The door chime tinkled. Nevell Blackthorn walked up to the counter. "Do you have those slides ready for me yet, Mike?"

"They'll be ready in two shakes, Mr. Blackthorn. I've got to ring up this lady's purchase first. Blackthorn glanced at Sarah's purchases and frowned. "It looks like you're buying enough supplies for a year."

Mike beamed while he reached for Sarah's credit card. "Yup, it looks like the little lady is going to be one of my best customers. It's good to have a professional photographer move into the area. This here's Mrs. Halliday, Rafe's wife."

"A photographer you say? I didn't know that." Nevell doffed his hat. "Sarah and I have already been introduced, although it's a pleasant coincidence to run into her again." His eyes narrowed. "So I take it you're planning on sticking around."

"That's Mrs. Halliday to you." Sarah gritted her teeth, but added calmly, "What I do is none of your business. I thought Rafe and I made that clear yesterday." He was deliberately trying to upset her, the jerk, but she wasn't going to rise to the bait.

Blackthorn's thin lips compressed into a tight line. "You and Rafe planning on attending the Ranchers Association Meeting tonight?"

Sarah shrugged. "Maybe." What business was it of his? Actually, she and Rafe hadn't even discussed it.

Blackthorn sniffed. "I'd recommend it. You might find it instructive."

Sarah noted Mr. Daley lingering nearby to eavesdrop. No doubt this acrimonious conversation would be repeated all over town by nightfall. Maybe Blackthorn had planned it that way. "It seems like you're pretty anxious that we be there."

Blackthorn shrugged and looked away. "Actually, it's my job to remind people of the meeting."

Sarah didn't buy his nonchalant facade. Something was in the wind, but she had no doubt Rafe could handle anything Blackthorn threw at him. "If it's that important, I'll try to get Rafe to go."

Blackthorn turned back, a smug smile on his face. "Excellent. At least one of the Hallidays shows some intelligence."

Sarah ignored the barb. She signed the charge slip and picked up the sack of supplies feeling Blackthorn's gaze on her as she left the store. As she drove home, she thought about Blackthorn's reason for wanting Rafe to attend the

meeting. He was probably trying to cause some kind of trouble but Rafe could handle anything he threw at him.

She pulled up to the ranch house and killed the engine. As she opened the rear door of the jeep to gather her purchases, a dark shape moved out of the shadows of the porch. Startled, Sarah stared at it until it drew nearer.

It was Rafe, and there was a furious look in his eyes. What had him so upset?

He took the sack out of her hands and looked her up and down angrily. "Where in blue blazes were you?"

"I went to town to get supplies." Sarah startled by his raw anger. Then she saw the truck keys in his hand. "What were you going to do? Track me down?"

Rafe stepped closer. "I knew you didn't go far because Rose said you left two hours ago and didn't take a suitcase. I checked and your clothes were still here."

Sarah gasped in outrage. "You went through my things?"

Rafe scowled. "Hell yes, I went through your things. I have every right." He slid the keys into his hip pocket. "Remember, we have an agreement. You have to stay here for the whole summer. And I'm not going to let you run away."

Sarah snorted and yanked the bag out of his grip. She'd had just about enough of his high-handed attitude. The bag ripped, spilling film canisters and dark room supplies onto the ground. Sarah stamped her foot. "Just look what you made me do." She bent down to gather up the supplies and glared at him. Rafe crouched down next to her and helped gather up supplies. They both stood up and Sarah turned to walk to the

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

house when Rafe's hand on her shoulder stopped her. She looked up at him, annoyed. "Now what?"

Rafe's eyes narrowed and he held out his open hand. "Give me your keys, Sarah."

Sarah's mouth dropped open. "You can't be serious." The determined look in his brown eyes rocked her back on her heels.

A nerve pulsed in Rafe's jaw. "I'm dead serious, wife. I'm holding you to your part of the bargain."

Sarah's heart twisted. Apparently her word wasn't good enough. She clenched the keys in her hand tightly, then tossed them at him. "Here they are, husband. I hope you choke on them." She stomped off toward the ranch house never looking back.

* * * *



* * * *

"So what goes on at these meetings?" Sarah asked tightly.

Rafe was encouraged by her interest even though he knew she was madder than a wet hen right now. And she had just cause because he'd acted like an ass. He'd just plain panicked when he'd come home to find her gone. It was a replay of the night she'd run out on him. "Any concerns or disputes between ranchers are worked out here. Also, if there are any problems with the local or federal government, they're brought out here."

"What's on the agenda for the evening?" Sarah glanced at him as they walked into the grange hall.

"I'm not sure. I've been too busy to go to many meetings lately." Rafe's eyes narrowed as he watched Blackthorn and Bob Wilson the local US Game and Wildlife official, walk toward the platform. Something must be up, he mused. It was unusual to see Bob at the meetings. He'd been wondering what was on Blackthorn's mind since his visit the other day.

Nevell Blackthorn walked up to the podium. He glanced around the room and then his gaze settled on Rafe and Sarah. He smiled, a self-satisfied smirk.

Rafe met Blackthorn's gaze and held it steady. Blackthorn had never been able to beat him in a fair fight and he backed down now by looking away. Rafe grew tense. He probably shouldn't have brought Sarah here. But the opportunity to show her around town on his arm had been too tempting to resist.

Rafe led Sarah to a row of folding chairs. They sat next to the Barclays.

"Hi there," June said.

"Hello," Sarah said back.

Blackthorn cleared his throat. "Settle down people. I'd like to call this meeting to order." The room quieted. Blackthorn turned to the man seated on the platform. "Bob Wilson of the US Game and Wildlife service is here to address us about a grave concern that's recently come to my attention."

Bob Wilson, a short man with dark hair, stood up and walked to the podium. Rafe knew him as a fair guy, but a

warden that went by the book. If there was a problem, he'd usually bring it up with the individual concerned rather than address them in a public forum. Just what was Blackthorn up to? Suddenly Rafe didn't want to know. Realizing Blackthorn was about to pull a fast one, he grabbed Sarah's hand.

Sarah turned to look at him. "What is it?"

Rafe leaned toward her. "Come on, we're getting out of here."

Sarah frowned and pulled her hand away. "But you're the one who insisted we come tonight."

"Well, now I want to leave."

Sarah sat back in her seat. "Shh, the meeting's already started."

Rafe grimaced and dropped down into his seat. He gave Blackthorn a hard look as Wilson cleared his throat.

Wilson adjusted the microphone several inches lower and then peered out at the audience. "I'm here to talk about a problem that's just been discovered, the killing of wolves recently returned to the wild. Could I have the lights dimmed? I have some slides to show."

The lights went dim and Rafe tensed as a picture of a dead wolf shone on the screen. He could hear Sarah's gasp of shock beside him and steadied himself for what was to come.

Wilson said angrily, "This first slide shows a female wolf and the second shows her cub. Both were shot, as can be clearly seen. You can turn the lights back on now."

Rafe blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. He'd recognized the land those slides were taken on; it was the Double-H. This had to be Blackthorn's cowardly way to get

Sarah to move away from him. If she thought he was involved, she wouldn't hesitate to leave him. He scowled at Blackthorn who smiled down at him. Damn, the sneaky bastard.

Wilson said, "Ladies and gentleman, what you just saw was a criminal act. You all know the maximum penalty for killing a wolf is two years in prison and a one hundred thousand-dollar fine. I know that some of you ranchers haven't been happy about the reintroduction of wolves in the area, but I thought you had come around to our way of thinking. I guess I was wrong."

Blackthorn stood up and walked toward the podium. He shook his head sadly. "Where did you find the wolves?"

"They were found on the Double-H." Wilson looked at Rafe. "Well, Rafe, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Rafe felt Sarah cringe beside him and damned Blackthorn's smiling face to all the fires of hell. "What's the usual line? I plead the fifth."

"This isn't a joking matter, Rafe." Wilson frowned.

Rafe stood and pulled Sarah up beside him. This time she didn't resist. "Bob, we both know this isn't the place to talk about such matters, but I can make a pretty good guess at who persuaded you to do so. Since you did bring it up, I might as well give you and my neighbors my answer."

"It's no secret I opposed the reintroduction of wolves. All my neighbors know that, but I didn't kill the wolves in these pictures. That's not the way I operate." Rafe ignored the murmuring of the crowd and focused on Wilson's frowning face. He didn't want to look at Blackthorn for fear that he'd

give into the urge to go up there and kick the bastard's ass. He was in enough trouble with Sarah as it was.

Wilson nodded. "I admit this is an unusual procedure. But because the crime just came to light and due to its severity, I thought this would be the quickest way to get things settled. Of course an investigation will follow."

Rafe felt Sarah's hand struggle in his firm grasp. Her appalled reaction hurt him more than all the crap Blackthorn had thrown at him. His fingers tightened, holding her still while he looked at Wilson. "Did you dig the slugs out of the wolves to see what kind of gunshot them?"

Wilson said, "Not yet. But we will. Be at my office Monday morning."

Rafe tugged Sarah's hand, pulling her down the aisle with him. "I'll be there. But you damned well better have more proof than a couple of pictures."

"Get in the truck, Sarah. We're going home."

Sarah glared at Rafe and snapped her wrist out of his grip, earning a scowl from him. She was so furious she wanted to go back and demand how people would think this of Rafe.

"I'm not ready to leave yet."

Rafe leaned forward and muttered, "Get your ass in the truck before I throw you in."

He was just barbaric enough to carry out the threat. Sarah scowled up at him and reluctantly complied. She turned to frown at Rafe when he hopped into the driver's seat. Why didn't he go back and fight?

A tap on the driver's door made her spin toward the sound. Nevell Blackthorn was standing there. He smiled when he saw her disgruntled expression.

Rafe rolled down his window. "What the hell do you want, Blackthorn? Haven't you caused me enough trouble for one day?"

"Me, cause you trouble?" Blackthorn said innocently. "What did I do?"

"You mean to tell me you weren't behind that little show?" Rafe snorted and started the engine.

"It was the US Game and Wildlife making the accusations." Blackthorn shrugged. "Not me."

Rafe smirked. "Yeah right, and I believe in the Tooth Fairy, too. You must be plum stupid to come within striking distance of me right now."

Blackthorn smiled apologetically at Sarah. "You wouldn't want to upset the little woman any more than she already is." He inclined his head toward Sarah. "Evening, ma'am. It's a pity you had to see this."

Sarah glared at the two of them. They were like a couple of little boys squabbling over the same toy, and she wasn't going to play anymore.

"State your business and get out of here," Rafe said tightly.

"I've decided to be magnanimous and up my offer on the Double-H." Blackthorn grinned. "I figured you could use the money to pay off your fine."

"Screw you, Blackthorn," Rafe growled. He put the truck in gear and swung out of his parking space. Sarah saw him look out the side mirror as Blackthorn jumped out of the way.

Rafe's dry chuckle set her teeth on edge. The events of the evening were nothing to laugh about. She turned to glare at Rafe. He drove in silence down the dark streets. A nerve ticked in his tight jaw and his mouth was set in a rigid line. She was still sickened by the memory of those gruesome pictures. Who could have done it? There'd been no talk of wolves around the ranch, no reports of calves lost.

She interrupted the silence. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Rafe turned toward her. His glance was defiant but there was something else there as well. She almost thought it was fear. But what did he have to be afraid of?

His gaze turned back onto the road. "Sarah, I don't have anything more to say on the subject tonight. I said it all at the meeting."

Sarah was stung by his brusque words. "I know you didn't do it."

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he drove toward the ranch. "Could've fooled me a minute ago."

"But the pictures." She knew in her heart Rafe was not responsible but couldn't help recalling the horrifying slides. Blackthorn was at Daley's Camera Shop to pick up some slides today. Were they the ones used tonight? The answer seemed obvious.

"From your point of view, pictures don't lie." Rafe's voice was clipped, his tone bitter.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

She recalled Blackthorn's mocking smirk up on the platform. Was he behind the shooting? "I wonder what Blackthorn's involvement is?" she said softly.

Rafe sighed. "Don't worry about it, Sarah. It's not your problem."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

Sarah buttoned up her white camp shirt and gave her sweptback hair a distracted glance in the mirror. She'd come to a decision during the long, lonely night. Rafe didn't believe she trusted him, but that didn't really matter in the end. If she could help prove him innocent, she was darned well going to do it. Her observational skills were sharper than most. Maybe she could pick up on some clue, in the back country of the Double-H, that had been ignored in Bob Wilson's rush to judgment. If Rafe could go into the meeting Monday with conflicting evidence, it might make all the difference.

Sarah walked out of the bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen. She had no intention of sharing her plans with Rafe. In his surly mood, he'd shoot them down for sure. Rose was dishing up a plateful of breakfast sausages. She looked up as Sarah entered the room, a frown darkening her usually cheerful face.

"Good morning, Rose," Sarah said.

Rose put a serving fork on the platter and grimaced. "You wouldn't say it was a good morning if you'd seen the boss's face this morning."

Sarah sympathized. She'd gotten the cold shoulder from Rafe all night. "Rafe wasn't too cheerful this morning, huh?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "He was black as a thundercloud, and cross as a bear with a thorn in its paw. What in the heck did you do to him?"

Sarah sighed as she picked up the heavy coffee urn. They both headed toward the dining hall. "It wasn't me. It was Nevell Blackthorn. At the meeting last night, Rafe was accused of shooting some wolves on the Double-H. Good heavens, Rose, it's a federal offense. He could be looking at some substantial fines, not to mention jail time."

Rose set down the platter of sausages she was carrying and gasped. "Lord o' mercy, no wonder he's in such a black mood this morning. But that's crazy, Rafe's not stupid enough to do something like that. Besides, we haven't had any losses from the wolves as far as I know."

Sarah placed the coffee urn by the head of the table and shrugged. "I don't believe it, either. Rafe's just not capable of doing such a cowardly thing."

Rose smiled. "I hope you told him that, dear. It would do him a world of good."

Sarah sighed and glanced away from Rose's sympathetic gaze. "I tried but he didn't believe me. They showed some slides at the meeting last night and I'm afraid my reaction made quite an impression on Rafe."

Rose smiled and patted Sarah's hand. "Still and all, dear, I'm sure you can patch it up. Talk to the man. He's your husband after all. You should be able to tell him anything."

Sarah shook off the idea and looked directly at Rose. "My personal feelings aren't important right now. I have to prove Rafe didn't do it."

Rose gaped at her. "And just how are you going to come by such proof?"

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah leaned toward her and said conspiratorially, "Well, now. If a trained observer went to the spot and say, got some evidence to the contrary, that would change things considerably, wouldn't it?"

Rose nodded and smiled brightly. "That it would." Then she rolled her eyes. "But the boss is in such an ornery mood, he'd never allow it."

Sarah shrugged and said nonchalantly, "He wouldn't have to know."

Rose smiled. "I like your style, young lady. You've got spunk, I'll say that for you." She glanced sharply to her left.

Sarah turned around and looked in that direction, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. "What's the matter?"

Rose put her hand up to her chest. "I thought I saw somebody standing in the shadows. I guess I was mistaken. It must be all this commotion shaking up my nerves."

Sarah patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I've got everything under control. Now let's get the rest of the food on the table before the mob descends on us."

* * * *



* * * *

Rafe leaned back and sipped his coffee. "So, wife, I see you decided to join us this morning. What's on your agenda for today?"

Sarah stopped with her fork in mid-bite. She ought to be used to his surly visage by now, but it still managed to startle her. He couldn't know about her plans, could he? Unless he was the person Rose thought she saw in the shadows. She tensed, knowing she had to choose her words carefully. "I thought I'd take some photographs."

Rafe took another sip of coffee, then set down his mug. "Try to stay out of my men's way today. Okay?"

"Fine." Sarah looked down at her plate, and went back to her meal. Rafe was spoiling for a fight, but he wasn't going to get one from her. She had important business to take care of. And his wounded ego was the least of her concerns. She heard his chair scrape the floor as he stood up, but didn't glance his way. Moments later she heard his angry boot-steps to the door, then the bang of the screen door. She finally glanced up to see inquisitive glances thrown her way by several of the men still at the table. Travis was goggle eyed, Tab had an amused smile on his face, and Zeke looked downright surly.

Sarah shrugged and stood up. "What can I say? He's not in a very good mood this morning." The men looked back down at their food. Sarah picked up her dishes and carried them into the kitchen. She walked up to Rose who was putting a stack of plates into the sink. "Well, I'm off to investigate."

Rose wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "But how do you know where to go? The ranch is pretty big."

Rose was right, but what other choice did she have? If luck was with her, she'd stumble across the right location. "I recognized the topography from the slides last night. I figure

if I head for that area, I'll run into what I'm looking for eventually."

Rose frowned and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "But that'll take you forever, dear. There has to be a better way to go about this."

Sarah shrugged and leaned back against the counter. "None I can think of. I really have no other choice than to go on my own. You know that if Rafe finds out about it, he'll try to stop me. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Rose smiled and put the dishtowel down. "I've got an idea. You wait right here, and I'll be back in a jiffy."

Sarah was surprised by her animation, but she didn't have time to stand around. "Rose, I need to get going."

Rose put her hands on her hips. "Have patience, child. A few minutes this way or that isn't going to make much difference, is it?"

"I suppose not." Sarah watched Rose go out the door then busied herself, by rinsing dishes and stacking them in the dishwasher. She glanced impatiently at the clock, wishing Rose would hurry up. She heard the door open and turned to see Rose enter the room followed by a scowling Zeke.

Rose grinned and reached back to pull Zeke up beside her. "I found a guide for you, dear."

Sarah gritted her teeth. Zeke would just as soon let her get lost in the woods as guide her. "Him?"

Zeke snorted and glared at Sarah and Rose. "I told you it was a damned fool idea, woman. Me and Sarah don't cotton to each other."

Rose wheeled around to face him. "Now you hold on there, old man. Sarah is Rafe's wife, so you'd better keep a respectful tongue in your head. I don't want to hear any more sass from you. And take your hat off. Can't you see there are ladies present?"

Sarah watched Zeke snatch the battered old Stetson from his balding head. She couldn't help smiling at his sheepish expression as Rose railed at him. Evidently they were old adversaries.

Rose finished chewing Zeke out and turned back to Sarah. "And as for you, missy, you ain't no better. Zeke knows this land like the back of his hand. If anybody can lead you to the spot, it's him. And we all want what's best for the boss, don't we?"

Sarah had to admit Rose was right. She glanced at Zeke's sullen expression. "How about it, Zeke?"

Zeke looked down and turned the hat brim around in his hands. "I'm game if you are. But I don't think Rafe's gonna be too happy about it."

Sarah was relieved. Hopefully they could check things out and be home before Rafe missed them. She smiled at Zeke. "I think you're right. Rafe's going to hate the idea. But don't worry about it, he won't fire you. Why, you're practically a family heirloom around here." She saw him crack a tiny smile. "Anyway, I'll take the heat when it comes down." Zeke looked up at her and she thought she saw a grudging grain of respect in his eyes.

Zeke frowned and resumed turning the brim of his hat around in his hands. "Rafe didn't tell me much about it. But

my guess is that Blackthorn has somethin' to do with this business."

Sarah nodded her head and stepped forward. "I saw him in town at Daley's Photo Shop yesterday. He was picking up some slides, probably the ones Wilson showed last night. Blackthorn was practically gloating when the news came down."

Zeke nodded and slapped his hat back on his head, while casting a wary eye Rose's way. "So where do we find this evidence that Rose was carrying on about?"

"The photographs were taken near a bluff that I'd say is on the east side of the ranch. The wolves were found by a lot of scrubby pines."

Zeke frowned. "I bet the pictures were pretty gory, huh?"

Sarah nodded, her stomach clenching in remembrance. "I'm afraid I reacted before thinking."

Zeke scowled at her. "So that's why Rafe is so ornery today. I knew it would take a heap more than some false allegations to get his back up that bad."

Sarah held his accusatory gaze. "Whether Rafe and I get along isn't important. What is important is clearing Rafe's name. Are you going to help me or not?"

Zeke huffed out a breath. "I think I know the area you're talking about. It's pretty far out."

Shoot. This might screw up her plans to get back before Rafe noticed she was gone. Oh well, so what if he got mad. She couldn't let it stop her. "I was afraid of that."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Zeke cocked his head, watching her carefully. "We're going to have to ride. And I know how you feel about riding. Want to call it off?"

Ride. She hadn't even considered the possibility. But she couldn't back down now. Zeke's doubtful expression said he clearly expected her to cry off. "Not on your life. I'll get on a horse if it kills me. Besides, you're forgetting I had a riding lesson from Rafe."

Zeke grinned and let out a snort. "Yeah, on Bay Rum. I'll tell you what. You can ride Bay Rum and I'll lead the way on Buttermilk. She's nice and slow so you'll be able to keep up. I'll go get 'em ready. Meet me in the stable in ten minutes."

"I'll be there," Sarah told him with more confidence than she felt.

Sarah went to the bedroom to fetch her camera and an extra roll of film from her camera case. She stopped by Rose in the kitchen on her way out. "Thanks a lot, Rose. I'll pay you back some day."

Rose grinned. "Helping the boss is payment enough. Now you be careful and don't let Zeke bully you. You just stand up to the old coot."

Sarah laughed as she went out the door. "Will do."

She walked to the stable keeping a wary eye out for Rafe, but didn't encounter anyone on her way. She entered the stable and spotted Zeke in the shadowy recesses of the building saddling Bay Rum. "I didn't see any of the hands around, so the coast is clear."

Zeke cinched the saddle. "Everybody's too busy to pay any mind to us anyway. Most of the hands are out mending

fences today." He walked toward her and handed her the reins. "You need help mounting?"

Sarah took the leather straps and glanced at Bay Rum. The horse looked as sleepy as ever. "Nah, I think I can manage." She put her foot in the stirrup and Bay Rum shifted. Sarah glanced over at Zeke in a panic. "Maybe you'd better stand by, just in case." Sarah hopped and swung her leg around and got stuck midway. "Help."

Zeke gave Sarah's hips a shove, depositing her crookedly on the saddle.

"That oughta do ya," he grumbled. "Now when we get started, just remember to keep a loose hold on the reins. Bay Rum will follow Buttermilk if you don't interfere."

"Thanks." Sarah wiggled her bottom in the saddle, seeking a comfortable fit. She watched Zeke nimbly mount Buttermilk, belying his years. As soon as Zeke started moving out of the stable, Bay Rum woke up and followed suit.

As they rode out of the building, they almost trampled Travis who was hurrying toward the door. Zeke pulled back on his rein's hollering. "Whoa Buttermilk."

Bay Rum stopped abruptly and Sarah lurched forward, catching herself by grabbing the pommel.

"Don't you have some work to do, boy?" Zeke yelled.

"The boss sent me to get some more wire," he squeaked, in a startled voice.

"Well get on with it then and stay out of our way. We've got business to do," Zeke carped.

Sarah gave Travis a sympathetic smile as they rode by, trying to soothe his feelings. She rocked in the saddle as she

and Zeke picked their way over the meadow. They passed a few hands on their way, but none of them asked what they were up to. She'd long ago left her fear behind and fell into a kind of a sleepy daze that followed the rocking of the animal. A sleepless night was catching up with her.

Zeke reined up and turned to look at her. "Does this look like the right place?"

Sarah blinked and looked around. A sandstone bluff stood over a clearing edged by a stand of scrub pines. "Yes, I think this is it." She slowly dismounted, her muscles complained at the unusual activity.

Zeke dismounted and walked over to her. He put a hand on her arm to steady her. "You okay?"

After a moment, Sarah smiled up at him. "I'm okay, Zeke. I'm just not used to riding so long. Thanks for the hand, here and back in the stable."

Zeke frowned and dropped his hand. "Don't mention it."

Sarah felt sad at the break of connection. She wanted Zeke to like her but she understood why he didn't. "You don't like me much, do you, Zeke?"

Zeke took off his hat and slapped it against his leg making the dust fly out of it. He fixed her with a hard glance. "I can't say as I do. You were pretty rough on Rafe. I can't forget it, just like that."

Sarah sighed, but she knew she deserved Zeke's condemnation. He didn't realize she'd had to leave, in order to guard her heart. "I know if I were you I'd feel the same way." Sarah shook off her melancholy thoughts and turned

away. "Well, this isn't getting the job done. Let's take a look around."

Zeke dropped the reins on the ground, and the horses bent to munch on the grass.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Zeke asked.

Sarah glanced up at the bluff and snapped a photo. She could use it for comparison later. "I'm not sure," she said, walking toward the open area. "I guess anything that looks out of order. You know this land. Maybe you can spot something that doesn't look right." Sarah saw some stacked rocks. "Those rocks were in the slides. The wolves were lying on the ground in front of them."

Zeke glanced up at the bluff and then down toward the rocks. "This would be a perfect place for an ambush. A feller could lay up on the cliff and have all the time in the world to take pot shots at any wolves that happened by."

Sarah glanced up at the bluff and shivered. "Do you think that's what happened?"

Sarah shook off the ominous thought and turned back to the rocks. A dried pool of blood had stained the sand. There were several chipped stones littering the ground. As Sarah bent to pick up a fragment of rock, she heard the sound of a horse cantering their way. She glanced up to see Rafe astride Umbriago.

Zeke turned and looked. "Uh oh. The jig is up."

Sarah grinned at his sour expression. She knew they were both in hot water. "Yup, Zeke, I'd say the sheet is just about to hit the fan."

Zeke gave a dry snort of laughter, and walked toward his horse. "Like you said, I'm gonna let you take the heat."

"Chicken."

Rafe reined up next to Zeke's mount. He fixed them both with a steely glare. "What in the name of heaven do you two think you're doing?"

"I just came along to keep her out of trouble, boss. I knew you wouldn't want her running around these parts all alone."

"I'm looking for evidence." Sarah wanted to get all the shouting done so she could get back to work. She didn't have time to tiptoe around Rafe's wounded pride.

Rafe scowled and tipped his hat back. "Don't you think the authorities can do that?"

Put off by his sarcastic tone, Sarah put her hands on her hips. For goodness sake, she'd gone through the rigors of riding a horse again to rescue him. And he didn't seem to appreciate it one bit. "Obviously they can't do it properly, or they wouldn't be accusing you of the crime."

Rafe leaned forward in the saddle. "What did you say?"

Sarah frowned at his purposeful denseness. "I said, obviously not, or they wouldn't be accusing you of the crime. All three of us know there's no way you would have done it. Now come over here. I think I found something."

Rafe grinned and turned to Zeke. "Why don't you head in now, Zeke? I'll take over from here on."

"I can see I'm not needed around here." Zeke mounted his horse, sparing a smile for Sarah.

Sarah was bent down to pick up another fragment when a shot rang out, pinging against a rock directly in front of her.

Rafe jumped off his horse, shouting, "Get down, Sarah!" He pulled the cellular phone out of his saddlebag and tossed it to Zeke saying, "Call for help and then get back to the ranch. I'll take care of Sarah."

Sarah hit the dirt, then sneezed the dust out of her nose. What a time for an allergy attack. Another shot ricocheted off the stack of rocks in front of her. She belly-crawled to shelter behind them and let out a scream when something stung her arm. She twisted around to see Rafe circling the trees at a low crouch. Sarah stifled a cry when he rushed across the clearing and another shot struck a tree next to his head. Rafe dove for shelter, coming to rest behind Sarah.

She reached out to touch his arm. "Are you okay, Rafe?"

He sat up. "I'm okay, but what about you?"

"I'm fine. What are we going to do? Where's Zeke?"

"He's heading on back to the ranch with my cellular phone. He'll call for help. As long as he stays behind the line of trees, he'll be okay."

Another shot pinged off the rock. Sarah pressed herself into Rafe's arms and closed her eyes.

Rafe gritted out, "Come on, sweetheart, we've got to make a run for it. We're sitting ducks here." He pulled Sarah toward him. "Just stay low and go in the direction I point you, okay?"

Sarah glanced up at Rafe and knew she could trust him with her life. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me, honey," Rafe said roughly. "I'll be at your back creating a diversion."

Sarah frowned. "But you might get shot."

"You will do as I say." Rafe raised an imperious eyebrow. Then his expression softened and he bent down to kiss her. "Don't worry, Sarah." He joked, "Remember, my word is law on the Double-H. Let's go," he said, pulling Sarah forward.

Sarah got to her knees and scrambled through the brush. Rafe gave a yell and stood up, then fainted to the right as a shot rang out. She did as she was told and kept going knowing delaying would just put Rafe in more danger. She got to her feet after reaching the safety of the tree line and turned around. Rafe scrambled out of the underbrush moments later.

"Thank God. I was afraid you were hit." Sarah fell into his arms.

Rafe hugged her tight. "I'm fine, but I'm glad you were worried about me." He pulled back saying, "We'd better get a move on before he comes looking for us."

Rafe grabbed Sarah's hand and they ran around the trees until they got to Umbriago. He put his hands on her waist and deposited her onto the saddle. Then he mounted behind her.

"What about Bay Rum?" Sarah asked.

"Don't worry about him. He's following Zeke." Rafe gave a twitch of the reins. "Let's get out of here."

Sarah snuggled against Rafe's warmth and tried to ignore the burning pain in her arm. She must have scraped it against the rocks. She groaned when Rafe pulled her tight and the pain intensified.

Rafe rumbled, "What's wrong?" He brought his hand up. It was covered with blood. "You've been hit." He pulled back her

sleeve. "Sit up, sweetheart. I have to take my shirt off. We've got to put pressure on the wound to stop it from bleeding."

Sarah tensed as she pulled away from Rafe, and then relaxed back against his warm chest after he shrugged out of his shirt. He pressed the folded cloth against her arm. The renewed pain made her grit her teeth, but she forced herself to stay calm. She needed to be strong for both of them.

"I'm sorry it hurts, sweetheart," Rafe murmured in her ear.

Sarah was feeling woozy from the motion of the horse and her sleepless night. She closed her eyes. "It doesn't hurt that bad. Do you think we'll be okay?"

Rafe hurried the pace, keeping under the cover of trees. "Don't worry, baby, I won't let anything else hurt you."

Sarah smiled softly and nestled her cheek against his bare chest. She placed a soft kiss on his tanned skin. "It seems funny to be called baby again."

Rafe chuckled. "Should I be jealous? Who else used to call you baby?"

Sarah sighed, recalling faint, sweet, memories. "My Granny Blake, but that was in a different life."

"What do you mean, a different life?"

Sarah winced at the memory. "After my parents were killed in a plane crash, I went to live with Grandfather Maxwell. I never saw Granny again."

"Why not?" Rafe muttered.

Sarah shook her head. "She died. When I asked about her, Grandfather told me she was dead. Even he as bad as he is, he wouldn't lie about something like that."

"What do you mean bad?"

Sarah sighed. "He wasn't a very nice man. You had dealings with him when you were trying to locate me. You saw how he was."

"He was about as cold as an iceberg," Rafe said, remembering the man's cool blue eyes and obstinate chin. "I went to the house and he threatened to get the law on me if I didn't stop trying to contact you."

Sarah smiled. "That sounds like Grandfather all right. By the way, I really am sorry about putting you through the whole mess back then. I thought that you only married me for my connections."

"What?"

Rafe's shocked tone made her cringe. "It seemed like a logical conclusion at the time. Of course now I know it was a lot of bull intended to scare me off."

Rafe frowned. "What do you mean intended to scare you off?"

"Someone left an anonymous note on our bed. I read that and put together with the blueprint I found and then hearing you tell Zeke you were ready to start the conversion. Well, it seemed like a pretty airtight case."

"How could you believe it?" He gazed at her intently.

"I could never win Grandfather's love and approval, there were always strings attached. It seemed normal to have strings attached to yours, too." Seeing his angry expression she murmured, "I'm sorry."

"Don't fret about it. You just need to save your strength and hang in there for me."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah was left to wonder at his meaning. Could he want her to stay forever?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

Rafe held Sarah tight as they rode through the brush. She let her head rest on his shoulder. Rafe found himself praying she would be okay. Who could have left the note for her?

He could hardly believe it was one of his men. Most of them were like family. Tab was like an older brother. They'd grown up together on the Double-H. Zeke was like a second father to him. The newer hands didn't have much access to the house. Could one of them be working for Blackthorn? It hurt to think there might be a traitor in his midst but he knew he'd have to be on his guard against future incidents.

More importantly, how could Sarah believe he'd married her for her family connections? He'd make it his goal to convince her it wasn't so. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

Sarah sighed and nestled against him. "I'm feeling better now that we're almost home. Boy, am I ever glad you came to bawl me and Zeke out. I hate to think of what might have happened otherwise."

Rafe tightened his arm around her shoulders. His hand was still clamped to her wound. From the looks of it, she was losing too much blood. He made for open land and kicked Umbriago into a gallop.

He craned his neck but didn't see any signs of being followed. Whoever was taking pot shots at them must have backed off. It wasn't hard to guess who that someone was. The cowardly bushwhack fit Blackthorn to a tee. And as soon

as Sarah was taken care of, Rafe was personally going to take the bastard apart.

Sarah put her hand up to cover his. "I'll hold it, Rafe. I'm not helpless."

"Uh uh, sweetheart. I'm giving the orders around here. You just lie back and let me take care of you." She sighed as Rafe tucked her head protectively under his chin. Sarah's revelation about her grandfather made him sick. What kind of cold-hearted man would reject the needy child Sarah must have been? It put everything her grandfather might have told her into question including the fact that her maternal grandmother was supposed to be dead. Rafe intended to do some checking to see if it was true.

He came in sight of the ranch and galloped Umbriago across the pasture. He saw Zeke standing with Bob Wilson and the sheriff. Rafe noted Zeke's relieved smile and the sheriff's questioning look as he brought Umbriago to a halt. He handed Sarah down to Zeke and slid out of the saddle, then nodded toward Wilson. "Zeke, what did you get him here for? I told you to get the law."

Zeke held Sarah out toward Rafe. "You said to get help. You didn't specify who. Besides, I figure you two have a lot of talking to do."

"Our talking is going to take place in his office Monday morning, not before." Rafe lifted Sarah out of Zeke's arms and strode toward the truck.

Wilson followed them toward the pickup. "I came because I got a tip you might be nosing around the area where the wolves were found, Halliday."

"Looks like you had a mite of trouble out there, Rafe," the sheriff added sympathetically.

Rafe gave Wilson a distracted scowl. He knew the man was only doing his job, but right now he was as annoying as a mosquito buzzing in his ear. "I want to get Sarah into town for some medical attention. You two got a problem with that?"

The sheriff said, "Do you want to make out a report when you're in town?"

Rafe shrugged. "There isn't much to report. We were in the clearing where the wolves were found when someone got the drop on us from the bluff. If you two hurry on up there, you might find some evidence. That is if you really want to find it. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to get Sarah to the hospital."

Sarah lifted her head off Rafe's shoulder. "I don't need any medical attention."

Rafe tucked her closer into his arms. "I say you do, and on the Double-H my word is law. Remember?" He heard her soft chuckle and said a prayer of thanks that she was going to be all right.

Wilson said, "That's mighty coincidental, you three being attacked where the wolves were found."

Rafe turned to look at him. "You might say that."

Wilson gave him a direct look. "It would be a good way to divert suspicion from yourself."

Rafe took a step forward. "Why you—"

Zeke stepped between them. "Now Rafe, Bob's only doing his job."

Wilson shrugged. "In my line of work it pays to be suspicious. Of course it could also be that someone has a grudge against you. Maybe it isn't enough they get you in trouble, maybe they want to kill you."

Rafe turned back toward the truck. "Don't worry. I'm going to straighten it out myself. We all know damn well who's behind it."

The sheriff said, "You wouldn't have any rash ideas, would you, Rafe?"

Rafe flashed a cool smile his way. "Who, me?"

"Rafe, you don't have any proof Blackthorn was behind this," the sheriff warned. "Let me and my men take care of it."

Rafe set his jaw. "When my family is threatened, I take action."

"Be reasonable, Rafe. A physical attack isn't Blackthorn's style. He'd try to run your ranch into the ground, but he wouldn't try to shoot you."

Rafe scowled at the thought, it would mean an unknown assailant was after them. At least with Blackthorn he knew what kind of a varmint he was dealing with. He put Sarah in the truck, slammed the door, and sprinted around to his side. "I'll take it under consideration, boys. But right now I've got more important things to worry about." He gunned the engine and sped off toward town.

Sarah held her breath as the emergency room doctor examined her arm. He probed the wound gently making her wince. Sarah glanced up at Rafe who stood there grim-faced.

"You can wait outside, Rafe. I don't need you to hold my hand."

"No dice. I'm sticking with you. How's she doing, Mark?" Rafe asked the doctor.

Dr. Phillips, a tall man with sandy brown hair and bright blue eyes, looked up at Rafe. "Don't worry, Rafe. Your wife's going to be okay. I'll get the nurse to clean the area and then I'll put in a few stitches. What exactly happened out there?"

Rafe's jaw tightened. "Some low down bushwhacker took some pot shots at us. Sarah got hit by one."

Mark shook his head. "Well, she's lucky he wasn't a very good shot." He turned to Sarah. "How long since your last tetanus shot?"

Sarah winced when a nurse swabbed off the area to be stitched. "I'm not sure."

Dr. Phillips picked up a hypodermic needle. "I'm going to give you some anesthetic now. Just take a deep breath, hold still, and pretty soon you won't feel a thing."

Sarah bit her lip while the needle pricked her skin. She looked at Rafe and noted that he looked pale. Had he been hurt too? "Are you okay, Rafe?"

"I'm fine," he said, tightening his jaw and shifting his stance.

Dr. Phillips looked over at him and chuckled. "Pal, you better sit down before you fall down."

Rafe hesitated for a moment before slumping into a chair next to the gurney.

Dr. Phillips looked up at Sarah and grinned. "It's always the husbands that are the worse." He bent to put in the

stitches then turned to Rafe. "The worst is over now, buddy. Now all I have to do is give her a booster shot and you're out of here."

Sarah waited for the shot then jumped down from the exam table. She walked over to Rafe and tugged on his hand to get him to stand up. "I told you it wasn't serious."

Rafe put his arm around her. "Not serious, my ass. The doctor said you lost a lot of blood. And you needed stitches."

Sarah glanced over at Dr. Phillips and flushed with embarrassment. You couldn't keep Rafe from speaking his mind. Evidently the doctor was one of Rafe's friends. What did he think of them?

Dr. Phillips scribbled out a prescription and ripped it off his pad. He handed it to her with a smile. "I want you to take this antibiotic as a precaution. Make sure you take it all, understand?"

Sarah smiled, apparently salty talking, high-handed cowboys were an everyday occurrence for this doctor. "Don't worry, I will."

Rafe took the prescription out of her hand. "Don't worry, Mark. I'll see that she does."

Sarah gave Rafe an exasperated glance as he escorted her out of the emergency room. The color was slowly coming back into his cheeks. Who would have thought he would nearly faint at the sight of a needle?

She sighed when she climbed into the rusty old pickup. They could be using her nice Jeep Cherokee. But no, Rafe insisted on rattling around in this contraption. It was a point of pride for him. Her exasperation dissipated as she glanced

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

at Rafe. Bullheaded or not, she owed him her life. At least she knew she could count on him when the chips were down. If only there were some way she could repay him.

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Sarah picked up a stack of plates to set the table for dinner. She turned to walk into the dining room when Rafe intercepted her. He frowned taking the dishes out of her hands.

"You're supposed to be resting, Sarah," he said with determination.

"I did take a nap. I'm all rested up." She sighed at his continuing overprotective attitude. "Rafe, you can't go wrapping me in cotton wool. What happened was just a freak accident."

Rafe's jaw tightened. "You aren't supposed to do any heavy lifting, and you know it."

Sarah let out an exasperated groan. "I don't call a few plates heavy lifting."

Rafe lifted an eyebrow. "Well I do." He turned and carried the dishes into the dining room.

Sarah glared at his back. He could be so hardheaded. Sometimes she just wanted to kick him. She waited until Rafe was holed up in his study after dinner to go in search of Zeke.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rose was busy planing the next days shopping so it was the perfect time to do what she had to do.

Lisa's statement about the rumors of Rafe's financial problems nagged at her for days. Just how bad a shape were his finances in? And Rafe's plan to sell part of the ranch to Jim Barclay only added to her concern. If anyone knew the truth about Rafe's financial difficulties, it would be Zeke.

As she walked near the bunk house, she heard masculine laughter. She peeked in the window and saw that a lively card game was going on.

"You looking for someone special?"

Startled, Sarah spun toward the familiar voice. Tab Whittacker leaned against the side of the building, smoking a cigarette. He gave her a friendly smile. Sarah let out a relieved breath. "You startled me."

Tab took a draw off his cigarette and tilted his head as he glanced at her through the smoke. "It's a nice night. I thought I'd take a stroll."

"Me, too." Sarah smiled and let out a sigh. Thank goodness it wasn't Rafe. She'd have a hard time explaining what she was doing here without tipping him off.

"How's the arm?" He gave a pointed glance at her left arm.

Sarah patted the white bandage that covered the gouge. "I'll live. I guess I was lucky. Things might have turned out differently if Rafe wasn't around."

"I'd say you were fortunate." He pushed away from the wall and ground out his cigarette with the toe of his boot. "These hills can be dangerous for strangers."

Sarah shuddered at the words. She'd always felt comfortable in the wilderness, but Tab's statement filled her with foreboding. "I take it you're pretty familiar with them."

Tab shrugged and looked toward the big ranch house. "Didn't Rafe tell you?"

Sarah smiled, even though her thoughts were elsewhere. "Tell me what?"

"It figures," he said sourly.

"What?"

"Never mind." Tab hooked his thumbs in his pockets and leaned against the house. "I've been here longer than your husband. I was born and raised on the Double-H. My pappy worked for Rafe's daddy. For a while after Rafe's daddy passed on, I thought I might buy Rafe out. But things didn't work out."

Sarah glanced at his handsome weather-beaten features and relaxed when she saw his easy smile. "That's quite a family history. It must be nice to have such deep family roots."

He inclined his head. "You might say that. Course things changed after Rafe took over from his pa."

Sarah wondered whether he meant for the better or worse. "Yes, I suppose they would. Things never stay the same no matter where you work. I'm sure Rafe is a good boss."

"Yeah, I suppose so. So like I was saying, are you looking for someone special?"

Sarah heard the screen door slap and saw Zeke walk out onto the porch. "Zeke's the one I wanted to talk to."

"Mrs. Halliday," Tab said.

Sarah turned back toward Tab. "Yes?"

"There could be rough times ahead, what with your husband accused of a crime. You might want to consider clearing out."

Sarah gasped. He had no right to talk to her like that. She said firmly, "It's my and Rafe's private life and none of your business. Unless you know something I don't know."

Tab's lips thinned as he frowned. "It was just a friendly warning. You being a rich city girl, you just don't fit in here, especially when times are rough for the boss."

Sarah gave him a lingering glance as he walked away. Just what was behind his friendly warning, a dislike of her or was he just protecting his boss? She shrugged and walked over to Zeke who was sitting down on one of the porch rockers.

"Good evening, Zeke. I wonder if we could talk?"

He patted the seat next to him. "Why don't you set a spell. Rafe told me you were all right. He get that right?"

Sarah leaned back and rocked in the chair. The breeze that lifted the wisps of hair off her neck was refreshing. "I'm fine. It was just a scratch."

"Still, I don't like it," Zeke grumbled.

Sarah smiled and looked at his wizened face. "I'm not too happy about it myself. But there's something else on my mind tonight."

Zeke stopped rocking and glanced at her. "And just what might that be?"

Sarah looked around. The porch was deserted, only motes of dust danced in the twilight. She remembered Rose felt someone was snooping when they talked about Sarah's plans

to track down the wolves' death site. A person couldn't be too careful, because you never knew when someone might be listening. "I heard about Rafe having trouble securing a loan to open his dude ranch. He's considering selling off a parcel of the ranch for cash."

Zeke scowled and stopped rocking. "Where'd ya hear that? Has Rose been a gossiping?"

Sarah grinned at the ornery way he said Rose's name. "I've got my sources, and they're private." She had no desire to tell him of Lisa's confidences.

Zeke harrumphed and leaned back in his rocker. He looked off into the distance. "You figurin' on leaving him again if it's true?"

Sarah was saddened by the tense set of his body. "No, you're not going to get rid of me that quickly." She watched his shoulders relax. "So give, is it true?"

Zeke looked at her. "Why do ya want to know? You plannin' to help him out? A rich gal like you probably has more money than she knows how to spend."

Sarah leaned back and started rocking again. "I'm not the rich woman you think I am. I walked away from my grandfather's money years ago and I never looked back."

"Just like you ran out on Rafe," Zeke said sourly. "You kind of got the habit of running out when the times get tough, don't ya?"

Sarah sighed. She'd have to confide in Zeke if she wanted his cooperation. "The reasons are totally different. I left my grandfather, the man who raised me, because there were too many strings attached to his affections. I left Rafe because I

thought he married me because of my family connections. Being part of a hotel tycoon's family wouldn't hurt a man who wanted to open a dude ranch."

"Of all the damned fool notions, where'd you ever get an idea like that?"

"I found a note on the bed after our wedding explaining it. When I went to ask Rafe if it was true I overheard him talking to you about the dude ranch, jumped to conclusions, and ran out just like you said. If it makes any difference to you, I now know that the note was a lie."

"Well it's about time. So what're you plannin' to do about it?"

"Aside from the fact that Rafe couldn't blow me out of here with dynamite, I'm going to rescue his ranch. I've got some money saved up and I'm going to use it to start up the dude ranch. All I need to know from you is how much capital he needs to start the operation."

Zeke shook his head. "He'd never take it from you."

Sarah nodded. "I know how stubborn he is, but I could do it on the sly. He'd never know until it was too late to stop me."

Zeke pushed to his feet. "I don't think he'd cotton to the idea. So you ain't gonna get nothing out of me. I don't want to talk no more."

Sarah stood up, narrowing her eyes. He wasn't going to wiggle out of helping her that easily. She was prepared to fight dirty to rescue the man she loved. "You tell me what you know, or I'll tell everyone I saw you smooching Rose after dinner tonight."

Zeke scowled and spat on the ground. "You been spying on me?"

Sarah grinned, unrepentant. "I was in the right place at the right time."

He looked down at the ground. "The boss told me that he needs fifty grand to make improvements before he opens. He ain't got the money and the bank turned him down. So now he's fixin' to sell off some acreage to Jim."

Sarah thought about the nest egg she'd been building to start her own production company. It would be just enough.

Sarah dialed Pipi's private number. She glanced around warily to make sure she wouldn't be overheard. The kitchen was deserted.

"Hello."

Sarah sighed with relief. "Pipi, it's Sarah. Listen, cuz, I need a big favor from you."

Pipi said sharply, "You never ask for favors so it must be something important."

"Yes, it's vital."

"Name it, and it's yours."

Sarah gave another glance over her shoulder. "I need you to take the funds out of my private account and wire them to the Shelbyville Bank for me."

"Okay, how much?"

"All of it. There should be sixty thousand dollars all told."

"All of it! What for?"

"I'm going to help Rafe out of some financial problems."

"Are you crazy? What are you trying to do pay him off to soothe his pride?"

"No, I'm not crazy. I'm in love," Sarah said firmly. She'd known Pipi would kick up a fuss but she wasn't about to knuckle under. "Rafe has no idea of what I'm up to. If he knew I was planning to finance his dude ranch he'd be furious."

"Why don't you just ask Grandfather to put his ranch under the Maxwell Hotel Banner, they'd give him the seed money."

Sarah tensed at the thought. "You know better than that, cuz. I don't want to be linked to that man in any way. I'm going to help Rafe myself."

Pipi sighed then said grudgingly, "Well, if you've made up your mind I don't suppose my arguments are going to dissuade you. You always were stubborn. I think that's why you and Grandfather were always at loggerheads."

"Yes, I have made up my mind." Sarah chose to ignore the comparison even though she knew it was true.

"In love, huh," Pipi grumped. "I thought you were going there to set things right not fall under his spell again."

"You make him sound like a hypnotist. He's my Western Romeo and helping him out is my way of paying him back."

"For what?"

Sarah gritted her teeth. She should have kept her mouth shut. "He saved my life," she said reluctantly.

"What?" Pipi screeched.

Sarah brushed the hair back behind her ear. "Keep calm, Pipi, I'm okay."

"I'm coming out there to get you," Pipi shouted.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Sarah frowned. "Well, I'm not leaving. Don't worry about me. It was just some nut taking pot shots. Rafe has been taking good care of me."

Pipi sighed. "He is, huh?"

Sarah frowned at Pipi's doubting tone. "Yes, he is. So now it's my turn to take care of him."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

Rafe savored the last sip of his breakfast coffee. It was Monday morning and all of the men were already at work, while he was lingering at the table, putting off the inevitable meeting with Wilson. How would Sarah react if he was actually charged with shooting the wolves? She said she believed him, but did she really? He would know soon enough because he was due in Wilson's office in an hour. No doubt if he didn't show, they'd send the sheriff out to arrest him.

He stood up and walked into the kitchen where Sarah was helping Rose with the dishes. She glanced up sharply at his approach. He could see the anxiety in her eyes, and it made him tense. What was she thinking? Then he focused on the white bandage on her arm, and his gut twisted. She'd been shot while trying to prove his innocence. That told him she trusted him.

How could he have guessed this summer would bring such a roller coaster of emotions. He walked up to Sarah and pulled her into his arms. "Don't worry, sweetheart, it will be okay."

"If only I could have gathered some evidence," she whispered, while caressing his back.

Rafe luxuriated in her touch for a moment. This was right and real. "We were rudely interrupted, remember? There wasn't time to get any evidence. Besides, Wilson and the sheriff went up there. If there was anything to find, I'm sure they discovered it."

Sarah nestled in his arms. "I'm sure they're going to realize that it's all a mistake."

"I don't want you to worry, sweetheart." Rafe hugged her tighter. Her belief in him meant everything.

Sarah nodded. "I know it's all going to blow over." She stepped out of his embrace noting sadly that he looked like a man going off to face a firing squad. "It'll just take me a minute to get ready."

"For what?"

"I'm going with you." Sarah grabbed her purse and walked toward the door.

Rafe frowned. "I don't think that's a very good idea, Sarah. They didn't ask you to come in."

Sarah stood tall in the face of his repressive attitude. He didn't want her involved but there was no way she would let him face this alone. "Tough. I want to be with you. Don't worry. I won't get in the way. Besides, I have some business to do in town later."

"What business do you have to do?" Rafe asked.

"There are a few items I forgot to buy at Daley's Camera Shop last time." Her money should be in the local bank by now. She'd open a joint account for the two of them and by the time renovations began it would be too late for Rafe to say no. They were a team now whether he realized it or not.

"I could pick up any photography supplies you need," he offered.

Sarah frowned as she fumbled for an excuse. "No thanks, you wouldn't know what to get. Besides you owe me. You did confiscate my keys, leaving me stranded."

"Okay, I guess you can come," he said grudgingly.

SARAH SAT IN an uncomfortable tweed chair in a corner of the room, while Rafe sat in a chair in front of Bob Wilson's desk. Rafe put on a front of confidence but she knew he was as tense as a canary in a room full of cats. Rafe cast a frustrated glance her way.

"How do you like that?" Rafe grumbled. "Here I am on time for my appointment and he keeps me waiting for half an hour."

Sarah was worried, too, but strove to hide it. She needed to be supportive, no matter what happened. Rafe flashed her the I-don't-give-a-damn smile of a man going before a firing squad. Sarah twined her fingers together to keep her hands from shaking. "Try to be patient, Rafe. Bob did say he was waiting for some lab results, and it would be worth our while to wait."

Rafe sighed and leaned back in the chair. "At least you believe I'm innocent. Now we just have to convince the law." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Waiting stinks. I've never been good at it."

Sarah smiled at his petulant, little boy tone. "Oh, I don't know. You waited three weeks for me."

Rafe cast her an intense look. "That's different. You were worth waiting for."

It was Rafe's first declaration of affection and she hugged it to her like a security blanket.

Wilson entered the room. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting so long. Ballistics had to fax me some info on the shell casings we found on the bluff yesterday."

"And..." Rafe prompted.

Wilson slapped a sheet of paper on his desk. "The shots that hit your wife came from a rifle. A thirty ought six."

"There are plenty of those around. Heck, we've got several of them around the ranch." He looked from the paper to Wilson. "Hey, what about Blackthorn, does he own a rifle?"

Wilson smiled grimly. "He did, but he reported it stolen a week ago."

"It figures." Rafe scowled. "Blackthorn's not stupid. If he was going to do the shooting, he'd claim that he didn't have the gun."

Wilson frowned. "By the way, Rafe, we checked. Nevell Blackthorn was working on bank business when your wife was shot."

"Has he got any witnesses to back him up?" Rafe asked sharply.

Wilson sighed. "He doesn't need witnesses, Rafe, you do. You're the one accused of a crime."

"What about the rock fragments?" Sarah asked. "And the bullets from the wolves? You've had plenty of time to check on them."

Wilson turned to look at her. "They came from the same gun, ma'am."

Sarah smiled. "Then you know Rafe is innocent. Rafe was with me when the second shots were fired."

"That's true, but you two could have set this up as a ruse." Wilson shrugged. "Or Rafe could have persuaded a pal to take a shot at you."

"What a stupid thing to say." Sarah stood up and stepped toward the men. She put a hand on Rafe's shoulder. "My husband wouldn't do such an underhanded thing. I have complete faith in him."

Wilson nodded. "My gut feeling says he's been set up, but I have to check the weapons on the ranch to be sure."

Sarah glanced at Rafe. The satisfied smile he gave her took her breath away. Apparently her trust meant a great deal to him.

Rafe turned to glance at Wilson. "What do you want me to do, Bob?"

Wilson sat down in his desk chair. "Have a seat and we'll work out the details."

Rafe sat down across from him. "I'll do whatever I have to do to get this cleared up. I want this solved as much as you do."

Sarah smiled. It was going to be all right. "Rafe, while you two talk this over, I'm going to go take care of the business I talked about. How about if we meet at the cafe in an hour?"

Rafe turned and smiled at her. "All right, sweetheart. I'll see you then."

Sarah left the courthouse and headed at a brisk pace to the bank. She didn't have much time to do what she had to do.

Sarah opened the front door of the bank and walked up to the teller's counter. "I have a transfer of funds that's supposed to be here this morning."

"And your name?"

"Sarah Halliday. I have a picture ID from my old bank. Of course it's still under my maiden name of Maxwell." Sarah slid her bank card and driver's license from her purse.

The teller smiled and handed Sarah the cashier's check. "Would you like to start an account with us today, Mrs. Halliday?"

"Yes, a joint account. I need to make sure my husband has access to this money." Sarah endorsed the back of the check and slid it across to the teller.

A large tanned hand dropped down on the check, preventing the teller from picking it up. The teller gaped up at the space behind Sarah's left ear. Sarah didn't have to look behind her to know who it was.

"Wilson and I finished our business a little early, wife," Rafe said dryly. "Isn't it a good thing I saw you in here on my way to the cafe?"

Sarah sucked in her breath and turned around with friendly smile. "Rafe, I can explain."

"There's no need to explain, Sarah. I understand perfectly."

Rafe smiled at the teller but his smile didn't reach his eyes. Sarah knew he was furious.

"My wife has changed her mind," Rafe bit out. "She'll be keeping her precious money."

"But—"

"Button it," Rafe snapped. He picked up the check, turned, and strode toward the door.

Sarah rolled her eyes and followed him. There was nothing worse than a male with a wounded ego, and Rafe's pride had

just been trampled on by her money. Rafe jerked open the driver's door to his truck and she dashed to the passenger door. As she hopped inside she cast a glance his way. Rafe's jaw was set. He probably did have a right to be angry, but he didn't have to be such a jerk about it. She was doing this for them after all.

He pulled out of the parking space and started driving toward home. "What was that all about?" Rafe bit out.

"Payment for services rendered?"

"I don't know what you mean." She stared at his rigid profile totally confused by the statement.

Rafe cast an annoyed glance her way. "Don't play dumb, Sarah. You know exactly what I mean. Payment for a nice roll in the hay, making love—sex. I might be good, honey, but I'm not for sale."

She gaped at him as his words penetrated. "Is that what you think?" It had never entered her mind he would think such a thing. "But that's ridiculous."

"Hell yes, it's ridiculous. I'm not some gigolo you can buy with your wealth. What I gave, I gave freely. So you can keep your blasted money." He pushed the check across the cracked, blue vinyl upholstery as if it was a piece of trash. "I don't need it."

"Don't need it, or are too proud to take it?" Sarah snapped back.

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Sarah watched Bob Wilson drive off with Rafe's rifles. He'd also taken the ones Rafe had picked up in the bunk house.

She was in a foul mood because of Rafe's stupid macho pride. He'd turned what could have been a beautiful gesture on her part into a disaster. What did he expect her to do, stand back while he floundered financially? Why should she stand back and watch him sell off part of his birthright when she had the means to save him?

Eventually she hoped to change his mind and open him up to sharing everything with her. It was the only way to make their marriage truly work. But she was just too steamed to approach him for the time being.

Right now she needed to lose herself in her work. It was the one area she still felt competent in. She was going to get busy and complete her series.

Sarah walked into the kitchen, carrying her camera and supplies. Rafe was at the sink, getting a drink of water. She watched the play of muscles in his back as he lifted the glass, and frowned. Why did he have to be such a big, macho cowboy? Couldn't the man bend a little?

Rafe drained the glass and put it on the counter. He turned to look at her and leaned back against the cabinet, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Where do you think you're going?"

Sarah flipped her hair over her shoulder. "This is still a free country, cowboy. I don't have to stand here and be interrogated."

A nerve twitched in Rafe's jaw. "Yes, this is a free country. But there's an assassin out there, remember? It's not safe to go wandering around."

He was right and it irritated Sarah to no end. Still, she couldn't stand to be cooped up all day. "He missed, so he must not be a very good assassin."

Rafe arched an eyebrow. "He didn't miss the wolves."

Sarah recalled the revolting slides and shuddered.

"So I repeat, where are you going?" Rafe asked patiently.

"I need to get some work done. I have a deadline to meet." At his implacable stare she added, "Besides, I can't handle just sitting around. And I promise I won't go anywhere near the bluff."

"Let's just hope the assassin doesn't think the same thing," Rafe said dryly.

Sarah frowned at his sarcasm. "Quit trying to scare me."

"I'm not trying to do anything. You're scared because there's a real possibility of danger. You can't go alone, so if you go, I go too."

Sarah bit her lip. The last thing she wanted was for Rafe to tag along. How could she get any work done with him looking over her shoulder? "You can't spare the time from work," she protested.

Rafe scowled and pushed away from the counter top. "Don't tell me what I can't do, wife. I'm still boss around here. Where do you want to work?"

Sarah sighed. It looked like she was going to have a tagalong whether she wanted him or not. "I'd like to take

some pictures by the lake. I figured I could get some good shots of wildlife around there."

Rafe nodded. "Yeah, you probably could, but it's pretty far out. If we go this late in the day, we'll have to camp out. Unless, of course," he said humorlessly, "you're afraid to be alone with me."

"I'm not afraid of anything." Sarah bit her lip. Actually, she was quite uneasy at the prospect. In their surly moods they'd probably be at each other's throat the whole time.

Still, she could get some beautiful evening shots and she did have camping equipment out in her Jeep. "Okay, let's go for it. I've got all the equipment we need in my Jeep."

"Fine, I think we could use some time alone." He turned and walked out the back door. "Let's go."

Sarah relaxed at his statement. Maybe she could get him to see her side of things.

Rafe opened the rear door of her jeep and then slipped her keys back into his hip pocket. Sarah frowned at the telling action; he wouldn't give an inch.

Sarah reached inside and pulled out her bedroll. Underneath was a spare bedroll. They were both attached to backpacks. She turned to Rafe. "Have you ever done any hiking?"

Rafe took one of the packs from her. "Don't worry. I'll keep up." He picked up two canteens. "I'll go into the kitchen and fill these. What about food?"

"I have a week's worth of freeze-dried food in the packs. Don't worry, Rafe, we won't starve. I'll find Rose and tell her we'll be gone while you're getting the water."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

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Rafe hobbled around the clearing setting up camp while Sarah scouted around for possible photo opportunities. He had to admit that hiking in cowboy boots wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done. But after they started there was no way he was going to admit it. Sarah knew anyhow. He could see it in the twinkle in her eyes whenever she looked his way.

He wiped the trickle of sweat out of his eyes, and looked off into the distance where she was checking out an ant hill. He grinned when he saw her loosen up and smile. She was just like an excited little kid when she set to work. It showed a passionate nature he knew reflected upon other areas in her life.

Such as her uninhibited passion in bed. The errant thought caused a tightening in his groin. He was supposed to be mad at her, not thinking about taking her to bed.

Would two fit in this sleeping bag? He rolled it out and smiled. If they slept on top of each other, maybe.

He turned and walked away from the task to gather firewood, his thoughts growing dark as he thought about Sarah's attempt to buy him off. He wanted her, not her money. Would she ever get that through her stubborn little head? But something even worse worried him. Was this pay off just a preliminary to her leaving him? He cast a frustrated

glance her way and saw she was snapping a shot of an eagle in flight. She was like the eagle, free, and alone, but he wouldn't rest until he had her tethered to his side.

Rafe had the fire going and dinner on to cook when Sarah made her way back to camp. She plopped down on the ground and smiled when he handed her a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," she murmured, and took a sip.

Rafe sat down next to her. "It's been a long day. I figured you could use a cup. Dinner will be ready soon."

"I think I'm too tired to eat." She closed her eyes and sighed.

Rafe reached out and began to rub her knotted shoulder muscles. He felt the tension seep out of her. "You have to take your antibiotic on a full stomach."

Sarah opened her eyes. "I forgot about those. I didn't bring them."

He pulled the bottle out of his shirt pocket. "I knew you would, so I got them out of the bathroom before we left."

Sarah smiled. "Figures." She gave a pointed glance at his boots. "I should have warned you about hiking in cowboy boots, sorry."

Rafe chuckled. "That's okay, sweetheart, I'll live."

"Whatever you're cooking smells good enough to eat."

Rafe grinned. "Freeze-dried beef stew, and applesauce for dessert."

"Yummy." She took a deep whiff of the tantalizing aroma. "You're going to spoil me. It's kind of nice to have a helper along on a shoot. I'm not used to such luxury."

Rafe got up and stirred the stew. "Sweetheart, if you played your cards right, you could have this kind of help all the time."

Sarah smiled. "I might just take you up on that offer, cowboy."

Rafe could have given a cheer, instead he got out two tin plates and dished out their stew. She was moving toward forever.

After dinner Sarah started to gather up their dishes, but Rafe took them out of her hands. "I'll do that while you wash up, Sarah. We want to keep that wound clean, remember?"

Sarah smiled. "I'll take you up on that offer. I think I'll go to the lake for a dip."

Rafe turned away and grinned. She didn't know it, but he planned on joining her shortly. This camping trip was serendipity. They were both a heck of a lot safer out here where absolutely nobody knew where they were. And it gave him time to cement their relationship. He finished the dishes, grabbed a towel, and headed toward the lake.

Rafe stopped at the water's edge. The sunset painted the water with rainbow colors, and highlighted Sarah's beauty. As she turned toward him, droplets of water looked like diamonds sprinkled over her fair skin. Her eyes were dark green and fathomless and her full lips curved into a siren's smile.

"I wondered if you would join me," she said.

"No power on earth would stop me." Rafe peeled off his shirt and kicked off his boots.

"Good."

Rafe saw her eyes widen when he slipped out of his jeans and briefs. He strode toward the water. "Do you want me, sweetheart?"

Sarah grinned. "More than you could ever know, cowboy."

Rafe looked down at his hard flesh. "Oh, I think I've got a pretty good idea." They both laughed at the private joke. He closed the distance between them with a few long strides and bent to kiss her parted lips.

Sarah pulled away. "It seems like the only time we get in sync is after we fight."

Rafe traced a teardrop that trickled down her soft cheek. "Don't cry, sweetheart. We're both going through some tough adjustments now. Things will get better."

Sarah smiled softly. "I hope so because sometimes I hurt so bad inside I want to die. Other times I get so mad at you I want to kick you."

"Believe me, sweetheart, the feeling is mutual." Rafe scooped her up with a chuckle. He kissed her mouth as her slippery body slid across his. Her breasts were tempting mounds pressing against his chest. Rafe's knees began to shake from excitement as he walked toward the bank. "We better take this on dry land before we both drown."

Sarah laughed. "By all means. I'm not quite ready for a watery grave."

Rafe carried Sarah toward the campsite.

"But what about our clothes?"

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. I'll go back for them later." Rafe reached the camp and bent to lay Sarah on top of

her sleeping bag. The firelight cast shadows on her body, highlighting her curves. "You're beautiful, Sarah."

Sarah reached up to trace a pattern on his chest. "Thank you. Every woman wants to be considered beautiful by the man she ... loves."

Rafe was exultant. She'd said right out loud that she loved him. He bent down to kiss her, positioning himself on her so she could feel how much he wanted her. Sarah parted her legs and he nestled between them. "I need you, Sarah," he murmured before moving down to suck at her nipples. They were like new strawberries in his mouth, sweet and hard.

Sarah gasped, pressing herself firmly into his mouth. "That feels wonderful. I've been aching for your touch."

Rafe smiled and moved down her body, scattering kisses across her taut abdomen. He stopped to dip his tongue in her navel and she arched toward him. Rafe chuckled at her surprised reaction and moved on down to press kisses on the insides of her thighs. Rafe found the heart of her and touched her with his tongue. She pressed against him whimpering. Emboldened, Rafe continued on circling that little bead, teasing it until she screamed in ecstasy, arching toward him. Then she eased down. He pressed kisses on her thighs moving back up to join her.

"Why did you do that, Rafe? I wanted to feel that when we made love."

"And you will, sweet Sarah. Just lie back and let it happen." He nibbled at her neck and cupped her breast, finessing the nipple. It instantly beaded to his touch. "You see?"

Sarah gasped when he bent down to flick his tongue across her nipple. "Yes, I guess it is possible," she said in an awed voice.

Rafe moved to the other breast and placed his hand between her thighs. He slicked slowly between the damp petals until he reached her bud.

Sarah's legs thrashed as she opened for him.

The scent of their love was heavy in the air and Rafe exulted in it. Sarah reached out to touch him, cupping him in her hand. Rafe pressed himself into her hot palm, but when he almost lost control, he pulled away. He settled between the thighs, pressing the tip of his shaft against her heat. Unable to wait any longer, he surged into her.

Sarah moved against him, wrapping her legs around his hips. "Oh, Rafe, that feels so right," she cried out in a voice raw with emotion. He surged into her once, twice, three times and she climaxed.

Undone by her passionate cry, Rafe followed her into bliss with a hoarse shout of love.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Something tickled Sarah's nose. She wiggled it against a warm furry pillow, opened her eyes, and realized she was sleeping with her head cushioned on Rafe's broad chest. She raised her head and saw that she was halfway lying on him as they both nestled inside her sleeping bag.

She yawned and then grinned. She might not remember falling asleep last night, but she'd never forget their long, passionate night of lovemaking.

She cautiously unzipped the sleeping bag, trying not to rouse Rafe. She smiled again. The poor guy would probably be full of aches and pains when he woke up. She wasn't exactly light as a feather.

The zipper buzzed down noisily as Sarah eased off Rafe and lay at his side. She leaned up on one elbow and gazed wondrously at the man she loved. Her gaze stopped on that part of his anatomy that had pleased her last night. In the early morning light it was just a shadow of its former self, but as she looked, it started to grow.

"Taking inventory, sweetheart?"

Sarah looked into Rafe's laughing eyes. "I just wanted to make sure we hadn't done any damage last night," she said with a straight face.

Rafe reached up to pull her down into his arms. "And do I pass inspection, wife?"

"You'll do." Sarah nuzzled his neck. He tasted wonderful, sweet and salty at the same time. "You know, I could get

used to this." She sighed blissfully when he caressed her breast.

"I aim to see you do." Rafe rolled onto his back, taking Sarah with him.

Sarah lay astride him, momentarily astounded by the rapid change of position. "Don't tell me it's time for another riding lesson," she said, laughing.

Rafe groaned. "That's a terrible joke, sweetheart, but since this is a truly wonderful morning, you get to be in charge. I'm all yours."

Sarah smiled when Rafe reached between her thighs to touch her softly. She couldn't help moaning at the exquisite pleasure his touch brought. The breeze ruffled her hair as she arched up to give him better access to what he so ardently sought.

She reached back to touch his hot velvet shaft, reveling in her ability to excite him. There was magic between them. He loved her. He'd yelled it out last night at his climax.

She moved back, positioning herself above him, and slowly lowered herself onto him. She moved easily, filling herself with his love, slowly, exquisitely.

"You're in control this morning, sweetheart," Rafe husked. "Do with me what you will."

"Don't worry, cowboy, I'll take extra special care of you." Sarah loved the intense look of passion on his face. She watched his expression change as she began to move. His dark hooded gaze burned with excitement. All too soon, Sarah's own passion overwhelmed her.

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

She moved raggedly against him, her breathing rapid. Her thighs trembled as their sweet friction started a brush fire inside of her.

Rafe reached up to cup her hips, gentling her motions.

Sarah gasped as she rubbed against him, feeling the sweet muscular contractions of her climax wash over her. She was aware of Rafe's blissful cry as he joined her. She collapsed against him.

Sarah lay on top of Rafe while she caught her breath.

"We're right back where we started this morning."

"Was I a comfortable cushion, sweetheart?"

Sarah raised her head and looked at him feeling herself flush. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry? Are you crazy? I loved every minute of it. It's not every night I get to cradle you all night long." Rafe brushed her hair back from her eyes. "So what's on the agenda for today?"

"I'd like to get in a couple of hours of work before we head back." Sarah rolled off Rafe and sat up. He looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen him before. "That is, if it's okay with you."

Rafe sat up. "It's fine with me, on one condition."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"That you give me a morning kiss."

Sarah saw how Rafe's eyes glittered as she bent toward him. Nothing could spoil this wonderful morning. Rafe's lips brushed warmly against hers. She kissed him back, feeling the sweetness seep all the way down to her toes. Sarah

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

pulled away and laughed. "If we don't cut this out, I'll never get any work done."

"So who wants to work?"

Sarah stood up and smiled. "I do, cowboy, so let's get cracking."

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Rafe rolled up Sarah's sleeping bag. He breathed deeply and smiled. He could still smell the traces of her scent and the perfume she wore. Things were going well, better than well. He'd told her he loved her last night and he didn't regret it one bit. It was a new sensation because he'd never believed in that kind of hearts and flowers stuff. Sarah had made him a believer.

Still, he had to make it clear to Sarah that he wasn't going to be placated by her money. After all, she'd thought he'd married her for her family connections. How would she feel if he actually took the money she offered. It would give her too easy an out.

No, it was going to be tight but he'd solve his financial problems by himself. He hated to part with any of the Double-H but when it came down to preserving their future he was prepared to go through with it.

He stuffed the clothes he'd retrieved from the beach into his backpack and tied it securely. He slipped the pack onto his

back, picked up Sarah's, and headed for the rise where she was scouting for shots.

As Rafe headed toward the sun, his thoughts returned to their lovemaking. Maybe he'd give Rose the night off so he and Sarah could have a cozy dinner for two. He smiled. It was just the kind of thing Sarah would love.

He crested the rise and looked around. He didn't see Sarah anywhere. Where could she have gone? She said she'd be here taking some shots of the cliffs.

Then he spotted a still dark object lying in the high grass, several hundred feet away. Maybe she'd dropped some of her equipment. Rafe told himself he was just worrying for nothing, but his footsteps hurried toward the object anyway. He drew closer, and saw it was Sarah, crumpled like rag doll in the grass.

His heart lurching in his chest, Rafe knelt beside her, reaching out to touch her warm, still, arm. "Sarah, are you okay?" There was no reply. He felt for broken bones and then carefully turned her over. She gave a tiny moan, but her eyelids remained closed.

What was the matter with her? Was she shot? He couldn't see any wounds. He brushed the hair back from her forehead and his hand came away with blood.

Looking closely he saw a gash with a deep purple bruise underneath her hairline. Rafe leaned down, placing his ear near Sarah's nose. Her sweet breath came slow and shallow into his ear.

"Sarah, sweetheart, can you hear me?" There was no response. Her face was so pale. How long had she been like

this? She must have fallen and hit her head. Rafe looked around, but didn't see any stumps of rocks nearby, just soft grass.

It hit him like a sucker punch. Someone had attacked her. Rafe's jaw tightened as he looked around. Whoever had done it was gone. Damnit, he thought they were safe, otherwise he never would have let her go off on her own. This was all his fault. He should have anticipated the unexpected attack. He should have taken better care of her.

He shrugged the backpack off his shoulders, and yanked out his cellular phone. He dialed the number for the local rescue service. The wait for an answer seemed like an eternity.

"Shelbyville nine-one-one, how can I direct your call?" a businesslike female voice asked.

"This is Rafe Halliday from the Double-H. I need paramedics right away. My wife has a severe head injury. We're camped out just one mile east of Jersey Lake."

"I just dispatched the Rescue Service. They'll be there as soon as possible, Mr. Halliday. In the mean time, stay on the line with me. I need to ask you some questions."

"Fine," Rafe said tightly. "Just please hurry them up."

"Please remain calm, sir. They'll be there soon. How did the injury occur?"

"Somebody bashed her on the head," Rafe said harshly, through gritted teeth. His stomach convulsed at the image and he thought he was going to be sick.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." He reached down to touch Sarah's cheek. "Send the sheriff, too."

"Do you know who attacked your wife?"

"I don't know for sure. I found her lying on the ground, unconscious." He stopped to take a calming breath. "But I have my suspicions," Rafe continued. Nevell Blackthorn would be one sorry bastard when he got his hands on him.

"I'm going to assist you by phone until the paramedics arrive. Is your wife having any trouble breathing?"

"Her breathing seems to be kind of shallow but I guess she's doing okay that way. The main problem is she's bleeding a lot. There's a big gash on her forehead."

"Mr. Halliday, I need you to apply gentle pressure to the wound to stop the bleeding. Do you have a clean cloth to place on the wound?"

"There's a clean towel in my backpack. Hold on a second and I'll get it." He searched around the contents of the pack and tugged out the towel. He never used it last night. "I've got it."

"Okay, Mr. Halliday, you're doing great. Just fold the towel into a square and use it to apply gentle pressure to the head. Remember we don't know what kind of damage might be underneath so you need to be careful."

"Right," Rafe said calmly when he was really shaking in his boots. The thought of a skull fracture or brain damage had him terrified. If he lost her, he wouldn't want to live. Sarah meant everything to him. She'd finally taught him how to love.

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Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans



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Rafe paced the hall outside the emergency room. Why in blazes didn't they tell him anything? It seemed like hours had gone by since they'd arrived by ambulance. Sarah had been whisked into the trauma bay while he had been shoved back into the waiting room. They'd even tried to keep him out of the ambulance but he'd bullied his way on board. This was all his fault and no one was going to make him leave her side until he knew she was going to be okay.

Rafe couldn't stand the agony of not knowing what was happening. He quit pacing and stopped near the window. The sun still shone brightly, but his world was dark with fear and rage. How dare the slimy skunk lay a hand on her. This time nothing would save Blackthorn from his revenge, no matter what the consequences were. Sarah had looked so pale and lifeless lying on the gurney. He didn't think he could bear it if anything happened to her. Rafe's gut twisted at the mind-numbing thought.

It seemed he'd brought her nothing but trouble this summer. It was his own damned, love-blind fault for putting her in danger. Maybe Sarah was smart when she left him in the first place.

He heard footsteps coming down the hall and turned to look. Bob Wilson was coming toward him. His face looked haggard and his pace was slow.

Bob stopped next to Rafe and slipped his hands into his pockets. "Rafe, how's she doing?"

Rafe shrugged and tightened his jaw. "They haven't told me anything yet. They won't even let me in there, but maybe it's just as well. I'd only be in the way. She's having a CAT scan right now so we should know something soon."

Bob put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll wait with you. But let's have a seat, I'm bushed."

Rafe walked with him to a row of green vinyl chairs in the waiting room and sat down. Then it struck him as odd that Bob had showed up now. "Hey, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at the crime scene with the sheriff's boys?"

Bob stretched his legs out. "They've got things well under control and I've already done my part. I thought I'd stop by and fill you in on some good news."

"Oh yeah, I could use some good news right now. What is it?"

Bob grinned. "We got the guy."

Rafe relaxed and leaned back in the chair. It was good news. "Blackthorn?" he asked sourly.

"Not quite."

Rafe frowned at his enigmatic answer. He'd be damned if Blackthorn was going to get away with this. "What do you mean not quite?"

"He had help," Bob said tightly. "A man on the inside worked with him."

"Who? I'll tear the bastard apart." Rafe's jaw set firmly. He thought he could trust all his hands. No wonder they got the drop on them so easily.

Bob shrugged. "Too late. We already took them both in. We got a make on the rifle this afternoon. It belongs to Travis Cain."

Rafe's mouth dropped open, it was the last name he expected to hear. "Are you sure about that, Bob? He's just a green kid I hired on for the summer. What motive could he have to try to kill Sarah?"

Bob's lips narrowed as he scowled. "He's Nevell Blackthorn's nephew, that's why. Didn't you check his references?"

Rafe winced. He'd just taken Travis's word. "What references? He looked strong enough and claimed to have experience. I would have found out soon enough if he was lying about that. He fit the bill." Rafe looked at Bob. "That means Blackthorn was behind it all."

Bob nodded. "It looks that way. Travis has admitted to spying for his uncle while he's been at the ranch. You know, giving him inside information and pulling a few pranks. You ought to have seen his gear. He's got some pretty sophisticated electronic equipment. He said he agreed to do it because his uncle was going to pay his next year of college. But he claims he didn't attack Sarah or shoot the wolves."

"Oh yeah, then where was he this morning when Sarah was hurt?" Rafe's eyes narrowed.

Bob shrugged. "He claims he went for a long walk. He said that he felt bad about what he'd been doing, spying on you and all. He said he was considering giving it up."

Rafe's jaw tightened. "That sounds pretty lame to me. Has he got any witnesses to back him up?"

Bob shook his head. "No."

"Good. I want to see them both pay for what they did. Blackthorn always thought he was above the law. Now I mean to make him see he's no better than anybody else. I want to see the son-of-a-bitch fry."

"Don't worry, charges are already being brought against them for attempted murder. There's no way he's going to wiggle out of this one. The jerk is already bitching about false arrest, but we've got him dead to rights."

Rafe sighed and looked down. "So my phones were bugged. No wonder he always seemed to be one jump ahead of me."

Bob nodded. "Yeah, it was a pretty high-tech setup. The kid's a computer major in college."

"Rafe," Doctor Phillips called out.

Rafe turned to look at Mark who was striding toward him. He tensed, bracing himself for the worst. The painful reality of the situation was like a slap in the face. "How is Sarah doing?"

"I think she's going to be okay, buddy. She's one lucky lady." Mark sat down across from them. "The CAT scan was negative. There's no fracture, no bleeding in the brain. She just has a simple concussion. Now all we have to do is wait for her to wake up."

"How long is that going to take?" Rafe asked.

"That's hard to say. Head injuries are tricky. But I think she'll regain consciousness soon."

Rafe let out the breath he was holding. "Thank God."

"Cheer up, Rafe. At least you didn't have to watch me put in the stitches this time."

Rafe thought of the last time and grimaced. Two attacks against Sarah were two too many. He couldn't put her in that kind of danger again. Blackthorn had long tentacles.

Mark glanced at Bob. "Do you think she was hit by the same guy that shot at her last week, officer?"

Bob nodded. "Yes, but we got him this time."

Mark stood up and shook his head. "Somebody sure had it in for her."

"It was Blackthorn," Rafe said.

Mark nodded. "I wondered. You two never did get along, even back in school. I remember when you made quarterback on the high school football team and he wound up sitting the bench for most of the season. Still, you wouldn't think an old rivalry would drive him to attempt murder."

"I think the guy's got a screw loose myself," Bob said sourly.

Mark shrugged. "It sure seems that way." He turned back to Rafe. "We'll want to keep Sarah here under observation for a few days. We'll be moving her up to her room in a few minutes. The nurse will come out to get you first."

"Thanks, Mark."

Bob patted Rafe on the shoulder "Well that's dandy news, Rafe. It's good to hear your wife is going to be okay."

Rafe sighed in relief. "It sure is."

"Oh, before I go," Bob said pulling a note out of his shirt pocket. "I did that checking you asked me to. Mrs. Sarah

Blake is alive and living in Durham, New Hampshire. I've got her number right here."

Rafe looked down at the note. "I had a feeling that old devil was lying. So Sarah's maternal grandmother is alive."

"I brought it along because I figured you might want to give her a call and tell her about Sarah being hurt."

Rafe clasped the note tight in his hand. This would mean so much to Sarah. "I owe you, Bob."

Bob smiled and stood up. "Good, you can pay me back by letting me handle this thing with Nevell Blackthorn. I don't want you interfering with the case we're building against him." He pointed toward the lobby. "I believe the pay phones are down that way."

"I'm right on it." Rafe walked to the pay telephone in the lobby. He dialed Sarah's cousin, Papi's work number first.

"Maxwell and Mackenzy law offices," the cheerful female voice on the other end of the line answered.

Rafe leaned against the wall. This wasn't going to be easy. "Put me through to Phillipa Maxwell."

"I'm sorry," the drone on the other end of the line said sweetly. "Ms. Maxwell is in a meeting right now, and can't be disturbed. May I take your name and have her call you back?"

Rafe frowned at the receiver. "Listen, ma'am, this is an emergency. Tell her that her cousin Sarah has been hurt."

There was a pause. "Very well, I'll give her the message. Hold please."

Rafe listened to the music playing softly in his ear and scowled. How was he going to tell her the news? Either way she was going to blame him and she'd be right. Sarah

wouldn't be lying in a hospital room if he hadn't conned her into coming back to rescue him. He had to make it up to her.

"Phillipa Maxwell here," a brusque, woman's voice said.

"My receptionist said Sarah was hurt. Is this Rafe Halliday?"

"Yes, I'm Rafe Halliday."

"Let me tell you one thing, Rafe Halliday. If you're to blame for this, I'll kick your behind clear across Wyoming. I'll sue you till you've got noting left but the lint in your belly button."

Rafe grimaced at her words they were too close to his own thoughts. "I'm to blame all right. I left her alone and someone bashed her on the head."

Phillipa gasped. "Oh my God. How is she?"

"Unconscious." It hurt to talk about. He stared at the geometric pattern of the ceramic tile on the wall to get a handle on his raging emotions. "Sarah has a concussion, but there's no skull fracture and no bleeding in the brain. On the bright side, the doctors think she'll be all right."

"They think, but they don't know."

Rafe thought that Pipi's apprehensive tone reflected his own fears. "That's about the size of it."

"I'll be on the first plane out there," Phillipa told him in an assertive voice.

Rafe nodded. "Good, I was hoping you'd say that. Sarah needs her family around her now. Listen, before you hang up, I did some digging and got Sarah's grandmother's phone number."

"But that's impossible," Phillipa sputtered. "She's dead."

"No, she's not."

"But, Grandfather ... Why that nasty old man. How could he do such a thing?"

Rafe shrugged. "Judging by his personality, I'd say it was easy. Anyway, I'm going to call her."

"Why don't you let me do it? That way we can make arrangements to fly out there together. I might even haul Grandfather out there with me. He's got a lot of explaining to do and he might as well do it in person. Settling things with Grandfather would probably do Sarah good."

"Sounds good to me," Rafe murmured. "I suppose it would be good for her to have it out with the old grump. Just don't let him upset her. It'll be nice to have a go-between like you that Sarah's comfortable with."

"But what about you? You'd be the natural one to intercede."

Rafe's hand tightened on the phone. "I won't be here."

"Are you running out on my cousin?" Phillipa shouted.

Rafe held the phone away from his ear until her tirade was over. "I'll wait until I'm sure she's okay, but then I have to leave."

"Why, did you find out she's not going to be wealthy after all?"

Rafe tensed. "I'm going to ignore that because I know how upset you are. To put it plain and simple, I'm not going to hold her to me with lies anymore. All it's done is cause misery. This way she's free to follow her own path."

"Don't act so innocent. Sarah told me, before she went out on her fool's errand, that you were using her connections to

get funding for your dude ranch. And aside from that, she had me wire all her personal funds to give to you."

"I married Sarah because I love her. And I wouldn't accept her help. She still has the check." Rafe tensed because the accusation reflected Sarah's own fears. He had taken advantage of her but not in the way she feared. He'd taken all her love and given back nothing but pain in return.

Pipi sighed, "I don't want to spend any more time arguing with you. I'll be on the first plane out, and don't you dare leave until I get there. I have some annulment papers for you to sign."

"I'll be waiting."

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Rafe sat in the chair by Sarah's hospital bed. At least she wasn't so deathly still anymore. Her eyelashes were like dark crescents on her pale cheeks. She'd turned her head and he'd heard her murmur. It gave him hope that she'd be all right.

It was dark outside but he didn't mind sitting in the dark. It cocooned them together for the last night he'd spend with her. Leaving her was right. He couldn't hold her with lies and deception anymore. He knew she loved her career, this would give her time to pursue it. If he was lucky some day, she'd come back to him.

He reached out to touch her hand. Her beautiful eyes slowly swept halfway open.

"Rafe?"

"I'm right here, sweetheart," Rafe husked.

"I'm so sleepy." She yawned.

"I know, close your eyes and rest now. Nothing will hurt you anymore, sweet Sarah."

Her eyes fluttered shut. Rafe let go of her hand, sweeping a light caress across her fingers. He swallowed the lump in his throat and got to his feet. Men didn't cry, but he wanted to bawl like a two-year-old kid.

Getting up, he gave her one last lingering look, memorizing her sweet features, before he hustled out of the room. If he stayed one moment longer, he could never leave. He shut the door firmly behind him. Leaving her was one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but he knew it was right. Had Sarah felt this way when she left on their wedding night? The notion haunted him.

He pushed away from the door, turned and walked toward the nurse's station. He'd report that she'd regained consciousness and then get the hell out of here before his nerve failed him. Phillipa would just have to mail the papers to him.

Rafe approached the nurse's station. He waited a moment and when they continued to ignore him, he cleared his throat. Several nurses looked up.

The nurse closest to him frowned and said, "Yes, Mr. Halliday, how may I help you?"

"I wanted to report that my wife regained consciousness." He heard footsteps coming down the hallway and looked up. A petite woman with red-gold hair, worn up in a twist and an elderly lady, strode toward him followed by a tall elderly man with a thick mane of white hair. Rafe recognized the red hair and obstinate tilt of chin from Sarah. This had to be Phillipa and Sarah's grandparents.

The redhead pushed her way to the nurse's station, and said authoritatively, "I'm Phillipa Morris and I'm here to see my cousin Sarah Halliday."

"Visiting hours are over Miss."

"I don't care," she snapped. "You take me in to see Sarah right now or I'll slap you with a law suit that will set you on your ear."

"Now, now," Granny Blake said, walking up to the desk. "I'm sure there's no need for argument. We've been informed my granddaughter was in an accident. We just now flew in from out of state and we'd like to see her, please."

Grandfather nodded, glaring at the nurse. "Don't dawdle, girl. Show us the way at once."

Rafe could see Phillipa's well-shod foot tapping impatiently. "I'm Rafe Halliday. I'd be pleased to show you to Sarah's room," he said, ignoring the irritated look on the head nurse's face.

They all turned to glance at him. Grandma's gaze was sympathetic, Grandfather's assessing, and Pipi looked just plain accusatory. Rafe told himself that he deserved her condemnation for the deception he'd pulled on Sarah.

The grouchy nurse said, "Very well, but make it a short visit. I can't have the other patients disturbed."

Rafe took Granny's elbow. "Follow me. I was just telling the nurse Sarah regained consciousness."

"Oh, thank heaven," Granny said.

"I always knew Sarah was a fighter," Phillipa muttered.

"And why not, she comes from good stock, at least on my side of the family," Grandfather said stiffly.

"Right," Rafe replied tightly. She was a fighter, but he didn't intend to have her fight a losing battle any longer. He softly opened the door to her room.

Phillipa peered inside. "I thought you said she regained consciousness."

"She did, but she must have fallen asleep again." Rafe smiled at Phillipa's doubtful glance. It pleased him to know that Sarah had a strong champion in her corner. "Scout's honor."

"I doubt you were ever a scout," she said, then turned on her heel and entered the room.

Rafe followed them into the room. He watched Granny walk up to the bed and stare, her gaze drinking in the sight of Sarah after all these years. Granny turned to look at Rafe while tears ran down her cheeks.

"Thank you for bringing my baby back to me after all these years."

"You're welcome." A lump tightened his throat. "I wanted Sarah to have the real family she'd always missed."

Phillipa coughed.

Rafe looked at her and smiled slightly at her disgruntled expression. "I'm not forgetting you, Phillipa. Sarah already has you and now she'll have you both." Rafe glanced at the old man noting his imperiously raised eyebrow. "She may even have her old curmudgeon of a grandfather if he's smart." Grandpa had the good grace to look sheepish. "A happy family is what she's always wanted. Now did you bring those papers for me to sign?"

Phillipa opened her bag. She pulled out a document and a pen. "All you have to do is sign this and walk away." She looked up at him inquisitively. "If that's what you really want to do."

"It's what's best for Sarah. Who knows, maybe someday she'll be ready to come back to me." Rafe reached for the document and the pen Phillipa thrust at him. He scrawled his name on the line at the bottom.

"You'd wait for her?" Phillipa asked curiously.

"Forever," Rafe said, and walked out the door.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

Rafe stepped off the curb and walked toward the idling pickup truck. He opened the passenger door, and got a glimpse of Zeke's dour face before he hopped in. "Thanks for coming out this late to pick me up."

"Don't mention it." Zeke motioned back toward the lights of the hospital. "Is she gonna be okay?"

"Yes, thank God. She just regained consciousness. Mark Phillips said she should make a full recovery." Rafe pulled the door shut then rolled down the window hoping a touch of breeze would make him feel better. "Let's get going, Zeke," he said impatiently. "I want to get home."

Zeke put the truck into gear and pulled out of the parking spot. "I suppose you heard they picked up Travis Cain."

"Yeah, I did. Bob Wilson stopped by to give me the news. He said they rounded up Nevell Blackthorn as well. The two of them were in on it together." He gazed over at Zeke. "Were you there when they came to arrest Travis?"

"I sure was," Zeke said with a scowl. "The sheriff came just as we were all sitting down to lunch."

"I never would have thought Travis was the one doing this thing." Rafe closed his eyes and said tiredly, "Thank God, Wilson insisted on doing ballistic tests on the rifles on the Double-H. It uncovered a viper in our midst."

"Yeah, but it almost came too late."

"I know." Rafe thought about Sarah's brush with death and shuddered.

"It came as a shock to all of us when they came to get Travis. I never thought the kid would have it in him to shoot a person let alone an animal. He just don't seem to have the stomach for it."

Rafe glanced at Zeke's puzzled expression. "How'd Travis take it when they came to arrest him?"

"Bad." Zeke shook his head. "When the sheriff walked into the dining hall the kid turned white as a ghost. And when they slapped the handcuffs on him he looked like he was gonna cry. The kid was shaking like a leaf. He was talking a mile a minute when they hauled him out the door. He was saying he might be a spy but he wasn't a killer."

"It doesn't sound like a pretty picture." Rafe set his jaw, the kid had that coming and more. "Travis deserves everything they throw at him. I just hope Blackthorn gets a dose of the same medicine."

"I ain't saying he don't deserve it, I'm just saying he didn't take it very well."

"I know," Rafe said with a sigh, regretting his irritable tone. Just because he was miserable he didn't have to take it out on Zeke. He looked out into the black night seeking solace for his wounded heart. "I'm sorry I spoke sharp to you, old friend. It's just that I'm a might edgy right now."

"I understand." Zeke was silent for a moment. "I picked up the ambulance call on my monitor. Poor Rose was shook up something awful," Zeke's added, his voice rough with concern. "She wanted us to rush right up to the hospital, but I told her we'd best keep out of the way. The way the sheriff put it to us later, she was in bad shape."

Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans

Rafe winced, remembering Sarah's pale face. "Mark told me that Sarah was very lucky. If she would have gotten hit just a little bit harder, she would probably be dead."

"Folks at the ranch will be mighty relieved when I tell them she pulled through. Course, most of the men are out on the town tonight so it will have to wait until morning. But we can set Rose's mind to rest right away," he said eagerly.

Rafe nodded. "You did right to keep Rose away. They wouldn't even let me in by Sarah until they took her up to her hospital room."

They pulled into the driveway of the Double-H.

Rafe turned to look at Zeke, his face illuminated by the yard light. He looked his age tonight, no doubt he'd suffered too. Rafe was sorry to have put him through it. "Do you want to go in and tell Rose the good news? I think I'd just like to go to bed." Rafe saw Zeke's eager smile. He knew the two were more than friends.

Zeke got out of the truck saying, "I'll take care of it. You just get a good night's sleep."

Rafe got out of the truck. The yard light shone on Sarah's Jeep Cherokee. Rafe rattled her keys still stuffed into his pocket. They were the last link to her. He'd have the Jeep run up to the hospital in the morning. Then he'd have no reminders to fret about.

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Rafe's alarm clock went off at four-thirty as usual. He rolled over to shut it off and his hand landed on the empty side of the bed. He frowned and slapped at the clock. The stupid bed was way too big without Sarah to share it with.

He closed his eyes and sighed. It was better this way. He'd done his duty and stuck around to make sure she'd be okay, but then he'd caught a ride home. This was where he belonged. Sarah had her own life.

He rolled out of bed and walked to the closet. It was Sunday, the hand's day off, but he needed the routine of work to keep his mind off Sarah. It sure as hell wouldn't do either of them any good if he pinned after her.

The whole mess was over. The sheriff had Nevell Blackthorn and Travis Cain in jail. Rafe intended to keep his promise to Bob and stay out of the investigation. There was nothing more to do than go on with the rest of his life. It seemed like a pretty grim prospect. Rafe jerked his work shirt off the hanger. There seemed little point in getting dressed but he went through the motions automatically.

He wandered into the kitchen and saw Rose bustling about making breakfast. He stopped short, surprised that she was up. "It's your day off, Rose, what are you doing up?"

Rose gave him a sympathetic smile. "I figured you'd be up bright and early, with all that's on your mind. Besides, I thought you could use the company. Have a seat at the table and I'll serve you some breakfast."

Rafe sighed and slumped down in a dinette chair. He doubted if he could swallow a mouthful. He glanced out the

window. A light rain was falling and trickling down the window. The dawning light looked drab and dreary just like his mood. "I don't feel much like eating," he muttered.

Rose shook her head. "I know how you feel, boss. I don't have much of an appetite myself this morning. But you've got to keep up your strength for the missus."

Rafe blanched at her innocent words.

"When are you going up to the hospital?"

"I'm not going to the hospital," Rafe said grimly. He looked away from Rose's inquisitive gaze.

"Why?" Rose asked apprehensively. "Did they tell you that she can't have any visitors?"

"No." Rafe turned away, not wanting to say out loud what he'd agonized about all night. If only Rose would drop the subject, but he knew she wouldn't. Rafe said grimly, "She's not coming back."

Rose gasped and put her hand to her heart. "What do you mean she's not coming back? I thought you said she was all right?"

"She will be, God willing, but she's out of our lives. I set her free to go back to her old life."

Rose clucked her tongue. "But she was doing so well here at the ranch. We were all getting along just ducky. I just don't believe she'd want to leave."

Rafe shrugged and looked away from her sympathetic gaze. "Believe it or not, it's true. She only stayed here for the summer because I forced her into it. You know the snow job I gave her. And what did it get her? Nothing but trouble. Well, now I'm letting her go. She's free."

Rose harrumphed and put her hands on her hips. "Lord, lord, what a load of malarkey. If ever I saw two people made for each other, it's you and the missus." She shook her head. "Why, you young people nowadays don't know a good thing when it's right in front of your face."

"I don't want to talk about it any longer." He started to stand up thinking he'd rather clean out stalls than listen to any more of Rose's scolding.

"Oh sit back down, you hardheaded man, and I'll pour you some coffee," Rose said with a great deal of exasperation in her voice.

He didn't even seem to have the power to go against Rose's bossiness today. Rafe sat back down.

"Zeke told me Sarah woke up before you came on home." Rose carried two cups of coffee to the table and sat down across from him.

Rafe nodded. "Yes. The doctor said she should make a full recovery. They'll want to keep her under observation for a couple of days to be sure. Mark said she was very lucky. If she'd been hit a little bit harder she might not have made it."

Rose shook her head. "Some luck!"

"That's what I said." Rafe's jaw tightened as he thought of the pain she must be feeling. "She shouldn't have been out there, Rose. I got careless and it almost cost Sarah her life."

Rose reached over and patted his hand. "It's not your fault, Rafe. I'm sure the missus won't blame you."

"That's just peachy," Rafe mumbled and took a sip of coffee.

Rose sighed. "Anyway, like I was saying, I'm glad she's gonna be okay. It gave all of us quite a scare when we heard about her getting hurt. Zeke was listening to his police band radio when he picked up the ambulance call."

"I'll bet." Rafe grimaced when he pictured the scene. "What did Travis say?"

Rose nodded and took a deep breath. "I just finished laying out lunch when the sheriff came. Even though everyone was all in a tizzy about Sarah being hurt, I had my job to do. The sheriff came right to the table and handcuffed him. You could have knocked me over with a feather, I was that surprised. The boy looked like he was going to faint he turned so white. I never would have pegged him for a criminal."

"Me, neither," Rafe shook his head. "But I guess he was the best kind of criminal because he looked so innocent."

Rose nodded her head. "They came back in and checked the phones in the house. They said the phones were bugged, can you imagine that?"

Rafe shrugged. "I guess Travis had an easy time doing that, having access to the house at meal times. All he had to do was excuse himself to use the bathroom and sneak into my study."

Rose tightened her lips. "And to think I took kindly to that lad." She shook her head. "The boy got really agitated when they were taking him away, saying that he was a spy but he'd never shot anything in his life. He said the rifle was a birthday present from his dad and that he'd never even fired it. Well I

can tell you, there was a lot of speculation after they hauled him away."

"I'll just bet." Rafe knew how cowboys loved to talk. "Just so Travis, and especially Nevell Blackthorn, get what's coming to them. That's all I really care about."

"Well now that things have straightened out. You can wait for the missus to come back to you. I know you're in love with her. It's as plain as the nose on your face. And I know she loves you and wouldn't want to leave."

Rafe tamped down the hope that sprang up in him at Rose's positive words. "It's just barely possible that she might come back to me, but I wouldn't bet on it. The odds are against me."

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Sarah turned her head on the pillow and carefully opened her eyes. She had a gigantic headache that seemed to throb along with her pulse. Well, at least that told her she was still alive. She glanced at the strange walls. They were painted a sickly yellow. Where was she? she wondered. She sure wasn't in her own bed. Then she noticed a person standing at the foot of the bed. "Rafe."

"No, it's Pipi." Her cousin stepped closer. Pipi's mouth curved into a soft smile. "How are you feeling this morning, Sarah?"

"Terrible," Sarah said with a sigh. "It feels like there are little men banging away at my head with tiny hammers. I was attacked, wasn't I?"

Pipi nodded solemnly. There was a tight frown on her face. "Don't worry, Sarah, they already caught the man."

"Good." Sarah sighed and sagged back against the pillow.

Pipi brushed the hair back from Sarah's bandaged forehead.

Sarah smiled at Pipi's tender gesture. Her older cousin had always looked out for her. "I guess Rafe must have called you."

"Yes, he let me know you were hurt. I arrived in the middle of the night, while you were sleeping."

Sarah smiled up at Pipi. "He shouldn't have worried you. I'm okay."

"Are you?" Pipi's voice was cautious.

"Yes, I'm fine and I'm even better now that you're here. I'm just a little sore that's all. So have you seen Rafe?"

"Yes, he and I had a long talk," Pipi said after a moment's hesitation.

Sarah glanced up sharply at Pipi's evasive tone. What was wrong? Rafe might be hurt, too, or even worse, dead. "Is Rafe okay?" she gasped, frightened.

"Yes, he's fine," Pipi said, tightly. She looked toward the door as it opened and then turned back to Sarah with a bright smile. "I've got someone special I want you to meet, Sarah."

Sarah head footsteps enter the room. She glanced over toward the door as an older lady entered the room. Sarah

would have recognized that dear face anywhere. "Granny Blake, is that you?"

The lady walked up to the bed and reached out to clasp Sarah's hand tightly in hers. "Yes, I'm here, baby." Granny's soft hand trembled while tears dampened her green eyes. "I gave up hope of ever seeing you again, baby Sarah."

Sarah couldn't believe her eyes. "I must be having some kind of hallucination caused by the bash to my head. Pipi's probably not real either."

Pipi chuckled. "Oh, I'm real all right, just ask the nurse from last night. She probably thinks I'm the toughest hombre to cross her path in ages. And your Granny is real, too. Grandfather had us all conned."

Grandfather stepped near the bed. "I'm afraid it's true," he admitted gruffly. "I thought it best that you didn't grow up under that kind of influence."

Sarah blinked up at the three of them. "You mean to tell me this is real. I'm not off my head."

"Not last time I checked, cuz." Pipi grinned and added, "But I can always have a shrink check you out if you like."

Sarah processed the information slowly. She stared up at Granny Blake's sweet face. The two of them shared the same eye color. That hadn't changed but there were new lines on her grandmother's face. Her hair was now a cap of gray curls instead of blond. "You're alive!" Sarah gasped.

She stared at Grandfather's hard countenance stunned. "How could you have kept us apart?"

Grandfather fidgeted then looked away. "It was wrong, I realize that now. And I'm ... sorry."

Sarah saw his proud face crumple and noted how much he had aged. "But how?"

Granny shook her head. "That's because he snatched you after your parents went down in that plane crash, before I was even informed of the accident. He wanted you all to himself, so he took me to court for total custody. With all his money it wasn't hard for him to win. I think it was his revenge on me for your mother stealing his son away."

Sarah frowned. "Stealing away. He's always said my mother had ruined my father?"

"And she did," Grandfather said bitterly.

Granny gave him a quelling glare and he piped down. "Sarah, the truth is your dad was following along in his father's footsteps until he met my girl, Dawn. Of course your grandfather could never accept anything less than blue blood for his son, so he rejected them both."

Granny reached out to brush a wisp of hair off Sarah's forehead. "I was worried at first that your dad might desert my girl. His father had always been such a strong influence in his life. But instead, he broke away and made something of himself. You were all very happy, but the plane crash changed all that. They were coming back from a delayed honeymoon trip when they died. So at least I had the comfort of knowing they were doing something happy."

"Oh Granny, I never knew any of this." Sarah glared at her Grandfather. "According to him, my mother was just a cheap little tart and my father was besotted by her. Of course, deep down, I knew differently. I had early memories of us being a happy family."

Granny smiled sadly and shook her head. "I missed you, baby child."

Sarah smiled while tears ran down her cheeks unchecked. "So many years have been stolen from us." She felt like some part of her that had been dead was now coming back to life. "Oh Granny, I missed you, too. We've got so much time to make up for."

Granny smiled and squeezed her hand. "We will, baby Sarah, we will."

"I missed you, too," Grandfather said roughly. "It's been ten long years since I last saw you. I admit, after losing my son I latched onto you. I know I was never good at showing it but I loved you very much, still do for that matter. What I did was wrong and I'm sorry for all the hurt I've caused. Can you ever forgive me?"

Sarah took a calming breath, swallowing the lump in her throat. She saw the lines of sorrow on his face and heard the genuine regret in his voice. This humble old man was a far cry from the stiff autocrat that had raised her. She reached out to take his trembling hand. "I guess we'll have to start fresh, won't we?"

Tears misted his eyes as he glanced at her and then at Granny Blake. "We all will."

Sarah cleared the lump in her throat. "Tell me, Granny, how did you find me after all these years?"

"That nice husband of yours did some checking and got my number. Then Pipi called me last night and told me you were hurt. She chartered a plane and before long we were here. It

was just like being caught in a whirlwind. Before I knew it, I was here looking at your sweet face."

Sarah smiled. This was just like Rafe's typical high-handed style to go behind her back. But considering the results she didn't mind. "That was so nice of Rafe. I should be mad at him for being so sneaky, but I can never stay mad at him for long."

Granny smiled understandingly and then glanced nervously at Pipi. "Yes, he said you'd want family around you when you woke up this morning."

Sarah's heart melted, what a sweet thought. Rafe loved her. He'd shouted it out at the campsite. And his actions proved it. After all he'd always said that actions counted the most. She hugged the thought to her. She looked around the hospital room but didn't see any sign of him. "So, where is he?"

"He went home, Sarah," Pipi said quietly.

Sarah looked at Pipi. "Why?" she asked, knowing somehow she wasn't telling her everything.

Pipi huffed out a breath. "Rafe said he didn't want to push you anymore. He said he'd conned you into staying here, which I always suspected, and that was no basis for a marriage." She pulled a document out of her bag. "He waited for me to get here and signed off before he left."

Sarah gasped.

Pipi continued, "I told him I figured it was because he found out you weren't rich after all. That you weren't really an heiress."

"What do you mean she's not an heiress?" Grandfather said.

"Well you cut her off when she left the family fold, didn't you?" Pipi said sourly.

Grandfather looked away. "I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Pipi sighed. "Rafe told me he wouldn't accept your money. Is that true?"

"Yes it's true. He was majorly teed off when he found out I planned to help finance the dude ranch."

"Why didn't you come to me for the investment?" Grandfather demanded.

"At the time we weren't exactly on good terms. I didn't want to put up with the strings that might be attached."

He looked down. "I guess I've been a little heavy handed over the years."

"Don't fret over it, Granddad, it's all water under the bridge now."

Sarah glared at Pipi. "You as much as called him a fortune hunter. No wonder he took off. This is terrible." Sarah closed her eyes. This couldn't be happening.

"Cheer up, Sarah," Pipi said brightly. "He's giving you an easy way out."

"I love him."

"Yes, but does he love you?" Pipi countered.

"Of course. Even a blind man could see it by his actions. Would a man who didn't love me make this noble gesture? Rafe always said actions mean more than words and I guess he was right."

Pipi turned to Grandfather. "You talk some sense into her. She won't listen to me."

He glanced warmly at Sarah. "I'd say Sarah knows her own mind."

"Right," Granny chimed in. "He seemed like a fine man to me."

"Darned tooting," Grandfather added. "A man after my own heart. You two love each other don't you?"

Sarah smiled with remembrance of their last passionate encounter. "Yes, we love each other very much."

Pipi snorted. "Then why did he leave? If he cared, he would have stuck around."

"He left because he didn't want me to stay under duress. Now I don't want to hear any more of your objections, Pipi." Sarah sat up and her head began to swim. She clung to the mattress to keep from toppling over. She had to tough it out and get to Rafe.

"What do you think you're doing?" Pipi screeched.

When the dizzy spell passed, Sarah raised her head and scowled at Pipi's panicked gaze. "I'm getting out of here."

"Good idea. Let's get back to Boston as soon as possible," Pipi placated while putting a hand on Sarah's shoulder to make her stay put. "But first the doctors want to keep you under observation for a couple of days."

Sarah shrugged away and slid her legs off the side of the bed. "No way, I'm getting out of here now."

There was a tap on the door, and Dr. Phillips walked in. "What's going on in here, World War Three?"

Pipi rounded on him with her hands on her hips. "You talk some sense into her." She peered at the doctor's name tag. "Doctor Phillips. Sarah wants to leave and I was telling her that it isn't a very good idea."

Mark Phillips frowned at Pipi then turned to look at Sarah. "Why do you want to leave now?"

Sarah smiled at his reasonable tone. "I'm okay and I want to go home. There's some urgent business I need to take care of."

Pipi snorted. "For Pete's sake, Sarah I wouldn't call the cowboy urgent business. You don't actually mean to chase after that husband of yours? You're a heck of a lot better off without him."

Sarah smiled at her frustrated tone. "Pipi, someday when you meet the right man you'll understand."

"Bull."

Doctor Phillips gave a sharp whistle. "That's it. All visitors out so I can examine my patient."

Pipi glared at him and turned on her heel. She left the room with Granny and Grandfather trailing behind her.

"You'll have to pardon her, Doctor," Granny said on her way out. "She's just a little overwrought."

"She's always been kind of high strung," Grandpa added. Mark nodded. "I understand."

After they shut the door behind them, Mark turned to Sarah. "Boy, she's really something."

Sarah grinned. "Who, Granny?"

"Uh uh, the redhead."

Sarah shrugged. "Pipi tends to be a little overprotective."

"Yeah, like a momma bear with her cub. So how are you really feeling this morning?"

Sarah shrugged. "Like hell, but I can handle it. I need to go home."

"I'll be the judge of that. Let's take a look." He shined a light in her eyes, then probed her forehead.

"Ouch," Sarah mumbled.

"You're going to have one beautiful shiner in a couple of days," he said, slipping his light back in his pocket.

Sarah smiled. "Gee thanks."

He cocked his head and gave her a once-over. "Well, you don't seem too bad considering what you've been through. But I wouldn't advise any strenuous activity for several days. I'd rather have you here, but I guess you can go home if you're that gung-ho about it. Just don't overdo it. I don't want Rafe and the redhead to come down on me."

"Thank you, doctor." Sarah let out the breath she was holding.

He walked to the door. "You know, you're one lucky lady. A little harder and you wouldn't have made it."

Sarah nodded. She knew she had a second chance at life and she wasn't going to mess it up this time. "Thank heaven they caught the guy."

Mark opened the door. "I heard they arrested one of the ranch hands. They also picked up Nevell Blackthorn. I hear he's making quite an argument about false arrest."

Thank goodness that Bob Wilson had checked the rifles at the ranch. That was probably how they zeroed in on the hand. She could picture Nevell Blackthorn all huffy and trying to

throw his weight around. The man definitely wouldn't take well to confinement.

But she had more important things to dwell on; Rafe and how much they meant to each other. There would be nothing to keep her from telling him she loved him now. She felt free.

Sarah eased to the side of the bed and stood up. Keeping one hand on the bed for balance, she walked to the closet. The door opened and Pipi, Granny, and Grandfather walked in.

"So that stupid doctor is letting you leave?" Pipi carped.

Sarah continued pulling her clothes off the hangers. "Mark Phillips is not stupid. He's very accommodating. And he's a very good Doctor to boot."

"I don't care if he's the world's best Doctor. I'll accommodate him with a malpractice suit if anything goes wrong."

"Will you stop spouting off and come over here and help me get dressed?" Sarah sank down on the bed while Pipi and Granny fluttered around her, helping her dress. Grandfather went out to call for a wheelchair escort.

Sarah put on the same jeans, camp shirt, and hiking shoes she'd worn yesterday. The scent of wood smoke on the clothes brought back memories of that wonderful camping trip and the surprise attack that followed. She really should have seen it coming, but she thought he was there on ranch business. Her last memory was of Tab's grim face as he brought the butt of his rifle down on her head.

After Sarah finished dressing and signed the release forms a nurse had brought in, Pipi said, "I'll go call us a cab to take us to the airport."

Sarah grinned. Her cousin wouldn't give up easily. "While you're at it, call me one to take me back to the Double-H."

Pipi frowned. "But he doesn't want you."

"That's not true," Sarah said cheerfully. "He doesn't want to force me. I'm going back of my own free will."

"For a lifetime of cows and horses? You know how you hate horses, Sarah."

Sarah put a soothing arm around Pipi's tense shoulder and pulled her close for a hug. "No, for a lifetime of love and babies. Don't worry about me, Pipi, I know what I'm doing. And no offense to any of you, but I found the love and family I've always missed right at the Double-H, in Rafe's arms. And guess what, I'm never going to leave."

Granny smiled and patted Sarah's arm. "Go for it, Sarah. Follow your heart. I did like the look of that young man you married. Besides, we've got all the time in the world to get to know each other."

Sarah let go of Pipi and reached out to hug her grandmother. "Thanks, Granny Blake. I love you even more for being so generous."

Sarah turned to get crushed in her grandfather's tight embrace. "Be happy," he said with a shaky voice.

Sarah blinked away the tears in her eyes.

"If that cowboy hurts you, I'll kill him," Pipi vowed.

"Don't worry, Pipi, I know exactly what I'm getting into."

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Roping A Runaway Bride
by Honey Jans



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Sarah paid the taxi driver and watched him pull out of the drive. She looked around the grounds but didn't see anybody. Of course, she realized. Today is Sunday and most of the men would be in town.

She walked toward the house hoping to find Rafe inside. She couldn't wait to see him and tell him she loved him and she was back for good. A loud noise coming from the barn made her stop then change course. Rafe was probably all ready up and doing chores.

She ambled over to the outbuilding. As she drew nearer, she heard two men's voices. They sounded angry but she was too far away to make out what they were saying. One voice was Rafe's, but she couldn't place the other one. She cautiously stepped forward not wanting to intrude. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light as she walked up to the open doorway. She gasped at the sight that greeted her. Tab Whittacker stood with his rifle pointed at Rafe.

What on earth was going on? Tab was supposed to be under arrest for attacking her. Unless they got the wrong man! She took a quick side step into the shadows and listened.

"You're lying, Halliday," Tab hissed. "I know she's dead."

Rafe stood in a loose stance, his feet apart as if ready to dodge a bullet. But Sarah knew he'd never make it at this close range. She had to do something to save him, but what?

"No, you're just incompetent," Rafe said coolly. "You're probably the one that tried to shoot us and missed."

Sarah heard a horse nicker and saw Umbriago in the next stall. Could she? She really had no choice.

"Missed, my ass," Whittacker shot back. "I was trying to wing her and scare her off. When I aim at a target I don't miss."

"So it was you who set up Travis?"

Whittacker sneered. "You're finally catching on, Halliday. It was easy. I knew he was spying on you for Blackthorn, so he was the perfect fall guy. I slipped the rifle out from under his bunk. The kid didn't even know it was missing."

"And you shot the wolves," Rafe said grimly. "Was it Blackthorn's idea?"

"You still don't get it, do you? I did it all, Blackthorn's just a loud mouthed idiot. It was so easy to push his buttons and get him all riled up against you. You always did give him too much credit. You should have looked to your own back yard for trouble."

"Yeah, and I would have found a yellow-bellied coward."

"Why you." Whittacker took a step forward, then stopped. "Uh uh, jerk, I ain't gonna be that easy. You ain't gonna get me rattled."

"But why did you wait until now to try to destroy me? And why pick on Sarah?"

"I was biding my time, but I couldn't wait no longer. You were fixin' to sell part of the ranch to set up your dude ranch. It ain't right to break her up."

Sarah cautiously inched toward Umbriago, whispering soothing sounds at him the way she'd heard Rafe do. If the horse shied, they were both in big trouble. Umbriago stood steady, eyeing her calmly. Whittacker was certifiable, she had to intervene before he killed Rafe. She stepped up on a rail on the side of the stall and grabbed his mane gently. She eased a leg over his bare back, all the while whispering, "Good horse," whether to soothe the animal or herself she didn't know.

Whittacker bragged, "Why pick on Sarah? I knew you'd be easy pickings if she walked out like last time. So that was my first step. I shot the wolves, but she didn't leave. So I winged her, hell I even tried to warn her off but she wouldn't listen. So I had no choice but to kill her."

"Like I said, Whittacker, you missed."

"Bull. I didn't miss with all the other stuff I pulled either."

"What do you mean by that?" Rafe asked in a deceptively calm voice.

"Figure it out, boss man," Whittacker sneered. "Who do you think's been causing all the problems around here? Me, that's who. I've been doing all I could do to make you go under."

"You're just talking through your hat, Whittacker. Why would you do that?"

Whittacker hissed. "I figured things would fall apart, and I could buy you out. But instead, you came back and dug your

heels in. This ranch should be mine, damnit. I loved her. I'd never sell part of her off like you want or have a bunch of city dudes come stay here. It ain't right."

"You'll never get away with this, Whittacker."

Whittacker moved the barrel of his rifle to Rafe's heart level. "I don't give a damn. It doesn't much matter anymore. If I can't have the ranch, you can't either."

Sarah kicked her heels into Umbriago's sides and gave a rebel yell. The horse bolted out of the stall, straight toward the men. Whittacker turned toward her with a growl just as Rafe jumped him with a flying tackle. A shot rang out and the rifle clattered to the floor. Umbriago stopped short and Sarah slid from his back. She ran forward, scooping up the rifle. She pointed it toward the fighting men as they rolled on the floor.

Good grief, she couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Rafe. Rafe rolled on top of Whittacker and drove a fist square into his jaw. Whittacker sagged against the floor.

Rafe stood up and turned a wild glance her way. "Are you all right, Sarah? You scared the hell out of me."

Sarah rushed toward him thanking her lucky stars that he appeared unharmed. "I was thinking the same thing, cowboy. I didn't know if it would work, but I knew that I had to give it a try."

Rafe took the rifle from her and pointed to a coil of rope on the wall. "Go get me that length of rope and I'll tie him up for the sheriff."

Sarah grabbed the rope hanging on a peg and brought it back to Rafe. He handed her the rifle and she held it on the unconscious man while Rafe trussed him up. When Rafe

walked back to her, she put down the rifle and wrapped her arms tightly around him. "Oh, Rafe. Are you all right?"

Rafe pulled her close. "Why didn't I ever see what a lunatic he was?"

"Because he seemed like family. You've known him all your life."

Rafe sighed and pulled away. "We grew up together. He was like a big brother to me."

Rafe took Sarah's hand and walked with her out of the barn. He turned abruptly to hold her at arm's length. "Where did you ever get the courage to do that?"

Sarah smiled and squeezed his hand. "Love can do amazing things. I love you, Rafe. With all my heart. I wanted to tell you before but I was afraid you didn't feel the same."

"And now?"

"I know you do and I want to shout it from the rooftops."

Rafe grinned. "Yes, sweetheart, I love you very much. I'd come to accept the fact that I had to let you go but I sure am glad you came back." He bent down to brush a burning kiss across her lips. "You always seem to come to my rescue, sweetheart," he said warmly as he pulled away.

Sarah smiled up at him "That's my job in life. And I want to help you some more. I want to help fund the dude ranch."

"Now, honey," Rafe said calmly. "I told you before, sweetheart, I don't want your money. We can do without it."

"Am I, or am I not, family?" she asked with a smile on her face.

"You are," Rafe agreed with a raised eyebrow.

"Then what's mine is yours, and vice versa. Agreed?"

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by Honey Jans

He sighed. "I don't want you to think I married you for your money or family connections."

Sarah shook her head and smiled at his troubled expression. "I don't, not anymore."

He sighed. "I may be hardheaded but I can learn. I guess that's another thing I have to thank you for, teaching me to open up and trust. Yes, I agree to let you help. After all, this is your home, too."

"It's a deal," Sarah said before reaching up to seal it with a kiss.

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Sarah walked to the table with a fresh bowl of popcorn for Mandy and Pipi to string. She set the large wooden bowl between them.

"Thanks, Aunt Sarah," Mandy said distractedly.

Sarah ruffled her hair. "You're welcome, Mandy."

Pipi grinned at her. "Yeah, thanks, Aunt Sarah."

Sarah grinned. "Don't get smart with me or I might invite that nice Doctor Phillips over to put you in your place again."

Pipi threw a piece of popcorn at her. "You wouldn't dare."

Sarah laughed and looked into the kitchen. She saw Rose and Granny making fudge while they gossiped. Zeke sat meekly on a chair patiently waiting for samples. Grandfather was out organizing a sleigh ride for the ten guests that were

Roping A Runaway Bride
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staying there. The dude ranch had been a smashing success and created a closer bond between them all.

Sarah made her way over to the sofa and sat down next to Rafe. She glanced up at Gabe and Lisa stringing lights on the Christmas tree. "Isn't it wonderful to have all the family here for Christmas?"

Rafe chuckled and rubbed her expanding tummy. "And we'll have even more family before you know it."

Sarah sighed dreamily as she felt the baby move. She leaned her head on Rafe's shoulder. "Four more months. I can hardly wait."

Rafe rested his chin against her head and whispered, "I love you, sweet Sarah. Thank you again for coming to my rescue and teaching me the meaning of love."

Sarah smiled. "You're welcome. I love you, Rafe. Forever."

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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Author Bio

Honey Jans lives in a small Midwestern town with her husband and true inspiration. She is a born romantic with an extraordinarily vivid yet kinky imagination.

Honey hopes her erotic tales add spice and reading pleasure to your life. She loves to hear from her readers and tries to answer all quires. If you'd like to contact her, you can eMail Honey or join her newsgroup. She is a member of Romance Writers of America, WisRWA, Passionate Inc. and EPIC.

Honey loves writing erotica and hopes that her stories add a little spice to her reader's lives.

In her spare time, Honey enjoys lounging under a shade tree and sipping a cool drink while reading a good book. Her talents and interest are not limited to Romance, Erotica or printed words. Honey is also an artist, with an amazing talent that she inherited from her mother. She lives life to the fullest traveling whenever she can, frequently taking tropical vacations and Caribbean cruises with her husband.

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