

# Rawhide AND LACE



SANDI HADDAD

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

...Kim stood back, hands on hips. "I need to learn to do that."

J.D. shrugged. "You will. But you won't be much good to me with a sore back." He positioned the saddle and went around to the other side of the horse.

Kim reached under Stormy's belly as J.D. passed the girth strap to her. Uncertain what to do next, she waited while he came back around.

"Okay," he said, stationing himself behind her. "Now fasten it."

Kim fumbled nervously. He stood close behind her and a little to the right. She could feel his breath on her neck and the heat of his body almost touching her. *Concentrate, Kim. He's only a man.*

She finally managed to free the leather tie with one hand, while still holding the girth with her other.

"Okay, good. Now thread that through the buckle on the end."

His voice was gentle and patient. She tried to ignore his closeness. Eventually she succeeded in following his directions.

Before Kim could ask what to do next, his arms came around her. She stifled a gasp and bit her lip. Though callused and hard, his large fingers were gentle as he helped her thread the strap through the loop and back around.

When they finished, his hands lingered over hers. Her heartbeat took off like a herd of stampeding horses. She swallowed hard and glanced over her shoulder.

The heat in his eyes shook her to the core...

## PRAISE FOR RAWHIDE AND LACE

***Eppie 2002 Finalist—Best Contemporary Romance!***

“...Haddad is a writer with class and style. She always manages to throw more emotion and energy into the mix than a formula romance could accommodate!”

—*Lagniappe Book Reviews*

“...Enchants from the first page...Terrific characters, modern, free-flowing dialogue, and a barnful of horses kept my attention from the first page. A quick read, but one that tugs the heartstrings and makes you smile, *Rawhide And Lace* is a bright sun in midwinter.”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“If you like romances that feature a slowly building relationship and light sexual tension then this one is for you.”

—*Timeless Tales*

“...An enjoyable light read.”

—*Romantic Times*

“High-spirited...one story that is a must read especially if you are a horse lover.”

—*No Boundaries*

“Ms. Haddad has created real characters, and a complicated plot that’s not resolved until the very end. Her dialogue is real, and she knows her setting. If you’re looking for more than just ‘girl meets man,’ this is the book for you.”

—Ann M. Beardsley  
*Scribes World*

ALSO BY SANDI HADDAD

*Physical Evidence*  
*A Stable Account*  
*A Stable Relationship*  
*Ticket To Romance*  
*Vital Signs*

# RAWHIDE AND LACE

BY

SANDI HADDAD

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

RAWHIDE AND LACE  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC  
<http://amberquill.com>

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2003 by Sandi Haddad  
ISBN 1-59279-115-8  
Cover Art © 2003 Trace Edward Zaber

Rating: PG

Layout and Formatting provided by: [ElementalAlchemy.com](http://ElementalAlchemy.com)

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To my daughter Tamara Kage,  
who inherited my love for horses.  
She helped me keep my facts straight by  
contributing personal experiences as a  
trail guide as well as tirelessly  
proofreading multiple revisions.*

*Thanks, Tammy!*



# CHAPTER 1

## **BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY**

SILENT PARTNER NEEDED FOR  
HORSEBACK RIDING STABLE.  
APPLY IN PERSON AT TRIPLE H  
TRAIL RIDES 77 EAST DAIRY  
ROAD, FLAMINGO SPRINGS, FL

Kim Ford reread the *Orlando Sentinel* ad, then glanced around the ranch. Her excitement grew by the minute. This could be just what she'd been looking for! The buildings and fences needed minor repairs and sprucing up, but the location was perfect! She knew the land alone should be valuable, and then there were the *horses*...

Raised voices and sounds of a scuffle drew her attention to the barn entrance. The newspaper in her hand fluttered to the ground. What in the world had she walked in on?

A tall man in a cowboy hat appeared, dragging a slightly shorter, but huskier man. He hurled the obvious loser of the dispute to the dirt,

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

then stood over him, hands on hips.

The fallen man struggled warily to his feet. As though fleeing for his life, he scurried into a truck, jumped in and peeled away in a cloud of dust.

Kim stood frozen in place. She watched as the lean but well-muscled victor brushed his hands together with a satisfied nod. Catching sight of her, he grinned and said, "Guess that snake won't be giving me any more trouble."

He came forward with a slow easy stride. When he reached her, he tipped his hat and nodded politely. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

His drawl sounded deep and sexy. Her cheeks warmed as a flicker of approval smoldered in the depths of the dark-haired cowboy's sensitive, yet somehow disturbing, chocolate-colored eyes.

Kim hesitated. From his hat to his boots, this man matched her image of a rancher. He appeared younger than she'd expected, though, probably under thirty. Could he be one of the employees? "I...came about the ad," she explained.

He wiped his hand on his jeans before extending it to grasp hers. His palm was rough and callused, but warm and solid. "I'm J.D. Hudson, owner of the Triple H. Are you interested in my Quarterhorse filly?"

Kim swallowed down her uneasiness and gave him her most confident smile. "No," she said. "I'm Kim Ford, and I'd like to apply for business partner. I think I can help you run this stable."

His grin faded as his eyes narrowed. "Guess I should've known you didn't come to look at a horse. Not in those city-slicker clothes. But you don't look much like a rancher, either."

She glanced down at her navy power suit and matching high heels. "I suppose I am a bit over-dressed for the position. I planned to apply for an office job. Then I saw your ad, and it sounded so much more enticing..."

His expression didn't change. "The ad said 'silent partner.' I need

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

funds, not an assistant.”

“I know. I have the money. But I want to work here, too.”

He shook his head, and his gaze raked over her again. “Why would you want to invest in a riding stable?”

She ignored his suspicious tone. “I’ve always loved horses. I took English riding lessons at a very prominent stable in Ohio for several years. I’m working on a business degree, and I think you have the potential to succeed here. Your location is great! It’s just close enough to the city to attract tourists, but far enough away to feel like the country. All you need is the right management.”

“Management isn’t the problem. I’d be doing just fine now if...” He gazed off in the distance and removed his bandanna to mop his forehead before meeting her eyes again. “All I need is some cash to pay off the bills and avoid foreclosure.” His bitter tone made her wonder at the source of his frustration.

“I have a trust fund my grandparents left me to invest in a business,” she said. “I’d like to spend it on something I love. But I want to be involved as a full partner, to put my degree to use.”

“What can you do besides handle the books?”

“Everything. Whatever I don’t know about the daily care of horses, you can teach me.”

“Uh-huh.” He sounded as if he wanted to laugh out loud. “And how much experience have you actually had on a ranch?”

“Not a lot. But I’m willing to learn.”

He stared at her a moment, then tugged at the brim of his hat and gave her another assessment. She wondered if he was stalling for time.

Before he could voice another objection, she asked, “Can you at least show me the property?”

He shrugged. “I was planning to mend some fence. Want to come along?”

“Okay.”

When the rancher abruptly turned and strode away, Kim followed,

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

feeling like a puppy tagging behind its master. “How big is the ranch?” she asked, half-jogging to keep up.

“Just over fifty acres,” he said over his shoulder. “My dad raised cattle here on three hundred acres for twenty years. But he had trouble making a profit and sold off most of the land years ago. We liked horses better than cows anyway, so we converted the rest to a riding stable. When he died three months ago, he left it to me.”

“Oh... I’m sorry about your father.”

“I didn’t live here then.” His voice held a trace of pain. He hefted a roll of field fence, threw it in the bed of a dusty blue Chevy pickup truck and reached for the door handle. Tossing her an impatient glance, he asked, “Coming?”

She hesitated. An inner voice told her she should refuse and should never risk getting in a vehicle with a stranger. She was especially careful these days. But she wanted to go into business with him. Surely he wouldn’t try anything. She’d told people at the motel her destination, and her rental car was here.

Besides, her own reaction to him frightened her more than the man himself. Seeing his muscles ripple as he’d carried that heavy roll of fencing had sent a shiver of awareness down her spine.

Her instincts had been right before. If she’d listened to her own feelings instead of trying to please her parents...

She pushed aside the unpleasant memory. Past history. Her gut reaction told her J.D. was a good man in spite of his gruff manner. In order to convince him they could work together, she’d have to get used to being alone with him.

Tugging the hem of her skirt, she surveyed the high step. Why hadn’t she worn slacks and flat shoes? She cast a surreptitious glance at J.D. and saw him roll his eyes as he settled in the driver’s seat. Gritting her teeth, she carefully stepped up and settled on the passenger seat.

He turned the key in the ignition. The truck coughed a few times, but eventually revved up. He rested his right arm on the bench seat and

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

turned to look over his shoulder as he backed the vehicle.

Although he didn't actually touch her, Kim sensed the exact location of his arm. She could almost feel the heat pulsing through it. The skin on her nape prickled, and she tensed.

If J.D. noticed her uneasiness, he didn't show it. After backing, he moved his hand to the gearshift, and she started to relax again. He drove a short distance down the entrance drive, then followed the fence for half a mile. Along the way, he pointed out the boundaries of the ranch. She caught sight of a couple of riders walking their horses down the trails.

Kim remained silent. She enjoyed the view of the lightly rolling Florida landscape, so different from the Ohio hills of her youth. The palm trees mixed in with oaks and pines gave it a distinctly Southern look. Native grasses and wildflowers were sprinkled among the clumps of palmettos. It was a very pleasant place to be, especially in spring, with everything coming to life.

J.D. reached a broken piece of fence and parked the truck. Without a word, he got out and hauled the roll of field fence from the truck bed.

Kim climbed out too, and watched as he pulled out his tools and set to work, nailing the fencing to the post with what looked like large staples. He stretched it across to the next post and cut off the extra wire.

"Can I help?" she asked.

Not bothering to look up from his task, he shook his head.

Kim stared at him with fascination, enjoying the new sensations invading her body as she watched him at work. Somehow she didn't think the flush of heat spreading through her was caused by the sun. This was a real man, doing what male muscles were meant to do. Never before had she felt so feminine.

Frustrated with herself and the unbusinesslike direction her thoughts were taking, Kim turned away from him and concentrated on a small bed of flowers by the road. She bent to pick a few of the bright blossoms. A moment later, she heard J.D. yelp and turned to see his

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

face contorted in pain. He held his thumb with the other fist and muttered unintelligible curses.

Without thinking, she dropped the flowers and hurried to his side. She reached for his large callused hands. Taking the wounded one in her own, she turned it to expose a rapidly swelling red thumb. Kim winced in sympathy as she examined the injury.

“Want to kiss it and make it better?” he asked with a rakish grin.

Her face heated, and she immediately dropped his hand. Not wanting to let him know he’d embarrassed her, she raised her chin and met his gaze. But his darkening pupils showed something she wasn’t prepared to deal with. She blinked in surprise and took a step backward.

“Let’s go,” he said abruptly as his eyes shuttered.

She swallowed. “Where?”

His gaze traveled slowly down the length of her. He lifted one brow. “Where would you like to go?”

Something about his look of male appreciation made her hesitate. A sexy man like this could be dangerous, her inner voice warned. “Back to my car.”

J.D. continued to stare at her for a long moment, as though trying to decide if he believed her. Finally, he nodded. “Okay.”

He picked up the hammer from where he’d flung it on the ground and carefully finished pounding the staple into the last piece of fence. Gathering up the rest of his equipment, he put it back in the truck.

As soon as she realized he was finishing up, Kim climbed back in the cab to wait. Her heart still raced, and she took some slow, deep breaths to calm herself.

What had she gotten herself into? Normally she was so careful about strangers. After what happened two years ago, she never went anywhere with someone she didn’t know well.

Yet here she was, alone in the middle of nowhere with a man she’d barely met—a very strong, virile man who could physically do

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

whatever he wanted with her.

There was something honorable about him, though, in spite of the secrets hidden in the depths of his eyes. She sensed he wouldn't hurt her—not bodily anyway.

He got into the truck and started it without even glancing at her. Kim breathed a small sigh of relief when he headed toward the barn. After a few minutes of silence, she decided to start a new conversation.

"Is the weather always so nice here?"

"You mean Florida?" His gaze darted to her, and she nodded. He looked back at the dirt road. "No... Spring is nice. Fall is about the same. Winter can be pretty cold and miserable, and summer is always hot and humid. Of course, hurricanes can be a problem, but we're far enough inland to be pretty safe. Where are you from?"

"My family lives in Cleveland. Right now I'm on spring break from Ohio State."

He chuckled. "No wonder you think the weather here is nice." They reached the barn, where he parked the truck in the same spot as before.

Kim got out of the cab and went around to the front, wondering if she should offer to come back another time to discuss the partnership.

Before she'd decided, J.D. said, "Come in the office for a cool drink." He didn't wait for an answer but went to the bed of the truck to retrieve his tool belt.

Kim hesitated only a moment. If he'd been planning to try anything, surely he would have done it earlier when they were alone in the field. Since there were two newly saddled horses tied at the rail, there had to be at least one hired hand around somewhere.

"Okay." She followed him into the barn. After passing several of the dozen or so stalls lining the concrete floor of the wide center aisle, he stopped in a doorway. Nodding toward two closed doors across from it, he said, "Feed room and tack room are over there. This is my office." He strode inside and placed his tools on a shelf. After washing his hands at the small sink, he removed two soft drink cans from the

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

refrigerator and handed one to her. He motioned to the stool in front of the desk.

Kim perched on the seat and popped the top on her drink to take a long, thirsty swallow. The soda cooled and refreshed her parched throat.

J.D. settled himself on the chair behind the desk and leaned back, propping his long jeans-clad legs on the cluttered desktop, his booted feet crossed at the ankle.

Casually, she looked around the room, admiring the worn but comfortable furnishings. In addition to the desk and chairs, an old couch set in one corner. Several photos of people with horses dotted the tan painted walls. A dusty red gingham curtain framed the only window. Next to the refrigerator, a small table held a coffeemaker and two mugs.

Finishing her inventory, she returned her gaze to J.D. and saw him studying her.

"When do you head back?" he asked. His dark eyes never left her face as he took another swallow.

"Our plane leaves Sunday. Classes start Monday."

"Our?"

"My... I came with a friend from school." She sighed, wondering why she didn't feel comfortable mentioning her boyfriend, Charlie.

"Sounds like you're not anxious to return."

"I'm not. The weather there is still awful, and I'm tired of school. But at least we only have one more term to go."

"Then what? Assuming you don't come back here?"

Kim pulled her gaze away from him and studied her soda can. "I don't know." She didn't want to tell him that she didn't like either of her choices.

Charlie already had a job waiting here in Florida in his father's manufacturing business. She could probably get one there, too, if she wanted to strengthen her relationship with him. But after two years, she



## RAWHIDE AND LACE

was starting to doubt that she'd ever want more than a platonic friendship from him. Plus, depending on his parents wouldn't mean any more independence than relying on her own family.

Or she could stay in Ohio, and her parents would continue to try to run her life, the way they'd done in the past—picking her college and her major. She wanted to make a clean break from them.

She looked at J.D., who still watched her with an enigmatic expression on his face.

Leaning forward, she said, "Please consider letting me buy into the ranch. I graduate in six weeks and I need a job. I like horses. I like Florida. And I like this ranch. I'd *really* like to work here."

Jonathan Dean Hudson stared at the little slip of a girl who seemed to think she could help him run his ranch.

Was she out of her mind?

Or was *he*, for starting to like the idea? He wondered if he considered her a candidate because she had the money...or because she went to college?

He experienced a twinge of envy. He would have graduated years ago if he'd kept his scholarship. But he'd let a rich city girl ruin his plans back then. Was he willing to risk letting it happen again?

Shaking his head, he surveyed Kim doubtfully. He was surprised that she hadn't lost interest already. She sure looked a lot different than she had when she'd arrived less than two hours ago.

Her long lashes still batted at him innocently over wide-set blue eyes. But the ash blonde hair that spilled over her shoulders wasn't quite as wavy as when she'd arrived. He liked it better straight, though. It looked more natural.

Her once-crisp clothes were now wilted and dusty. He preferred the way they clung to her heat-dampened skin, revealing her curves. She definitely had a nice body.

Unfortunately, the last thing he needed was a female who looked like her hanging around the ranch. That had already proven hazardous.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

While mending the fence, he'd allowed his glance to slip away from the task to appreciate the rear view of Kim when she bent over to pick a wildflower. He'd immediately regretted the distraction when the hammer hit his thumb instead of the staple.

Oh yeah, she'd be a big help with all the work to do around the place. Once she found out how much actual labor was involved, she'd probably turn tail and run faster than ol' Mac had just before she arrived. He hoped she wasn't as hard-headed as his ex-employee and wouldn't have to be bodily thrown out. J.D. didn't believe in using physical strength against a woman.

The delicate blonde would be useless around the ranch, he reminded himself, even when dressed more appropriately. Everything about her spoke of spoiled rich kid. Her soft, delicate hands had long, perfect nails. Why would she want to give up her easy life to work on a ranch? She probably had some idealistic notions about what it would be like.

She didn't give up easily, though. He'd have thought that after the fence-mending episode, she'd have seen enough to realize this wasn't some fancy boarding stable for rich horse owners. Yet she was still here. It was late Friday afternoon and unusually hot for March, even in Florida. Why hadn't her enthusiasm waned?

J.D. took another assessment of his potential new partner. Since the desk blocked his view, he couldn't see her pretty little feet, but he'd be willing to bet her high heels didn't look so spotless anymore.

He pulled his legs off the desk, stood up, and tossed his crumpled drink can in the recycle bin. Suddenly he felt a need to express his frustration. He faced the window and braced his hands on the sill as he looked out.

"My brother and I grew up here," he said. "This land has belonged to my family for generations." He kept his back to Kim, not wanting her to see the panic he felt threatening to erupt now that he had to admit he was in a bind. "I always planned to come back here someday and help my dad run the ranch. Maybe if I had, I could have done

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

something to save it.”

“You still can! You just need an investor. I have the money, and I think I can help you make a success of this business.”

He shook his head. “Running the ranch is hard work. It’ll take a lot more than a degree.”

“I’m not afraid of work.”

“I put in long hours.”

“So will I. You won’t have to pay me anything until we show a profit. I can live on my savings in the meantime.”

“That wouldn’t be fair.”

“We can work something out. I’m sure the ranch can succeed. You can pay me interest.”

Gazing at the land he loved, he raked a hand through his hair and shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re serious.”

“I am, so why don’t we discuss the details?”

J.D. still had a lot of doubts about taking on a partner. But after spending half the night going over his finances, he had to face reality. If he didn’t do something soon, he’d lose everything. His dad had left him a pile of debts to go along with the ranch.

Instead of helping the situation, the dishonest foreman who’d taken over when J.D.’s dad died had made things worse. Mac hadn’t brought any funds to the table, either. So far, Kim was the only person who’d answered his ad. The city chick and her money could be the second chance this ranch needed. The business was slowly going under. He didn’t want another bank loan hanging over his head. Once he got back on his feet, maybe he could buy her out. Especially since she didn’t look at all like the rancher type.

Maybe they *could* make a deal. She seemed agreeable enough, and she certainly was an attractive distraction...

He faced her and noted her earnest expression. What the hell. He had nothing to lose, did he?

Resuming his seat, he said, “Okay. Let’s talk.”

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

They spent the next hour going over his books. Kim agreed to contribute the funds to pay off outstanding bills and make needed improvements, which they decided would equal approximately half of the assessed value of the property. When all the papers were signed, they would be full partners in the ranch, though the house and the lot it sat on would remain separate. They resolved to talk to their lawyers and meet again one more time, after the legal approval, to sign the agreement before she went back to college.

They were interrupted several times by the ringing of the phone, and J.D. left briefly to set up rides. When he returned the second time, he brought his ranch hand, Becky, back to the office to meet Kim.

After he sent the husky redhead out to saddle another set of horses, Kim asked, "How many employees do you have?"

"Just Becky."

"But you said she's only part-time."

"That's right. She works until her kids get home from school. After that, it's just me. Are you sure you want to be an equal partner?" He held back the urge to grin when Kim seemed to hesitate.

She sat up straight and raised her chin. "Yes. I'm sure I can handle it. Besides, we can hire more help if we need to. Who was that man who left so suddenly when I got here?"

J.D. allowed himself a satisfied chuckle. "Oh, don't worry about him. He won't be coming back."

"Why not?"

"I dismissed him."

Her blonde brows arched. "You mean you fired him?"

"Same thing."

"Hardly. You physically threw him out! He could sue you."

J.D. shrugged. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

"Haven't you ever heard of assault and battery?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "This is a perfect example of why we'll have trouble being partners."

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“Why? Because I’m trying to warn you about a potential lawsuit?”

“Because you don’t know a damn thing about how we do things here! A paper degree won’t prepare you for dealing with idiots in the work force. That guy tried to steal me blind. When I caught him in the act and threatened to have him arrested, he threw a punch at me. I defended myself and tossed him out. He won’t be back, and I don’t expect to hear from him again.”

“Who was he?”

J.D. grinned. “My *last* business partner.”

## CHAPTER 2

Less than two months later, when he heard the roar of a sports car, J.D. glanced out the stall window. He recognized the driver of the red Mustang and groaned. Kim must have graduated already and come to check up on him. He hadn't even had a chance to make any of the "improvements" she'd suggested.

She stood next to her car and stretched as she looked around in appraisal. He gritted his teeth. His new partner probably had even more new ideas to throw at him.

He gave himself a mental shake. No point in second thoughts now. She was here, like it or not.

After they'd made the partnership legal during her spring break, she'd gone back to Ohio to finish her last term of college. She had phoned a few times to ask about the business. He'd tried to keep the calls brief and impersonal, hoping she'd get the message that he wanted to continue to run things his way. Apparently she hadn't been discouraged.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

Swallowing down his reservations, J.D. went outside. He let his gaze rake over Kim as he approached her. At least her T-shirt and shorts were a little more practical than the business suit she'd worn the first time he'd met her. But the way the casual clothes clung to her figure would make it hard to keep his mind on work—and off her shapely legs...

He glanced at her feet. Sandals. Great. Just great.

She beamed at him. “Hi, partner! I couldn’t wait to get here and see how my new enterprise is progressing. I tried to call from the motel, but your line was busy. I’m just so anxious to get started that I decided to come on over!”

He touched the brim of his hat and allowed her a slight smile, then nodded toward the car coming down the drive. “Glad to hear you’re ready to start work. You can help me with those customers.”

“Now? I just got to town and I was planning...” She glanced toward the vehicle as it pulled up to the fence.

“C’mon.” J.D. didn’t wait for an agreement—or argument—from Kim. He strode over to the two horses tied to the hitching rail and adjusted the saddle on Sunny.

His new partner followed but remained silent as he greeted the two teenagers, took their money and stuffed it in his jeans’ pocket. He untied the bay horse and held the reins while the first girl mounted. After adjusting the stirrups, he turned Sunny’s head toward the trail and gave the mare a pat on the rump to start her moving.

Kim stood by Cherokee, staring at the horse’s belly with a blank expression.

Frowning, J.D. asked, “Don’t you know how to fasten a girth?”

“Not that kind.”

He reached for the billet strap and pulled it taut, then stuck two fingers under it to make sure it wasn’t too tight.

Turning to the other rider, he helped her mount. “Thanks, J.D.,” she said with an adolescent blush before heading after her friend.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"Have fun!" Kim called as the two riders rode off. Facing J.D. with a sheepish smile, she said, "I guess I have a lot to learn."

He struggled to keep his growing impatience from his tone. "Haven't you ever saddled up a horse?"

"Just English, where the girth straps have buckles. But I can learn."

He shook his head. "Maybe you should stick to the book work. I wouldn't want you to break a nail."

Kim glanced at him and then at her long red fingernails. "Guess I better trim them, huh?"

"Better remove that polish, too, unless you want it all chipped."

That was only one of the many changes she'd have to make if she wanted to be of any use to him on this ranch. He stifled the urge to complain about her outfit. She'd figure it out soon enough. Besides, she did look good in it. *Too damn good.*

"Let's go into the office," he grumbled.

As she matched his brisk stride by trotting beside him, J.D. reminded himself that regardless of how little she knew about horses, Kim was legally his business partner. He'd better remember to keep his mind on work—and off her curves.

They reached the office, and she sank onto the couch with a dramatic sigh. J.D. took two cans of soda out of the fridge and handed her one before taking his usual seat behind the desk. After answering a call and signing up another trail ride to begin in half an hour, he recorded it on the desk pad.

"Tell you what, Kim. You handle the phone for the next couple of hours, so I don't have to keep running in to answer it. I'll take care of getting the horses ready. Then you can help me feed them before you leave."

"When will that be?"

"After dark."

Her shoulders slumped. "Oh."

He ignored her lack of enthusiasm. "If you want to work here,



## RAWHIDE AND LACE

you'll have to get used to the long hours. Now that summer is coming, my busiest time for riders is the cool evenings just before dark. My ranch hand Becky needs to be home with her kids by then. If you aren't going to be able to help me—"

Kim raised her chin. "I'll stay. Answering the phone isn't exactly hard labor."

A grin tugged at J.D.'s lips. "Good. Tomorrow I'll show you how to saddle a horse." He handed her the pad. "Here's the list of rides already set up. Make sure you don't assign the same horse to more than one rider."

He started toward the door. "On second thought, you'd better check with me before you schedule any rides. I may need to recommend the horse, depending on the rider's ability."

Kim took the pad and glanced at it. "*This* is your schedule?"

Her disapproving tone rankled him. "Yeah. Got a problem with it?"

"I think I can come up with a much more efficient way to do it."

"Just answer the phone, okay?" He threw her a quelling frown, and she sat down abruptly on the chair behind the desk.

J.D. stomped to the tack room. His new partner was going to be trouble. She didn't even know how to tack up a horse, but she was already criticizing his system! He seized a saddle and blanket and carried them out to the fence. After setting them on a rail, he headed back for another set.

The physical labor of hoisting the heavy tack helped ease some of his frustration. By the time he'd caught and saddled the horses, he had almost forgotten about Kim. The sound of the phone made him start to dash for the office, until the ringing stopped, and he remembered his new partner must have answered.

A few minutes later, Kim raced out and stopped breathlessly in front of him. "Can you take three riders in twenty minutes?" she gasped.

He mentally figured how many horses were out. "As long as they're

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

not beginners.”

“Okay. I’ll set it up.” Kim sprinted back to the barn. Watching the retreat of her cute bottom, J.D. allowed himself a wry grin. This just might work out okay, after all, he thought. The pretty city slicker could probably use the exercise. Better to let *her* do the running. He had plenty of other chores.

\* \* \*

Kim recorded the most recent trail ride and sank onto the desk chair. She must really be out of shape if such a short run winded her, she realized. If nothing else, this job would keep her fit.

She sat back and looked around the office. Nothing appeared to have changed since her last visit. Her heart beat a little faster with anticipation of all the improvements she could make—if her partner would let her. So far she hadn’t been able to determine the reason for his less than enthusiastic welcome. Of course, she hadn’t warned him that she intended to come here today—hadn’t even planned it herself. After that long and tiring drive, she should have spent the evening getting settled in her motel and soaking in a hot bubble-bath. Instead, she’d barely checked in and dropped off her stuff before impulsively deciding to drive here.

Rather than greeting her with an offer to help her get her bearings, her new partner had put her to work!

Remembering she was supposed to call her boyfriend to let him know she’d arrived in town safe and sound, she reached for the phone.

Before she could dial, however, another customer called. She ran out to discuss the details of the ride with J.D. When she hung up the phone, she recorded the ride while her thoughts drifted back to her partner.

She had to admit that one of her reasons for being so anxious to get here had been to surprise J.D. She’d hoped he might treat her more like an equal now that she had her college degree. Instead, he still seemed to think she was a helpless female.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

He seemed to enjoy looking at her, though. Almost as much as she liked looking at *him*.

Kim's cheeks warmed at the memory of her body's response to J.D. Today he appeared much the same as the first time she'd seen him, clad in a Stetson, faded jeans and boots, his denim shirt open at the neck to reveal tufts of coarse black hair.

She gave herself a mental shake. No point in letting her thoughts stray in that direction. They were business partners. Period.

Getting back to work, she glanced at the hastily scrawled notes on J.D.'s pad and shook her head. How could he tell which horses were scheduled and which ones were still available? He definitely needed to be more organized. She'd have to make that a top priority, even if she had to argue with him about it. After all, by his own admission, the business had been failing. Change *had* to help.

The phone rang again. The caller wanted to cancel a ride. Kim found it on the list and crossed it off. At least she wouldn't have to jog out to find J.D. this time, she thought with a grateful sigh.

The next hour passed in a blur as she took calls and ran out to check with J.D. about any she couldn't handle by herself. She became more and more convinced that he needed a more efficient system. The notebook was a mess, with rides crossed off and replaced with new ones. There seemed to be no particular order, making it difficult to tell how many horses were available to be used at any one time.

Kim was shaking her head in frustration as she tried to decipher the rides for the next morning, when J.D. returned to the office. He leaned against the doorjamb. "What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to figure out tomorrow's schedule."

"You can't read my writing?"

"No, it's not that... What you really need is a computer."

His eyes narrowed as he came into the room. "I've been managing just fine without one."

"I know. Although you seem to be able to keep track of it, don't

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

you ever get mixed up?"

"Sometimes. But people usually don't mind waiting a little if the horse they want to ride is out when they get here."

"Well, they shouldn't *have* to!" Kim jumped up and approached to make him understand.

He glared at her, his arms crossed. "I can't afford a computer."

Kim noted his clenched jaw and the unbending set of his shoulders. She had to admit he was right about the expense. Chewing her lip, she considered her options. Her best bet would be a compromise.

"Okay, how about if I work out a more organized way to set up the rides that won't cost anything?" she suggested.

J.D. studied her for a long moment, and she took a step forward. "Look," she added, "I might not know much about horses, but I *am* a business major."

A muscle worked in his jaw and he stroked his chin. After a moment, he sighed. "Well, I do hate paperwork, and I would like to turn over some of it—"

"Good! Give me a chance to prove what I can do."

Standing only a few feet away, he towered over her. His gaze dropped to her lips, and she felt a sudden need for air. She took a step backwards.

He swore under his breath and glanced away. "See what you can work out tomorrow. Right now we need to get all the horses in and fed." He turned on his heel and headed out of the office.

Puzzled at his abrupt departure, she followed him out. The last trail horses were still tied to the hitching post. He unfastened a mare and handed Kim the reins. "Walk her into the third stall. Do you know how to take off a bridle?"

She glanced at it and nodded. "Yes. Except for the curb chain under the chin, there isn't much difference from the English bridles I'm used to."

"Good. I'll be right behind you." He untied another of the two

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

remaining horses.

Kim led the willing mare into the stall, unbuckled the neck strap on the bridle, and removed the headstall without incident.

She eyed the saddle doubtfully. "Here," J.D. said from behind her. "I'll show you." He loosened the cinch and unfastened the strap from the ring holding it. Going around to the other side, he threw the girth over the top of the saddle and returned to Kim's side. "Think you can finish?" he asked, stepping back.

Kim reached up and grabbed the saddle, tugging it off the horse. When she staggered under the weight, J.D. reached out and took it from her.

"You'd better build up your arm muscles before you try that again. These saddles are heavy." His voice sounded more tolerant than angry.

Kim watched, impressed, as J.D. hefted the saddle and carried it out. He returned a moment later, carrying a wooden tote box with an assortment of currycombs and brushes.

He selected a hoof pick and held it out. "Ever use one of these?"

Finally, something she knew how to do! "Yes. They taught me to clean my horse's hooves when I took riding lessons."

"Uh-huh."

She ignored his amused tone and the gleam in his eyes. Taking the hooked tool from him, she turned sideways and picked up the horse's foot. At least she knew the correct way to do this—even if her nails would never be the same.

After watching for a moment, J.D. headed out to finish untacking the other two horses. "Don't forget to give her a light brushing," he said over his shoulder.

Kim didn't reply as she bent to her task. It wasn't as easy as she remembered. The horse obediently lifted her hooves, but it *was* hard to keep her long nails from getting in the way. J.D. had been right about that.

Brushing wasn't difficult. The horse had a thin summer coat and

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

only required a light touch-up over the saddle area. After finishing, she went in search of her partner. She found him grooming the last of the three trail horses they'd brought in together.

"Okay," he said, "time to get the rest." He headed out of the barn toward the pasture.

Kim hurried to keep up with him. When they reached the pasture gate, J.D. slipped inside. He grabbed the halter on a big Paint gelding and led him through the gate, shutting it behind him.

"Apache's the boss," J.D. said. "The others all follow once he's in. Wait till I get to the barn and then open the gate." He led the horse toward the barn without giving Kim a chance to question his orders.

It didn't occur to her to do anything else. She could barely see in the dim moonlight, and mosquitoes were out in full force. She stood by the gate, swatting at the insects and jumping up and down to give them a moving target.

When J.D. called to her, she swung the gate open.

There was a momentary stampede as the six horses in the pasture crowded each other to get through, then raced to the barn. They all stopped close to the front and seemed to know in which order they were supposed to enter. One at a time, they trotted in.

By the time Kim ran the same distance, all the horses were in their stalls, contentedly munching their hay. She blinked in amazement. "How do you do that when I'm not here?"

J.D. shrugged. "If nobody else is available, I go back for them. This is much quicker, but either way I get them in." He entered the feed room, opened a large bin and dipped a bucket into the grain mix.

When they had fed and watered the last of the horses, Kim threw herself down on the couch in the barn office, exhausted. She glanced at the wall clock and raised her eyebrows. "Ten o'clock! Do you always work so late?"

J.D. sat at the desk. "Only spring through fall. We have to end the rides at dark, and then all the horses have to be bedded down." He

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

leaned back in his chair. "Having second thoughts?"

"No... I knew it wouldn't be a nine-to-five job. But I will need to take some time to find an apartment and get settled. I haven't even unpacked yet."

"You haven't? Sorry, I didn't realize that. You must be worn out after your trip." When his gaze dropped from her face to her arms, he jumped up and crossed the room.

"We'd better put something on those," he said, taking her arm. "Are you allergic to insects?"

Kim's gaze followed his to the huge welts on her bare arms. "No, but I've never had bites like *these!*"

"Don't worry. A lot of Yankees react like that to mosquitoes at first. You'll become immune after a while. You'd better start wearing an insect repellent, though. You might want to wear jeans and long sleeves, too, at least after dark." His eyes focused on her sandaled feet. "And..."

"I know. Closed shoes."

"Right. Boots are the best protection around the horses, but since you'll be doing a lot of running, sneakers might be a good compromise."

"Okay," she agreed.

J.D. disappeared into the small bathroom off the office, and she heard water splash as he washed his hands. He came out with a first aid kit, opened the box, and removed a bottle. Hunkering down next to her, he began dabbing salve over the welts on her arm.

Kim tried to relax as he covered the bites with the cool, soothing balm. But he was so close she could smell his aftershave mixed with the cowboy scents of leather and horse. She gulped and concentrated on focusing her thoughts elsewhere.

His strong hands were gentle and capable as he went about his task. He finished one arm and started on the other.

In spite of her reservations, Kim couldn't keep her gaze from

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

straying to his face. She admired the rugged lines of his jaw with the black stubble of beard.

He raised his eyes to lock with hers, and Kim's heart leapt to her throat as she realized he had caught her watching him. Even so, she felt incapable of looking away. J.D. might be her business partner, but more than a legal connection drew her to him. Raw masculinity simmered beneath the surface, oozing from every pore of his tanned, lithe body.

One dark brow arched as his gaze dropped to her mouth. She realized she'd instinctively parted her lips and tilted her head back. Trembling with a blend of dismay and anticipation, she waited for his next move.



## CHAPTER 3

J.D. glanced from the vivid blue of Kim's eyes to the soft curves of her lips. Hot damn. Was he out of his mind?

If he touched her legs, he'd be a goner for sure.

He reminded himself of their business relationship. Dropping her hand, he pulled his gaze away and thrust the bottle and gauze at her. "I'll let you finish up."

"All right."

Was it his imagination, or did she seem a little breathless? J.D. stole one more quick glance her way. Ignoring the puzzled expression on her face, he returned to his seat at the desk and focused on the ride schedule for the next day.

After a few minutes, Kim replaced the supplies. "Thanks," she said. "I'd better get going. What time should I come tomorrow?"

He set the pad down and leaned back to enjoy her reaction. "I start at six."

Her eyes widened. "A.M.?"

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"A.M." Grinning, he stood and strode to the refrigerator. "But I think I can manage alone for one more day. Why don't you sleep in?"

"I'd appreciate that."

Witnessing her obvious relief, J.D. experienced a moment of regret for teasing her. He handed her his wrapped sandwich and an apple. "Here. Since we both missed dinner, you're probably hungry."

Kim's stomach growled in response, and they laughed. "Thanks," she said. "I've been so busy I didn't even think about eating. I sure don't feel like going out to get something at this time of night."

He nodded. "That's what I figured."

After he locked the office, they walked together down the center aisle of the barn. Some of the horses greeted them with soft nickers as they munched their hay. When Kim stopped to pet Morticia's nose, the filly paused munching hay and rubbed against her arm.

J.D.'s gut responded to the sight of the mutual affection with an unexpected twist. What was that all about? He must be hungrier than he'd thought.

Reaching the outside door, J.D. switched on his flashlight, then turned off the master light and plunged them into semi-darkness.

Kim took a step closer to him. Over the scent of the medicinal salve, he could smell the unique perfume she wore. He inhaled deeper. Nice.

"Wow." Her voice next to him sounded a bit high pitched. "It's really *dark* out here at night. I can't even see your house."

"I'll find it."

She laughed. "I guess you're used to this, huh?"

"You'll get used to it, too."

"Oh, I know I will!"

"Uh-huh." *If you last.* He gave in to a grin, glad she couldn't see his face.

"It is pretty out here, though, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "I guess. Never paid much attention."

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

“You should!” Her voice rose with animation in spite of her earlier fatigue. “The sky is so clear—you can’t see stars like that in the city.”

“True.”

He noted the buzz of more mosquitoes. “You’d better get in your car before you get eaten alive.”

“Okay.”

Following the beam from his flashlight, they hurried to her Mustang. As soon as they reached it, she jumped inside, and he slammed the door to shut out most of the insects. She smiled and waved through the window. A moment later, he stared after her taillights as she drove off.

He knew one thing for sure: The Triple H would never be the same. So why didn’t that bother him more?

\* \* \*

Once inside her vehicle, a wave of loneliness assailed Kim. Although only a few miles from the city, the ranch at night appeared alienated from civilization. Except for the beam of her headlights, the only light came from the moon and stars. Despite the warmth of the night, she shivered.

She glanced in the rearview mirror at the total blackness. It would take a while to get used to driving out here without the benefit of streetlights. At least she still had plenty of gas and her father had checked out the car thoroughly before she left Ohio. She’d sure hate to get stranded—especially at night.

Steering with one hand, she bit hungrily into the apple. She was well down the road before she remembered she’d never called her boyfriend.

Charlie had moved down to Florida earlier in the week, coming back with his parents right after graduation. He knew she planned to arrive today.

With relief, Kim noticed lights up ahead at the highway. Within a few more minutes, she arrived at her motel. When she reached her

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

room, she wearily sank onto the bed and picked up the phone to dial Charlie's number.

"Kim!" he said. "I've been worried sick. Where *were* you?"

"I'm sorry. I went by the Triple H, and J.D. needed help so I stayed. We just got done."

"It's after eleven!"

"I started to call you sooner...but we got busy, and then I completely forgot."

There was a long pause at Charlie's end of the line. Finally he spoke again. "At least you're all right. I was upset because the motel said you'd checked in, but you never answered your phone. I even came by to see if you wanted to go to dinner."

"I'm sorry. I would have loved to about four hours ago. But I was busy answering the stable phone."

Another awkward silence followed before he said, "Well, get some rest. Call me when you wake up, and we'll make plans for the weekend."

"Okay. Bye." Kim hung up, belatedly realizing she shouldn't have let him believe they could spend the weekend together. She would need to check with J.D. since that was his busiest time. From the look of the schedule she'd helped make, there were rides all day, starting at eight. She had better get a good night's sleep...

A loud ringing sound woke her the next morning. She groggily reached for the alarm clock and hit the snooze button twice before she realized it was the phone she had heard.

"Hello?" she mumbled into the receiver.

"Were you still asleep?" Charlie chided.

"Yeah... I guess so. What time is it?"

"Almost noon. I thought maybe you'd like to go to lunch before we try to find you an apartment. Unless you'd like to change your mind and move in with me?"

"Oh no!" Kim leapt up and threw off the sheets.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"It's not *that* bad an idea."

"No... I mean... I should be out at the stable."

"You're going to *work* your first weekend in town?" Charlie didn't sound understanding.

"I should. J.D. and I didn't really discuss it yet." Kim started to pull off her clothes. She'd been so exhausted last night she hadn't bothered to change, but had crawled into bed right after hanging up the phone.

"You still have to eat. How about if I meet you in the motel restaurant in half an hour?"

He had a point. "Okay. I'll call and let J.D. know I'll be there this afternoon."

Thirty minutes later Kim had showered and dressed in T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She took the extra time needed to trim her fingernails and remove the last of the polish before going down to the restaurant.

Charlie stood just inside the door in a blue polo shirt and matching crisp slacks. His wide smile faded when his gaze passed over her outfit, but he regained his welcoming expression as he enveloped her in a hug. "I've missed you."

"Graduation was only a week ago!" she teased. "But it's good to see you, too." During her stressful last visit with her parents, she'd longed for his calming influence and special friendship. "And I'm starving," she added.

Charlie laughed good-naturedly as they slipped into a booth.

A short while later Kim headed back to the Triple H. Knowing it might be a while before she got another chance to eat, she had bolted down a full brunch of eggs, ham and biscuits. Charlie had seemed to understand her need to go to work but had shown no interest in visiting there himself. He'd seemed satisfied with her promise to call him later.

When Kim arrived, the stable bustled with activity.

Only J.D.'s filly grazed in the pasture, but several horses, saddled and tied to the fence, waited for riders.

Becky and J.D. were helping a group of riders who had just

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

returned. They nodded to Kim as she approached but didn't waste time on greetings. The phone rang, so Kim ran to answer it.

For the next several hours she stayed busy, much as the day before. She answered dozens of calls and received plenty of exercise jogging out to check with J.D. about most of them.

A few times Becky and her boss came in to get a drink. On one of those trips J.D. picked up the schedule and took a quick look at it as he drank his soda.

"I don't understand why, if you're this busy, you're not making more of a profit." Kim sat back and absently drummed her pencil on the desk.

He pulled over a chair and straddled it to face her. "It's simple. I have to keep a dozen horses to have enough for the busy times. But business is slow all day until evening when it gets cool. On weekends we're booked all morning, and then again late afternoon till dark. The middle of the day is just too hot for riding. Right now I only have two horses out. But they all have to be fed every day, whether they're used or not. Add to that the vet bills, sawdust for the stalls, water and electricity..."

"I see what you mean. But maybe we can come up with a way to get more riders during the slow times."

"We use the slow times, like now, to clean stalls and catch up on maintenance." He drained his can and stood.

"But I've been having to turn down riders because we don't have enough horses!"

He shook his head. "We can barely afford to feed the ones we have now. Besides, more horses would mean even more damn work, and I sure as hell don't need to have more to do!"

His tone rankled her nerves. Kim met his stormy gaze but kept her own voice level. "I'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from using profanity when I'm just trying to help."

He lifted a dark brow, and she thought she caught a glimpse of

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

admiration in his eyes before they narrowed with a dangerous glint. "Help? Is *that* what you call it?"

Kim jumped to her feet, hands on her hips. "Yes! I'm helping! That's why I'm here!"

J.D. crossed his arms. "I need more hours in the day now to get all the chores done around here—not somebody to suggest ways to make more work!"

"I'm *trying* to make this ranch more profitable."

"And I'm just trying to keep it running! Like I did before your d—your *darn* interference!" Without waiting for another rebuttal, he tossed his can in the bin and strode out of the office.

Kim sighed as she sank back onto the desk chair. She'd come through her first major disagreement with her partner. But it looked like it would be one of many.

Maybe she would wait until tomorrow to tell him he needed more insurance... She picked up the calendar she'd found in the desk and went back to work on developing the new schedule.

J.D. joined Becky, who was cleaning out stalls, her red curls bobbing as she sang along to a Garth Brooks song on the portable radio she always had nearby. She nodded when she spotted him, but went on with her task.

Becky was the perfect employee, he told himself, picking up the manure rake and entering the next stall. A hard worker, she always had a smile for everyone, and she never got in his way. She could teach his new partner a few things.

He scooped up the nearest pile of soiled sawdust and carried it to the wheelbarrow in the aisle. The dirty job had never really bothered him. Like most of the chores around the stable, he'd been doing them so long they were just part of the daily routine.

It was time his new partner got used to doing some of them, too. Maybe once she found out how much physical labor was involved in ranching, she'd decide she'd rather be a silent partner after all.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

A wry grin tugged at his mouth. Cleaning the barn would be a good start, since it didn't take any particular skill. She'd still be able to hear the phone.

He had just resolved to go back to enlist her help for stall duty when Kim appeared in front of him. She narrowly missed getting a face full of soiled stall bedding as he flung it into the wheelbarrow.

"Don't ever sneak up on me when I'm cleaning the barn!"

A pretty blush crept over her cheeks. "Sorry. I thought maybe I could help."

Although he'd been about to ask her to do just that, having her offer took some of the satisfaction out of it. Still, it was a chore she should be able to handle that would free him for other things. He thrust the manure rake at her.

She took it and entered the stall, squeezing past him without a word. He didn't stay to supervise, but went out to check the horses.

Kim wasn't as fast as Becky on the barn chores, but she managed to do a passable job and answer all phone calls. When they finished the last stall, she followed the stable hand to the office for a cool drink and a chance to finally have a private conversation with her.

Becky offered to share her lunch, but Kim declined since she was still full from her late breakfast.

"How long have you worked here?" Kim asked, taking the seat behind the desk.

The redhead sat on the couch and unwrapped her sandwich. "Only a few years, but I've known the Hudsons most of my life."

"So you worked here before J.D. took over?"

"Uh-huh. I worked for his dad. After Mr. Hudson's car accident, my husband even came with me to take care of the place until J.D. could get home to take over." She leaned back and took a bite of sandwich.

Kim wanted to know more about the Hudsons and the history of the ranch. She sipped at her drink, hoping Becky would elaborate. When she continued eating instead, Kim persisted, "Where was J.D. before



## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

that?"

The other woman paused a moment. "He'd left a few years before to go to college. Nobody really knows what happened. He dropped out of school his senior year, but still didn't come home except for a quick visit or two. Not until the funeral." She took another bite.

"Did you know him before?"

She nodded and swallowed. "We grew up together, went to school together. He's a few years younger than me, and our brothers were friends."

Kim sat up with a start. "I remember J.D. mentioning he had a brother. Isn't he interested in the ranch?"

Becky shook her head. "Not anymore. Ben was supposed to stay home to help with the ranch until J.D. finished college. I'm not sure what came between them. The boss doesn't talk much, and it's really none of my business." She gave Kim an apologetic shrug and resumed eating.

Kim shifted her gaze to the picture on the wall. A man and two boys posed in front of the Triple H sign. She stood and walked over to get a closer look. The man appeared to be an older version of J.D., while the boys were about four and eight. "Triple H for the three Hudson men," she said softly.

Becky polished off the last of her sandwich and joined her. "Ben is at the University of Florida now. The brothers used to be really close, but they must have had a major fight. They were barely civil at their dad's funeral."

Kim stared at the three happy faces in the photo. What could have happened? "Was Ben unhappy about the will?"

Becky shook her head. "No. Whatever they disagreed about must have been before their father died. Anyway, Ben got the house and J.D. got the business. Mr. Hudson always treated both boys equally." She glanced at her watch. "We should be getting more riders soon. I have to make sure the horses are ready."

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

When Becky left, Kim went back to her paperwork. In between calls she worked out a revised schedule and straightened the file cabinet. The afternoon hours passed quickly. Before she knew it, Becky was back to say goodbye.

"Having you here sure does make my job easier," the ranch hand said as she retrieved her purse. "In between rides I had time to finish getting the stalls ready. You'll just need to bring the horses in and feed them."

"Great." Kim smiled. At least Becky seemed to appreciate her help. "Thanks. We'll see you tomorrow."

After the other woman went home, Kim organized the desk and finished the filing. A big stack remained of outdated information which could be thrown away.

She paused in the act of shuffling the paperwork into a neat stack. Her heart beat a little faster at the sound of approaching footsteps. When they stopped at the doorway, she looked up at J.D.

"What the...*heck* are you doing?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

Kim stifled a smile. At least he'd honored her request to watch his language. "Straightening up."

When the line of disapproval on his forehead deepened, she swallowed. Raising her chin, she thrust the stack at him. "I found all these in the files. You'll need to check them to make sure, but I think they can be tossed out."

A muscle worked in his jaw as he studied her. After what seemed like several minutes, he took the papers from Kim and gave them a brief glance. "Okay, I'll take them home tonight." He set the stack on the desk and went over to the refrigerator. "Ready for a dinner break?"

"I didn't bring anything..."

"That's okay, I made extra." He pulled out two brown bags and handed her one.

"Thanks." She took it gratefully and sat at the desk. As she unwrapped the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her gaze fell on her

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

reworked schedule. She picked it up. "Take a look at this."

Although he gave her a suspicious look, he accepted the pad and sat down across from her.

His expression didn't change. After finishing his sandwich, he started on an apple, still studying the schedule without a word.

Finally, he tossed his dinner trash in the basket. "Not bad," he said, raising his chocolate-colored eyes to meet Kim's gaze. "It might work." Without waiting for a response, he left the office.

Kim remained in her seat, staring after him. It *might* work? Of course it would *work*! He just didn't want to admit she might have done something *right*. She would simply have to show him that she was not the helpless dumb blonde he obviously considered her to be. She drummed her pencil on the desk, the noise covering the sound of his retreat.

Suddenly he appeared back in the doorway, his dark eyes focused on her. "We can start bringing the horses in now," he said. Before she could think of a reply, he was gone again. The sound of his heavy boots echoed down the aisle.

Kim sighed. She'd known J.D. would not be an easy man to work with when she signed on as his partner. But something about him touched her. Something made her want to get to know him, to find out why he wouldn't let anyone get close.

Since Becky had already filled all the horses' hay racks and water buckets, they were able to finish much earlier than the previous night.

Jogging to keep pace with J.D. on their way out of the barn, Kim said, "We still need to talk."

"About what?" His eyes remained focused on the path in front of them. He flicked off the lights, and they walked out into the darkness.

"I don't know what kind of hours you need me to be here. I have to find a place to live and get settled, but I've been here almost every minute since I got to town."

They reached her car. "Okay," he agreed. "Come in early

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

tomorrow. Becky likes to go to church with her family and doesn't get here until after lunch."

"I'll be here at dawn." She jumped in her car and quickly shut the door against the mosquitoes. She'd worn insect repellent today at J.D.'s suggestion, but the hungry buzzing still made her nervous.

Safely inside her car, she grinned, watching the bobbing circle of J.D.'s flashlight as he headed toward his house. This job was definitely not going to be boring.

\* \* \*

Early the next morning Kim stopped at a fast food restaurant on the way to the ranch. She had called Charlie the night before and explained why she couldn't see him that day, but told him she'd try to arrange a day off during the week.

Although the clock read barely seven, she found J.D. already busy. After he sent two trail riders on their way, he motioned for Kim to accompany him to the barn.

Deciding there was no point in putting off their first confrontation of the day, she asked, "Did you get a chance to look at the papers I gave you?"

They walked on a few strides before he answered. "Yes, and you were right. Most of them were still left from Dad. He never threw anything out. I took care of it."

When they reached the office, Kim noted the recent addition of a third mug. She unpacked the food she'd brought while J.D. poured black coffee from the pot in the corner.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any cream or sugar," he said. "Becky and I both drink it black. But I'll get some if you like it."

"Thanks. I use both." She took the cup anyway, and forced down a swallow of the bitter brew.

Kim settled on the couch while J.D. sat on the desk chair. After downing his coffee and an egg and cheese sandwich, he set the empty mug on the desk. He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest.

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“So what do we need to talk about?”

She got up and crossed the room to stand directly in front of him. Leaning over the desk to meet his eyes, she took a fortifying breath. “Let’s start by working out a time schedule. Like when you need me.”

His gaze dropped to her neckline and he swallowed. “Need you?”

“To be here.”

J.D. reddened and jumped up. “Whenever you can arrange it is fine. I did okay before you got here.”

“I know, but—”

He grabbed his cowboy hat and headed for the door. “I think I promised to teach you how to saddle a horse.”

“J.D....”

Raising a questioning brow, he turned to her. Kim hesitated, hating to start a new disagreement already this morning. But the sooner she pointed out the problems with the way he had been doing things, the sooner she could fix them.

She swallowed and met his eyes. “I think we need to discuss insurance and liability.”

His jaws tightened. “I’ve never had any problem.”

“You’ve been lucky.”

He frowned and returned to the desk, sitting down with obvious resentment. “We already have insurance.”

“I saw the policies. We need more liability coverage. You should have every rider sign a release before he or she gets on a horse.”

“We have signs posted.” His eyes remained narrowed, but Kim knew the facts were on her side.

“Hasn’t anyone ever fallen off?” she asked.

“Sure. But most of the people we get here have been coming for years. They know me, and I know them. They’d be insulted if I asked them to sign a release.”

“Even good riders can fall off. Who’ll be insulted when they sue you?”

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. muttered something under his breath and stood, turning away to look out the window.

Kim waited, giving him a chance to think. After a moment he gave a resigned sigh. "You're right," he said. "I heard about a stable not too far away that got sued when a horse bit some tourist's kid."

"We can prevent most problems by sending a trail guide out with anyone we don't know is an experienced rider," she said. "Helmets should be available and we should have *everyone* sign a release, no matter how good a rider they claim to be. I'll call the insurance agent first thing tomorrow morning, since he's probably not in on Sunday." She ventured a tentative grin, not wanting to seem pushy.

When he didn't smile in return, she tried another tactic. "Okay. Now let's go saddle a horse."

He nodded, tugged at his hat, and walked out the door.

Kim trailed behind him to the tack room. "Does it matter which bridle we use?" she asked.

"Yes, each horse has its own. Some require a harsher bit than others, and a few have bigger heads. I switch them around sometimes. But until you get to know the horses, it'd be best to ask me."

When she nodded agreeably, he continued. "I assign a different blanket to each horse too, so they don't transfer any skin problems. The saddles can be switched around depending on the size of the rider."

He handed Kim a bridle and tack box, carrying the saddle and pad himself.

When they entered Stormy's stall, they set the equipment down and J.D. handed Kim a curry comb and brush. He stood by to watch as she gave the horse a quick brushing on the saddle area. As soon as she finished, he placed the blanket on the horse's back. Kim reached for the saddle, but he ignored her and set it on the mare himself.

She stood back, hands on hips. "I need to learn to do that."

He shrugged. "You will. But you won't be much good to me with a sore back." He positioned the saddle and went around to the other side

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

of the horse.

Kim reached under Stormy's belly as he passed the girth strap to her. Uncertain what to do next, she waited while he came back around.

"Okay," he said, stationing himself behind her. "Now fasten it."

Kim fumbled nervously. He stood close behind her and a little to the right. She could feel his breath on her neck and the heat of his body almost touching her. *Concentrate, Kim. He's only a man.*

She finally managed to free the leather tie with one hand, while still holding the girth with her other.

"Okay, good. Now thread that through the buckle on the end."

His voice was gentle and patient. She tried to ignore his closeness. Eventually she succeeded in following his directions.

Before Kim could ask what to do next, his arms came around her. She stifled a gasp and bit her lip. Though callused and hard, his large fingers were gentle as he helped her thread the strap through the loop and back around.

When they finished, his hands lingered over hers. Her heartbeat took off like a herd of stampeding horses. She swallowed hard and glanced over her shoulder.

The heat in his eyes shook her to the core.

## CHAPTER 4

Heart still racing, Kim turned away from the temptation in J.D.'s eyes. This wasn't the place for that kind of thinking. And he wasn't the man.

She faced the horse and took a deep, calming breath.

J.D. released her hands. "See? Just like a man's tie. Now undo it and try again."

His voice held a trace of amusement. Did he know how he'd unsettled her? Glad he couldn't see her heated face, Kim hoped he also couldn't hear the pounding of her heart.

She had no trouble undoing the strap, but then her mind went blank, and she stood there awkwardly, trying to remember what they had just done.

"Haven't you ever fastened a tie?"

She shook her head. "I don't have any brothers. My dad does his own."

"No boyfriend?"



### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

An image of Charlie popped into her head, and her cheeks warmed again. What would her boyfriend think of the way she turned to mush at the nearness of another man? She swallowed and concentrated on picturing Charlie the way she usually saw him—in dress shirt and tie.

Keeping her eyes focused on the girth, she said, “He fastens his own, too.” When J.D. didn’t reply, she glanced at him with raised eyebrows.

He stared at her for a long moment, then shrugged. “Okay, no problem. Let me show you again.” He took her hands in his and led her through the procedure a second time. She stifled the urge to flinch at the first touch. Once his hands closed around hers, she relaxed. His fingers were gentle in spite of their strength.

After the third try, Kim managed to put her attraction to him aside enough to pay attention. When she could do the whole thing herself, J.D. showed her how to loosen the girth and tighten it again. They put on the bridle and led the horse out to the rail to wait for the next trail riders.

By the time the first group returned, three more horses were tacked up and ready to go.

Kim discovered she and J.D. worked well together. He decided which horses to use and got out their tack. She brushed them and put on their bridles. He put the heavy saddles on the horses’ backs, and she finished tacking them. In between she answered the phone.

Becky arrived early in the afternoon. As the sun climbed higher and hotter, the number of customers slowed down. J.D. took a lunch break while the women cleaned the stalls. When they were done, he suggested Kim take the rest of the day off. She didn’t try to argue.

Charlie sounded pleasantly surprised when she called him an hour later. He agreed to help her look for a place to live.

They found a small one-bedroom apartment at the edge of town. He wasn’t happy that it wasn’t as close to him as he would have liked. But she could move in immediately and it was only ten minutes from the

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

Triple H.

After dinner, they went furniture shopping. A few hours later they had found all the basics she would need to move in. She arranged delivery for the next day. Finally, they went back to her motel.

She unlocked the door. "I'm sorry I don't have anything to offer you."

"What about yourself?" Charlie asked huskily, grasping her shoulders and turning her to look at him. "Don't you think it's time?"

Kim's heart raced. She should have expected this. "Charlie, I..." She searched his eyes for understanding. How patient could she ask him to be?

His kind blue eyes softened. "Don't worry. I know you're tired. There'll be other times."

She nodded and accepted his gentle kiss. After promising to call him the next day, she slipped inside her room and leaned against the closed door with a sigh of relief.

An involuntary shudder racked her as the memory of another man, one who wasn't willing to be patient, came flooding back. Thank goodness Charlie understood her reasons for avoiding intimacy—so far.

He was a good man and a special friend, one who knew all her secrets and cared about her anyway. Although he'd never pressed her to make love, she knew it was only a matter of time now that they were both out of college dorms. When the moment of truth came, what would she do?

If she refused, she might lose Charlie completely. And she couldn't ask for a more honest or trustworthy man. Their relationship had always been...comfortable. Now that he had a steady job, he might even be considering marriage. But if she became his wife, he'd expect—and deserve—physical love. Would she ever be ready for that?

Although she knew Charlie would make a wonderful husband, he had never inspired the kind of passion she'd always thought a man you cared about should.

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

She sighed. Until recently she'd hoped desire for him would come with the passing of time. Unfortunately, the sensual feelings, that awakened since she'd come to central Florida, were not aroused by her boyfriend. They'd been stirred to life by a tall, lean cowboy with an attitude.

\* \* \*

The next day Kim arrived early at the Triple H carrying a box of doughnuts. She had brought her own laptop computer that she'd used for school. Not wanting a confrontation first thing in the morning, she left it in the car. She found J.D. already leading two horses out to the pasture.

"No riders this morning?" she asked when she met him at the fence.

"Not yet. If we get some, it will be easy enough to bring the horses in as needed. In the meantime, they get a break and so do I." He cast a hungry look at the box in her hand. "I hope you brought enough for two."

She smiled. "Of course." As she fell into step with him, she looked around. The cool morning hours were really beautiful here. It was so peaceful. The soft nickering of the horses and the birds calling one another were the only sounds. You couldn't even hear the highway. No machinery, no car horns, not even a radio. It seemed as if they were the only two people on earth.

They reached the office. Kim set the box on the desk. Her heart warmed when she noticed a sugar bowl and spoons on the table and realized he'd brought them for her. J.D. poured two cups of coffee before reaching in the refrigerator to pull out a small carton of milk.

"Thanks." She avoided his eyes as she prepared her coffee and took a seat on the couch. He seemed to be in a pleasant mood this morning. It might be a good time to introduce some more of her ideas.

"When I went through the invoices, I noticed you buy almost all of your supplies from one feed store. Have you ever compared prices to wholesalers or other dealers?"

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. had helped himself to a doughnut. He stiffened as he stopped chewing and swallowed, his expression hard. "No, I haven't."

"Why not?"

"My dad always bought from them. I can't remember ever looking elsewhere. I guess it might be a good idea to check it out."

Kim hadn't realized she was holding her breath. She let it out slowly, hoping he wouldn't notice. "I'll do that this morning. Can you give me an idea of the monthly supplies you use?"

"Sure." He finished the doughnut and reached for another. With his free hand he picked up a pencil and started to jot things on a blank piece of paper. By the time he'd downed his third jelly-filled, the list was complete. He handed it to Kim and rose to refill his coffee cup.

She glanced at the paper and looked at him with raised eyebrows. "You go through that much in *one* month?"

"Yep. In summer. Winter is worse."

"Wow." She gazed at the list in wonder. "But couldn't some of this be bought in bigger quantities?"

"Probably. Why don't you check it out?" He drained the rest of his coffee. "I'm going to get started on stalls while it's still a comfortable temperature in there."

As soon as he was gone, Kim went out to the car for her computer, slipping back into the office and setting it up without being seen. Then she picked up the phone book and got to work.

When J.D. returned an hour later, he frowned at the laptop in front of her. "Where did that come from?" he asked in a suspicious tone.

"Never mind. It's mine, so it didn't cost you a thing."

"But—"

"Look at this!" Before he could argue, she jumped to her feet and proudly thrust the paper in front of him.

She had neatly written columns with all the supplies he'd told her he needed. Next to each entry was the price he had been paying. Next to that she had recorded a new, much lower price.

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

He raised both dark brows. "How...?"

"Mostly by comparison shopping. Several places gave me lower quotes for large quantities. When I told your feed store what I had in mind, they agreed to match the prices rather than lose your business."

"But this means we'll be saving almost fifty percent!"

She nodded and grinned. "Yes."

He came to join her behind the desk, shaking his head in amazement. A slow smile spread across his face as he studied the figures. Before she realized his intent, he grabbed her and enveloped her in a bear hug. "Lady, I could kiss you," he said, chuckling.

Kim was too stunned to react. She'd never seen J.D. so happy. It was nice to hear his deep throaty laugh. His chest felt hard and muscular against her breasts as he pulled her to him. After a moment of hesitation, she returned the hug. It felt wonderful, especially since she was the cause of his joy.

Within seconds he drew back and headed for the refrigerator. Kim watched him, wondering if he was as unaffected by the embrace as he seemed. The effort to get enough air in her lungs made her sink back down on the chair.

"Looks like I need a new supply of drinks," J.D. said, his face hidden by the open refrigerator door. "I'll get some from the house." Without even a backward glance, he strode out the door. His footsteps echoed through the empty barn.

Kim picked up the schedule she'd made out the day before and looked it over as she tried to get her mind off her ranch partner. It was getting harder and harder to work with him without reacting to his male presence. When he'd said he could kiss her, she'd actually—for just a moment, of course—hoped he would.

Her heartbeat quickened again when she heard the approach of footsteps. But it was Becky who poked her head in the doorway. "I'm here if you want to leave now."

Grateful to have the chance to escape without seeing J.D. again,

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

Kim made a quick exit.

\* \* \*

J.D. walked inside his house and absently patted Tiny's head when the large mixed-breed dog joined him as they headed for the kitchen. A quick look in his refrigerator revealed only one cola.

"I needed to go to the store anyway," he mumbled. The dog wagged her tail in response. J.D. took the can and glanced out the window as he started to drink.

Kim was leaving. She looked good today in form-fitting jeans and a blue T-shirt, her blonde hair pulled back with a matching blue ribbon. Not that she didn't always look good. Not that she wasn't always distracting.

He'd never thought it would be so difficult to work with someone of the opposite sex. He and Becky had known each other so long he didn't think of her as a woman. Kim made it hard to forget.

J.D. felt a strange longing as he recalled hugging her. He certainly hadn't expected to react to her the way he did. She was so soft, so delicate. And she smelled so good. Not perfumy, but fresh and clean with a light flowery scent. It had been a real effort to pull away from her. If he'd held her a second longer, he would have been lost.

Clenching his jaw, he crumpled the empty can with one hand. She'd confirmed she had a boyfriend. A pretty girl like her probably had several—all city guys with college degrees.

What did it matter, anyway? She was his business partner. If he let their relationship become more than that, he'd be sorry. A city chick like her wouldn't be interested in a country guy like him. At least not for long. By the time she wore out her first pair of designer jeans, she'd be happy to head home.

He'd learned that the hard way.

\* \* \*

After taking delivery on her furniture and getting settled, Kim headed back to work. Once at the Triple H, she didn't have time to

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

think about anything except her many duties. Becky had already left for the day, and back-to-back rides were scheduled until dark.

Following the new rules, helmets were offered and all riders were expected to sign release forms. J.D. accompanied any groups who hadn't been there before.

Becky had left the stalls ready, so as soon as the last riders were out, Kim and J.D. brought the rest of the horses in.

Once again, working as a team, they finished ahead of schedule. They fell into the new routine as though they had been doing it for months instead of days. When the last horse was fed, they returned to the office to lock up.

"I'll be here early again tomorrow," Kim promised. "I want to go over the books again and see if there aren't some other ways to save money."

J.D. nodded. "Okay." He waited for her to go out the door, then switched off the light. She saw him stroke his chin as they walked out, but he was silent until they reached her car. Finally, he cleared his throat, and she glanced at him.

"Thanks for checking on the feed prices," he said. "It looks like you know your stuff."

"It will save *me* money, too." She climbed in and turned to smile at him.

"Yeah, I guess so. It's all half yours now, isn't it?" His face was hard to read in the moonlight, but his voice sounded bitter. He shut the door harder than necessary and turned toward his house.

\* \* \*

The rest of the week fell into a comfortable routine. Kim arrived at the ranch early every morning to share breakfast with J.D. while they discussed business. Then, while she handled paperwork and phone calls, he took care of whatever maintenance needed to be done on the barn. If there were rides scheduled, they tacked up the horses together. He served as trail guide when needed.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

As soon as Becky arrived, about lunchtime each day, Kim left to handle her errands at home. By the end of the week, she had finished outfitting and decorating her apartment and opened a bank account.

The only problem with her schedule was she never got to spend time with Charlie. Since he worked during her free hours in the early afternoon, and the ranch needed her in the evenings, they didn't see each other all week. She could tell from his tone of voice on the phone that he wasn't happy with the situation.

"I haven't even seen your apartment," he complained one night when he called her.

"I know. I'll talk to J.D. about getting some time off," she promised. But she knew it wouldn't work. She couldn't leave when she was needed. Besides, now that she had her own apartment, a part of her was afraid of what Charlie might expect when they were alone.

\* \* \*

After working all weekend, Kim decided on Monday that it was time to start telling J.D. some more of her new ideas. Instinctively, she knew she would be in for a battle.

"Where the hell is the money supposed to come from?" he roared when she suggested building more fence to allow pasture rotation.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Sorry." He ran a hand through his thick head of dark hair. "Where in *tarnation* am I supposed to find the money?"

"We can buy more materials with the money we're saving by buying feed in bulk."

He shook his head. "I thought the whole idea of that was to *save* money, not come out even."

Kim swallowed. The mutinous glare he tossed her way was disconcerting. But she knew she was right. "We will," she insisted. She reached for a stack of books on the desk and pulled them to her. "I've been doing some checking and—"

"And you think I should build more fence because some *book* says



## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

so?"

"Of course not! It makes sense. With only one pasture, the grass is constantly being eaten. If you could rotate, giving each area a few weeks of rest to grow, the horses would always have good grazing. We'd have fewer cases of sand colic and would need less feed."

J.D. let out a long sigh. "My vet did say something about that." He shook his head. "How much will it cost?"

"We can afford it. I'll take it out of the regular feed bill."

He threw her a hard look. "You're sure about this?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

"All right, order it," he grumbled. He grabbed his hat and strode out of the office before she could talk him into something else.

\* \* \*

When Kim arrived the next morning, she took a critical look around the stable. Although everything was in functional repair, it really needed some sprucing up. She made a mental list of supplies she'd need and resolved to talk to J.D. about it.

She found him already tacking up horses in the barn. As she joined him, she suggested making a trip to town later for materials.

Busy putting a bridle on an uncooperative horse, he grunted, "All right."

They didn't get another chance to talk before lunch. When Becky arrived, Kim drove J.D.'s pickup to town for her afternoon break. She came back a few hours later with the bed of the truck loaded with painting supplies and plants.

After making sure she wasn't needed right away, Kim started to unload the plants and set them around the outside of the barn.

Engrossed in her work, she didn't notice J.D.'s approach until his shadow fell across the truck bed as she leaned over it to retrieve another pot. Her happy smile of greeting faded as she turned and caught a glimpse of the expression on his face.

## CHAPTER 5

“What in the world do you think you’re doing?” J.D. asked.

Kim decided to ignore his obvious disapproval. “Getting ready to start planting these bushes. Can you help me set them up?” She turned back to the truck.

“Do you know what those are?” he growled.

“Uh-huh. Oleanders. They were blooming when I was down on spring break. I asked the nursery man what those pretty flowers were that I saw along the highway.”

“They’re pretty all right. Pretty deadly.”

She whirled around in surprise. “What do you mean?”

Anger flashed from his dark eyes. “The nursery didn’t tell you oleanders are poisonous?”

“Well, no. I guess I should have asked.” She slumped against the truck, her excitement rapidly fading.

“You should have asked *me* before you even went there,” he thundered with obvious exasperation.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"Yeah, I guess so. I wanted to surprise you, though." She cast a quick glance at him and stifled the urge to wince. "You *did* say I could take the truck to get supplies."

"You never said what you had in mind. I certainly didn't think you'd be foolish enough to plant poisonous flowers around a barn!"

Kim bit her lip. "The horses don't graze there. It didn't occur to me to worry about whether the plants were edible. I just wanted to spruce the place up a little." Her voice broke on her last words, and she started to walk away from him.

J.D. placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. His voice softened. "It's okay. At least they're still in pots, so the nursery will take them back. Come on, I'll help you load them onto the truck."

Her heart lifted a little. "Could we plant them around the house? They're so pretty."

He shook his head. "I don't want them anywhere on the property. There's always a chance of a horse getting loose, or even a well-meaning trail rider trying to feed it to his mount. I'm sure we can get the nursery to exchange them for something pretty *and* safe."

"All right. Would you like to approve the paint color, too, before I make the trip back to town?"

Arching a brow, he groaned. "Paint? I hate painting!"

"I'll help," Kim offered. "Just think how nice this place will look when it's done!"

"It's not pink, is it?"

"What's wrong with pink?"

J.D. shook his head with a wry grin. "Lady, you should come with a warning label."

\* \* \*

The next morning Kim sat on the couch in the office watching her partner enjoy his breakfast. She held her coffee cup in both hands as she nervously chewed her lip. After what happened yesterday, did she dare mention her next idea?

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. stopped drinking his coffee and reached for a third doughnut. Catching her eye, he gave a resigned sigh. "All right, what is it this time? You want me to air condition the barn, so the horses won't get too hot?"

Kim smiled in spite of her nervousness. "No..."

"What then?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"Remember how I suggested we give riding lessons?"

"I already told you we don't have a safe place to do it." He finished the doughnut and wiped his hand on a napkin.

"What if we built a round pen?"

He let out a snort of disgust and shook his head. "Lady, are you trying to run me out of business?"

"No, really," she said, jumping to her feet. "It wouldn't cost that much for materials—just more fencing. I've been doing some research and—"

"Your research is starting to get on my nerves."

"But that's because you know I'm right." She gave him a bright smile.

"Like h—heck!"

Kim pursed her lips. "I'd appreciate it if you'd stop raising your voice when we're having a discussion."

"Is that what we're having?"

"That's what I'm *trying* to have!" Her own voice rose with frustration. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed.

"What's so funny?" She frowned and cocked her head, puzzled at his complete change of attitude.

"You. You're so darn cute when you're mad!" J.D. grinned, but instead of melting her, as he apparently intended, it only made her more angry.

"I'll come back when you're ready to have an *adult* conversation." She threw him a glacial look as she strode past him out the door.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

His anger gone, J.D. leaned back in his chair and chuckled. He was starting to enjoy tangling with Kim. She had a lot more spunk than he'd thought at first.

Of course that could be dangerous, he reminded himself. He'd better make sure she didn't try to take over.

Sobered by the thought, he poured himself another cup of coffee. Was he objecting just to object?

So far, Kim had come up with some great ideas. She definitely was saving money on the old expenses. The new ones she wanted to add would be economical in the long run.

Giving lessons would be a new way to bring in more cash. There certainly was a demand for it. People called every week wanting to know where their children could learn to ride. He already owned horses suitable for beginners, which either he or Becky could use to teach kids. All they needed was a place to do it.

After draining his coffee, he went to look for Kim. He found her outside, watching the horses in the pasture. His black filly, Morticia, raced around the perimeter trying to get one of the older horses to give up its grazing and chase her.

J.D. strode up to the fence and stopped next to Kim, resting a booted foot on the lowest rail as he leaned on the top one.

"You could use it to train Morticia, too," Kim said, picking up the conversation where they'd left it.

"Okay, I give up. We'll build a lunging pen."

Kim turned to look at him with narrowed eyes. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"The expense, the work..." she mimicked.

"I thought you had an answer for all that."

"I do. Becky told me she knows some high school boys with strong backs who're looking for a summer job."

"Great. It's settled then. Order the materials." He pulled his foot off the fence.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"There's one more thing... Can I talk to you about getting some time off?"

He pivoted around and crossed his arms. "Why?"

"I haven't seen my friend Charlie in over a week."

J.D. felt a strange knot in his belly. His jaw tightened. "You already get time off every weekday. Can't you see him then?"

"Not really. He works during the day. I know you need me on weekends..."

"Why can't he take time off from *his* job? Didn't you tell me he works for his father?"

"Well, yeah... I guess maybe he can. I'll ask him about it."

"Good." A pair of trail riders arrived, and J.D. headed over to meet them, glad of a chance to end the discussion.

\* \* \*

The next morning J.D. glanced up from the schedule when Kim cleared her throat. "What's up?"

"I called Charlie last night. We're going to meet at a restaurant near his office for lunch today."

J.D.'s gut twisted. Probably shouldn't have had that last doughnut. He kept his expression neutral. "How does that affect me?" he asked.

"It doesn't, really. I just need to make sure I leave on time."

"Don't worry, I'll cover for you." His voice came out gruffer than he'd intended. He picked up his hat and headed out of the office.

A moment later he began cleaning stalls with vengeful vigor. Why did it bother him so much that Kim wanted to see her boyfriend? He'd known about the other man for some time now. His own relationship with her was supposed to be strictly business. It wasn't her fault it was getting harder and harder for him to remember that.

"J.D...." Kim stood in the aisle.

At least she was learning to stay out of his way when he worked. "Yeah?" He continued mucking without looking up.

"There's a call for you. He says he's your brother."

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

“Ben?” Frowning in concern, J.D. immediately exited the stall and handed her the manure rake. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. He just asked for you.”

Hurrying to the office, J.D. picked up the phone. “Ben? Are you okay?”

“No, I’m mad.”

J.D. let out a sigh of relief. “Is that all?” He went around his desk and pulled out the chair. “So what else is new?”

“Who the hell told you to pay my tuition?”

Sinking onto his chair, J.D. told him, “Somebody had to.”

“Dad left me enough to cover for awhile. I planned to get a loan when it ran out.”

“I didn’t want you to have to do that. The bill came here, so I paid it.”

“Without asking me?”

“Would you have let me?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

There was a long silence at the other end of the line. Finally Ben spoke again. “Look, J.D., I appreciate what you tried to do, but it isn’t worth losing the ranch. I won’t let you sell it to put me through school.”

“I won’t have to. I got a partner.”

“You *what*?”

“I found an investor. She’s working here with me and helping with the business. It’s already turning around.”

“She? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yeah, she has a degree in business. It’s working out pretty good.”

“Was she the one who answered the phone? She sounds cute.”

“What difference does *that* make? Anyway, she has a boyfriend.”

“Does that matter?”

J.D. clenched his jaw and counted to ten.

Before he came up with an answer, his brother spoke again. “I’m

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

sorry, J.D., I shouldn't have said that." After a short pause, Ben added, "Look...we need to talk about Lisa."

\* \* \*

Kim finished the stalls and checked her watch. It was almost time for a trail ride, and J.D. was still on the phone. She gathered up the horses' tack and performed her customary share of the preparation.

When her partner had still not appeared by the time she finished grooming, she eyed the saddle speculatively. She'd been untacking for over a week now and sometimes carried the heavy equipment to the tack room. She hoped that maybe by now she was strong enough to lift the Western saddle up onto the horse.

After picking it up the way she'd seen J.D. do, Kim used every ounce of strength she had to heave the heavy leather up onto the horse's back.

She did it! The saddle was on. Kim stood back with a gratified smile to admire the job. Pleased with her accomplishment, she fastened the girth and led the horse out to the fence before going back for the second mount.

Smiling with satisfaction, she thought about how much she enjoyed this job. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she was really achieving something on her own. Although only half of the ranch belonged to her, she was proud of the improvements she had made. She grew stronger and capable of more tasks every day. Maybe someday she'd buy the other half from her partner.

As she passed the office, Kim caught a glimpse of J.D. seated at his desk, deep in conversation on the phone. She frowned, remembering that his brother had called. This ranch had belonged to his family for generations. He had a much stronger tie here than she did. If one of them bought out the other, he'd want to be—and deserved to be—the one to stay.

Feeling a stab of regret at that idea, she shrugged it off and started tacking the next horse. When that time came, she'd find a solution.



### RAWHIDE AND LACE

After all, there were plenty of other ranches. She could always buy another and start her own business. With the experience she was gaining here, she'd be ready.

\* \* \*

At the mention of Ben's girlfriend, J.D. clenched his teeth. Aware that he gripped the phone so hard his knuckles went white, he took a deep breath and let it out before replying. "I thought the subject of Lisa was off-limits."

"We broke up."

"Am I supposed to be sorry about that?"

"Hey, give me a break. I'm trying to apologize here."

The sincerity in his brother's voice broke through the shell of bitterness J.D. had built up for months. He leaned back and stretched his feet out in front of him. "You never asked me what happened that night."

"I know... That's why I'm sorry. I should have trusted you and not taken her side. But you know what hard heads we Hudson men have."

J.D. finally allowed himself a wry smile. "Speak for yourself, kid."

"You taught me everything I know about being stubborn."

"Guess I did." J.D. chuckled as they slipped into the old habit of friendly bantering. Suddenly he missed Ben more than anything. "When are you coming home?"

"My term will be over in a couple of weeks. I'd like to take the other half of the summer off. Can you use another ranch hand?"

J.D. grinned. "Your timing is perfect. My new partner has me talked into building a couple thousand feet of fence."

Ben groaned. "Maybe I should stay in school after all..."

Hearing the approach of a car, J.D. glanced out the window. "Damn! The trail riders are here and I don't have the horses ready!"

"Don't you have help for that?" Ben asked.

About to hang up and race for the tack room, J.D. spotted Kim leading a saddled horse. *How the hell..?*

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

He watched her continue to the fence and saw that another horse was already there, tacked up and ready to go. She must have done it all by herself.

“Um... yeah,” he said, remembering Ben’s question. “Becky isn’t here, but it looks like Kim managed.”

“Sounds like the chick’s working out okay.”

“For a city girl, she’s turning into a mighty good worker,” J.D. admitted. Then he grinned and added, “But don’t *ever* tell her I said that.”

\* \* \*

Kim couldn’t find J.D. when it was time to leave for her lunch with Charlie, so she waited until Becky arrived. She had hoped to get away early enough to go back to her apartment to shower and change. But having to finish the stalls herself, as well as tacking up the horses, had put her behind schedule. She barely had time to wash up, change her blouse and comb her hair.

As a result, Kim felt grimy and underdressed when she entered the restaurant Charlie had chosen. It was near the downtown area, and most of the people there were businessmen and women in office dress. Charlie looked fabulous in a dark suit.

He rose to meet her when she approached his table. His smile of greeting faded as his gaze traveled down to her jeans and boots.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, “I didn’t have much time to get ready.”

He shrugged agreeably. “It’s okay.”

After he pulled out her chair and seated her, Charlie’s tawny brows drew together. “Something’s different about you.” He touched her hair. “You’re blonder. I like it.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t done anything to the color. It must be lighter from spending so much time in the sun.”

“Could be. You’ve gotten tan, too. Sure you haven’t been sneaking off to the beach?” he teased.

She grinned. “I wish I had. My tan might be a little more even.”

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

Kim picked up the menu and started to read. Suddenly, Charlie grabbed her hand and inspected it. "What's this? A callous? And what happened to your nails?" His lips pursed. "What the devil do you do at that ranch?"

She shrugged. "Nothing I don't want to do. It's hard work, but I enjoy it."

"Maybe I'll have to go out there to see for myself."

Kim smiled. "I'd like that. We've made a lot of improvements."

The rest of the lunch passed pleasantly. Kim and Charlie discussed current events and mutual friends. Much too soon the hour was over, and he had to leave. He agreed to visit the ranch on the weekend and invited her to go to dinner with him Saturday night.

\* \* \*

Later, when Kim and J.D. were bringing the horses in, the animals seemed to be especially nervous. J.D. was ahead, leading Apache when the Paint horse suddenly snorted and reared.

"Are you okay, Kim?" J.D. called over his shoulder as he patted and spoke softly to the obviously frightened animal.

"Yes." Kim's own heart thudded against her chest. She took Mouse into the closest stall and left her there while she joined J.D. "What is it?"

Apache stamped his feet and snorted repeatedly as he shook his head in rebellion. "Something must be in his stall," J.D. said with a puzzled frown. "He won't go in." He placed a hand on the horse's chest and backed him up several feet before handing the lead rope to Kim.

She led the gelding into another stall and talked to him soothingly. As soon as the horse stood calmly, J.D. strode to Apache's stall and looked inside. He paled.

"What is it?" Kim asked, alarmed.

He seemed frozen to the spot, his gaze fastened on a corner of the dark interior.

She strained her neck to see inside. A very large black snake was

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

frantically trying to crawl up the far wall.

“What should we do?” she asked.

J.D. shut the door of the stall. “Get me a shovel.”

“You’re not going to kill it with that?”

“If I try to shoot it, we’ll have a stampede in here! Never mind... I’ll get it myself.” He turned abruptly away and started toward the supply room.

Kim took a tentative peek back inside the stall. The snake coiled in the corner. “Isn’t that a black indigo?” she said to her partner’s retreating back.

J.D. strode quickly down the aisle and stopped at the supply room. His heart was still pounding from the shock of finding the snake. But he *had* to kill it, he told himself. He didn’t want to let Kim know he was afraid.

As his eyes readjusted to the dim light inside the supply room, he grabbed a shovel from the rack and emerged, nearly bumping into Kim coming the other way. The sight in front of him made his heart once again slam against his chest.

## CHAPTER 6

Kim held the snake behind its head, with the balance of six or so feet coiled around her neck and shoulders. She smiled.

“It’s okay, J.D. He’s harmless.”

He took a tentative step forward and looked closer. “You’re right. It’s a black indigo. How did *you* know it wasn’t poisonous?”

“After what happened with the oleanders, I’ve been doing a little reading about Florida plants and animals. These snakes are endangered. It’s actually against the law to kill them. They’re also very tame. See?”

She held the snake up, and J.D. drew back again, muttering a string of expletives under his breath. “Get that blasted thing away from me!”

Kim raised her eyebrows. This was a new side to J.D. She hadn’t thought he was afraid of anything, but he sure didn’t seem to like snakes.

She was glad a friend had once owned a pet boa and taught her how to hold it. “Okay,” she said soothingly. “I’ll just turn him loose outside. He’ll probably stay around, though. The book said they stay pretty

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

much within a one mile radius.”

J.D. muttered a few more unintelligible words which she figured were probably better left untranslated. She released the snake well away from the barn and returned to finish bringing in the horses.

Later, as they locked up the office, Kim remembered J.D. had never mentioned his phone call. “Is your brother okay?” she asked him.

“Yeah. He just wanted to talk to me about something.” J.D. switched off the light, and they headed for her car. Kim gave him a curious look, but not wanting to pry, remained silent.

After a few minutes, J.D. spoke again. “It looks like we’ll have some help with that fence. Ben is coming for the rest of the summer.”

“That’s great...isn’t it?” The look on J.D.’s face was hard to read.

“Yeah. We had a disagreement last year, but I think we can work it out. I hope so anyway.”

“You disagreed about how to run the ranch?”

J.D.’s face suddenly clouded. “No, it was personal. Let’s drop it, okay?” He threw her a pointed look before they stepped out of the barn.

Kim bit her lip, thankful for the darkness that hid her disappointment. For a minute she’d thought he was finally going to open up to her. Now his face read like a stone wall. Only he knew what kind of pain lurked behind it.

\* \* \*

The rest of the week passed quickly. On Saturday J.D. and Becky were working in front of the barn when a red Corvette roared in and pulled up to the fence.

“Is Kim here?” the blond man who emerged asked, casting a curious glance around.

“She’s in the office,” J.D. told him as he adjusted stirrups for a young woman mounted on Apache. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Charlie Simpson, a friend of Kim’s.”

J.D. quelled the urge to stiffen. He forced a smile onto his face as he told the rider, “Okay, you’re all set.” When she trotted the horse out to

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

join her companions, he turned back to his uninvited guest and offered his hand. “J.D. Hudson—her partner.”

Simpson appeared to resist the urge to wince at the bone crushing grip J.D. gave him. “N-n-nice to meet you. Mind if I go say hello to Kim?”

“Suit yourself.”

As soon as the other man stalked off toward the office, J.D. faced Becky. “That’s it for an hour, right?”

“I think so. I’ll ride out with this group.”

“Okay. I’ll be at the house if you need me.” He turned and started for home, ignoring Becky’s puzzled frown.

\* \* \*

J.D. glanced out his window for the tenth time in the last hour. Simpson’s car still sat there. Didn’t the guy know Kim had work to do? Somehow he doubted that the city slicker was helping with her chores. He started to turn away, but stopped when he saw the couple emerge from the barn.

Irritably, he watched them approach the Corvette. Simpson had his arm wrapped possessively around Kim’s shoulder. Stopping at the car, the blond man leaned back against the vehicle and pulled her close.

They looked like they belonged together. J.D.’s gut twisted. He slammed his fist against the windowsill. *You’re a fool, Hudson.* Knowing he shouldn’t watch, he somehow couldn’t pull his gaze away.

Simpson kissed Kim, but she drew away quickly.

What was it? J.D. wondered. Was she embarrassed—afraid someone might be watching? She seemed nervous, continually pulling her hair away from her face. She shook her head, and the city slicker reached under her chin to tilt her face up for another kiss.

J.D. had seen enough. He grabbed his hat and strode out his front door, letting it bang behind him as he hurried toward the couple.

\* \* \*

Kim winced at the sound of a slam. Her back was to the house, but

## **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

she knew J.D. approached. She was glad for an excuse to pull out of Charlie's embrace.

"Looks like I better let you get back to work," he said in a resigned voice. "I don't think your partner is too happy about my being here." When she nodded, he asked, "Sure you wouldn't like to change your mind about going out after work tonight? We could do something easy, like a movie."

She shook her head. "Weekends we're so busy here that, by the time we get done, all I want to do is go home and crash."

He sighed. "We've got to do something about this schedule."

J.D. walked up to them. He gave Charlie a cool nod. "Looks like you found her," he drawled.

"Yeah. Sorry I kept her away from her job so long."

J.D. shrugged. "That's okay. It's pretty slow right now."

Charlie got in his car and waved before disappearing down the road.

"We'd better help Becky finish the stalls," J.D. said.

"Okay. Sorry for taking such a long break."

His eyes narrowed, and she wondered if he suspected her relief at the interruption. "No problem." He tipped his hat and strode off.

Kim frowned, puzzled by his curt response. Why should he mind Charlie's visit as long as she got the work done? She remembered his earlier response when she'd asked about getting time off to see her boyfriend. Could it be that he didn't like the fact that she had another man in her life?

Could he be jealous?

No, she decided. J.D. was just starting to accept her as his partner. He certainly wouldn't be interested in anything beyond that. She wasn't even sure if he liked her.

Charlie, on the other hand, made her feel special. They always had fun together, and she knew where she stood with him. She deserved some free time to spend with him. J.D. would just have to get used to the idea that she needed a life outside his ranch.



## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

\* \* \*

The rest of the afternoon was busy. Kim had started advertising the trail rides, and it seemed to have worked. Every mount was booked until dark.

After all the horses were in and fed, J.D. counted out the stack of bills they'd received as payment. "This is the most we've ever taken in for one day," he said, sitting down at the desk.

"We could do even better if we could entice people to come on the off days and hours," Kim suggested. She laughed at the eyebrow-raised look he threw her. "No, really, we'll have plenty of help in the summer."

He stared at her for a moment. "Maybe. If we could get riders to come at the less busy hours, we'd be making money on time that's otherwise wasted." J.D. steepled his hands and rested his chin on them, brow creased. "It might work. We'd need some incentive, though."

They brainstormed a plan. By the time they'd decided on distributing coupons at the feed stores and through 4H and Scouting troops, another hour had passed.

"Oh no," Kim groaned, looking at the clock on the wall above J.D. "I didn't realize it was getting so late."

"Hot date?"

"No. Charlie wanted to take me out. I guess it's a good thing I said no."

J.D. studied her for a moment. When she didn't elaborate, he stood. "I have a couple of steaks defrosted, if you don't have plans for dinner..."

Kim's stomach growled, and she laughed nervously. "I guess I *am* pretty hungry. Are you sure you have enough?"

"Sure. I always prepare two. Sometimes I reheat the extra one for breakfast." When she hesitated, he handed Kim her purse. "Come on," he insisted, taking her elbow and ushering her out of the office.

He locked up and they headed out, as they did every night. Tonight

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

instead of parting at her car, they continued on to his house. J.D. unlocked the door and stepped in first to switch on the light.

Kim gasped as she felt something large and furry brush against her leg.

"It's okay," J.D. said. "That's just Tiny."

"*Tiny!*" Kim looked down at the enormous dog sitting in front of her and laughed. "How did he get a name like that?"

"She. Well, we found her by the road when she was a puppy. She was a little bit of a thing, so Ben and I named her Tiny. Of course she grew and grew, but by then the name had stuck."

Kim knelt down and scratched the dog's ears. "What kind of dog is she?"

"Heinz 57, I imagine. She looks like she has some Saint Bernard, and maybe Rotweiler."

"She's adorable. How come you don't bring her to the barn?"

"People who don't know her are afraid of her."

Kim grinned. "I can't imagine why."

She followed him to the kitchen and saw he'd told the truth about the steaks. They were huge.

After he washed up, J.D. moved aside to give her a turn at the sink. "Can you make a salad?" he asked, pulling a head of lettuce and a tomato out of the refrigerator.

"Sure." She finished drying her hands and took the vegetables from him. Her fingers brushed his, and she felt a current of awareness spread through her. Did he feel it, too?

J.D. walked over to the stove and began preparing the steaks, then pulled out some frozen French fries. Kim watched him while she tore the lettuce.

"It looks like you know your way around a kitchen," she pointed out.

"I've been a bachelor long enough to learn to take care of myself."

"Have you ever been married?"

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

His back was to her now, and she couldn't see his face. But the sudden way he stiffened his shoulders at her innocent question told her she'd brought up a touchy issue.

"No," he said without turning. "How do you like your steak?"

Getting the message at his abrupt change of subject, Kim kept conversation limited to that necessary for meal preparation. Half an hour later they sat at his table sharing dinner.

"This steak is really good," Kim said between bites. "I never did learn how to cook one without burning it."

J.D. nodded. "My dad taught me. He believed in teaching his sons to do everything around the house as well as the barn." His eyes took on a distant look, and Kim waited, hoping he would continue. But he resumed eating, and the topic was dropped.

Over the rest of the meal, they discussed the weather, the stable, and the horses. Kim found it easy to talk to him, as long as she didn't ask anything personal.

When they finished eating, she helped him clear the table and wash the dishes. It felt natural to be there with him. Kim relaxed more than she had in a long time. She smiled at the sight of her tough partner up to his elbows in soap suds. A month ago she wouldn't have believed it possible for such an outdoor man to be so domestically handy.

They finished the dishes and made coffee. Kim carried her cup into the living room while waiting for J.D. to feed the dinner scraps to Tiny. She stood in front of some framed photographs when he came to join her.

"Your mother?" she asked, inclining her head toward the picture of a young woman with eyes just like J.D.'s.

He nodded. "She died when I was eight. Dad raised us."

"I wish I could have known your parents," she said softly. "They look like quite a pair."

"I don't remember Mom very well. But Dad did a great job. I miss him." J.D. went to sit on the large armchair, and Kim followed.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

Why had he stayed away from the ranch so long if he was so close to his father? What could have happened?

She studied the planes of his face as he drank his coffee. He had a rugged appearance, one that held a lot of pain. She wished he would share his feelings.

But why should he confide in her? She was his business partner, nothing more. Still, tonight it seemed they were becoming friends.

J.D. knew Kim watched him. The question was, why? He hoped she hadn't guessed how he was starting to feel about her. Even now, he was getting warm. And it wasn't from the coffee.

He looked up and met her eyes, holding them. She blushed! Maybe she *did* know.

She glanced away, nervously running her tongue over her lip.

"More coffee?" he asked, rising.

"N—no. Thank you, but I think I'd better be going." She jumped up and hurried to the kitchen, putting her cup next to the sink.

He followed and blocked her path as she turned to go, then set his cup next to hers on the counter. "What are you afraid of?" he asked gently.

"N—nothing. I just need to go."

"Why? There's no one waiting for you at home, is there?"

She shook her head. "No. But I have to get up early..."

"To go to work? On Sunday? Your boss must be a tyrant." He took a step closer.

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips and was gone. "He is. He definitely is."

She stiffened when he moved still closer, pinning her between himself and the sink. The wild look that entered her eyes reminded him of a skittish filly ready to bolt.

"Whoa, baby. Take it easy." He tenderly touched her cheek. She felt so soft against his rough finger. "I won't hurt you, Kim."

Her eyes were huge, luminous blue spheres. She stared back at him

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

for a moment, as though mesmerized. When he lightly traced a slow path down her throat, she trembled.

Bracing her hands against the hard Formica behind her, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

He gently kissed her lips. When she didn't resist, he increased the pressure until she relaxed.

She tasted so good, like sweet warm coffee. Wanting more, he coaxed her lips apart with his tongue. Feeling her willing response, he grabbed her waist and lifted her up on the counter to sit in front of him. Trailing kisses on her face and neck, he caressed her back and shoulders with his hands. She slipped her arms around his neck and made a little purring sound. As she shifted position, her knee brushed against the front of his jeans, making him harder than ever.

Groaning with desire, he buried his face against her soft shoulder. He lowered his hands and tugged her shirt out of her waistband. "Lady, I want you so bad," he muttered.

## CHAPTER 7

Kim stiffened at J.D.'s heated words. The dreamlike state he had wrapped her in shattered as soon as she realized what was happening. Terror engulfed her and her heart began to race with fear. She swatted his hand away.

He released her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I... I can't do this."

Breathing heavily, he stepped back. "We can go a little slower if you want. I—"

"No!" She jumped down.

He stared at her. "What do you mean 'no'? Don't you want to? This has been building up since the day we met. You know I want you."

*Want. Not love. Not care about. Just like Greg.*

"That's just it!" she said, her voice breaking.

"You wanted me, too, a minute ago. We were getting along great. What the hell happened?"

"N—nothing." She bit her lip. "I just... I'm sorry... I better go."

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

She tucked her shirt back in as she ran, snatching up her purse on the way.

Once inside her car, with the door locked behind her, she leaned over the steering wheel and started to cry. A stream of shuddering sobs came pouring out in a torrent of confusion and despair.

What was wrong with her? J.D. hadn't hurt her. He'd stopped as soon as she asked him to. Wouldn't she *ever* be able to let a man touch her without fear?

Her thoughts drifted back to earlier in the evening. They'd had such a good time, enjoyed getting to know each other. And then J.D.'s hypnotic dark eyes had stared at her across his coffee cup, and she'd known he wanted to pursue more than a business relationship. Knowing she wasn't ready, she'd tried to leave.

When he'd followed her into the kitchen, her pulse had raced with excitement at his masculine presence so close to her. Her emotions had cartwheeled at first. He'd known just how to calm her. His touch on her skin and hair had been so gentle...

Instead of being frightening, the contact of his rough skin and strong muscles had felt good. She'd only taken a second to decide to trust him and give in to the physical need to be held.

His kisses and caresses had flooded her with sensations she'd never known before. No other man had ever affected her like that. She'd totally enjoyed it until... She shuddered. Until J.D. had moaned that he "wanted" her.

That's what the sleeze who'd tried to rape her two years ago had said. He'd thought she'd be an easy conquest.

Was that all J.D. wanted, too?

Calmer now, Kim glanced back at the house and realized that J.D. hadn't followed her, hadn't even tried to force her. He'd stopped at her first negative reaction.

Totally unlike Greg.

The knowledge only confused her more.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

As she reached in the tissue box for something to dry her tears, she realized that guilt could be playing a part. Charlie's kisses had never affected her like that. When she resisted his gentle advances, she'd always thought her excuse about not being over the attempted rape was the truth.

But maybe her reaction to the attack played a smaller part than she wanted to admit. Maybe her body was trying to tell her what her heart didn't want to admit.

Maybe she didn't love Charlie.

\* \* \*

J.D. stayed in the kitchen for a long time, listening for the sound of Kim's car pulling away. *You blew it*, he told himself. *She's a one-man woman, and you're not the man.*

He pulled a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and poured himself a double, not bothering to add ice before swigging it down. It didn't help.

For a moment he wondered if he'd just been alone on this ranch too long. Maybe any woman would look good.

That wasn't true. Although he'd been working with Becky for several months now, he'd never felt even a passing interest in his ranch hand. The fact that the redhead had a jealous husband was enough of a reason to keep him in line if he ever did. Still, he'd never seen her as anything but an employee.

Had he been so stressed from the responsibility of running the ranch by himself that he'd lost interest in everything else?

Several of the attractive female customers who came out to ride his horses openly flirted with him and waved their ringless fingers his way. So why didn't any of them spark his interest the way Kim did—the one woman he should avoid?

Shaking his head with self-deprecation, he poured himself another shot. Taking his drink with him, he lounged in his favorite chair. His gaze strayed to the seat Kim had vacated just a short while ago. Why did she have to be so desirable?



### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

But it was more than that. He was really starting to like her, as well as want her in his arms. He'd thought she was beautiful the first time he'd seen her. Now much more than a physical attraction drew him.

Kim wasn't at all the fragile city girl he'd thought when he first met her. She was proving to be a fine asset to the ranch, not afraid of hard work, not refusing any job he'd given her. And her business sense was really making the ranch a success. She'd turned out to be a damn good business partner.

He reminded himself Kim also had a lot more in common with college-boy Simpson than with him. She'd probably just gotten momentarily carried away tonight, then had a guilt attack and been embarrassed to tell him.

Wondering why he still hadn't heard her car start up, he glanced out the window. In the dim moonlight he could see the outline of her Mustang. Why hadn't she left? If her boyfriend was the reason she'd run off when things started getting physical, she should be on her way home by now.

Could she be having car trouble? For a moment he considered going out to check. Then, seeing no sign of a raised hood, he decided that must not be the case. If she needed help, she'd surely come back to the door, at least to use his phone.

Or was Kim waiting for him to go after her, to try to talk her into coming back inside? Maybe she wanted to make her boyfriend jealous.

When her car finally started up, he gave a sigh of relief, glad the decision was out of his hands—at least for tonight. He switched off the light and headed for a cold shower.

J.D. decided he'd had enough of city girls and their games. He'd be damned if he'd touch her again without a clear green light ahead.

He would rather kiss that bloody snake.

\* \* \*

When Kim arrived the next morning, carrying a box of doughnuts, J.D. was outside exercising his filly, Morticia. The young black horse,

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

wearing a halter attached to the long rope J.D. held, trotted in a circle around him.

His concentration on the filly gave Kim an opportunity to surreptitiously slip into the office and delay a confrontation. After preparing her coffee, she stood at the window to sip it.

Although J.D.'s stance appeared somewhat stilted, his eyes were shaded under his Western hat. Were his thoughts as confused as hers?

She had to admit to relief at a few more minutes of preparation before facing J.D. How could she explain her behavior last night?

Her thoughts were still jumbled when J.D. turned the horse out into the pasture with the others. Instead of coming into the office as she expected, he leaned on the fence while the filly frolicked in the grass.

Kim chewed her lip as she stared out the window, wondering if he was avoiding her. Should she just go out and start work as though nothing had happened, hoping he'd forget about it?

That would never work. He probably couldn't put her behavior out of his mind any easier than she could.

He looked so ruggedly male out there, his taut arms and shoulders outlined by his denim shirt. The filly spooked and then stood with wild eyes and flaring nostrils until J.D. walked up to her and patted her neck. The way he calmed the young horse, running his fingers through her mane, reminded Kim of the gentle way he'd started his seduction last night. The memory made her quiver with remembered delight. His touch had felt wonderful...until she'd ruined it.

She tossed her head. No point in fantasizing about the relationship going any further. He had no interest in a future with her. And she had no business pursuing anything other than a comfortable working relationship.

Finally, unable to take the suspense any longer, Kim left the doughnuts untouched on the desk and strode outside. She reached him as he started tacking up Sassy. She picked up a curry comb and began to brush the Paint horse tied next to the mare.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. stopped what he was doing. She glanced at him and forced a smile through trembling lips. "Good morning," she said.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sure. I... I can do this. Why don't you have some breakfast?"

He came around Sassy to stand in front of Kim. "You don't look okay."

"I didn't sleep much. But it's my problem. I'll be fine once I wake up."

"Uh-huh. Do you want to tell me why you ran out of my house like a bat out of hell last night?"

Kim bit her lip as she concentrated on a tangled strand of mane. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't ready—"

The phone rang. Glad for an excuse to end the conversation, she turned toward the barn. Before she got half a step away, J.D. grasped her shoulder. She flinched but stopped.

He immediately released his grip. "Look," he said in a gruff tone. "I'm sorry, too. I was out of line. I know you have a boyfriend, and I had no right to expect anything from you."

She kept her gaze on the horse. "It's okay. I guess we both need to remember to keep our minds on business." *If only it was that easy!*

"Good. Let's forget it and get back to work. Thanks to your advertising, we're going to be busy all day."

Nodding, she sprinted for the phone.

By nightfall Kim was exhausted. After helping feed and bed down the horses, she said goodbye to J.D. and headed for her car. This time he didn't invite her to dinner.

\* \* \*

Tuesday morning J.D. beat Kim to the office. When she arrived, he handed her a cup of coffee, prepared the way she liked it, and took his usual seat. "Weather forecast says rain this afternoon," he informed her grimly. "That should mean a quiet day."

Relieved that things seemed back to normal, she took a breakfast

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

sandwich from the bag she'd brought and handed the rest to him. "That will give me a chance to catch up on paperwork. Maybe I can find some more ways to save money."

He unwrapped his sandwich. "Don't you mean more ways to make extra work?"

The phone rang, and Kim wrinkled her nose at him as she reached for it. The corner of his mouth quirked, and J.D. turned away. He picked up his hat and went out.

When he returned to the office later that morning, Kim told him the phone had been quiet except for cancelled rides. She showed him the coupons she'd designed, and he okayed the layout.

The regular daily chores were completed by the time Becky arrived for her shift, so J.D. told the ranch hand he'd put her to work cleaning tack.

"Listen, Kim." J.D. leaned against the doorjamb to face her. "It will be slow all afternoon. Why don't you drop your coupon samples off at the printers on the way home and just take the rest of the day off? There won't be any late rides, so I should be able to feed and close up early."

Kim cast him a questioning look. "Are you sure?" When he nodded, she glanced at Becky.

The other woman winked at her. "Don't worry, we can handle it. Maybe you can finally spend some time with that cute boyfriend of yours."

J.D. stiffened, then pushed off the doorjamb and headed down the center aisle of the barn. "I'm going to get started cleaning saddles," he said, not waiting for a reply. He forced his thoughts to the task at hand and went in search of supplies.

By the time he returned with the necessary equipment, Kim was gone. The barn seemed empty, so he resolved to stay busy.

After several minutes of working together on cleaning the two saddles he'd set up in the office, Becky asked, "What's wrong, J.D.?"

He gave her a wry smile. "Guess I shouldn't be complaining about

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

not enough to do, should I?"

"I should say not. I'd think after the way you worked before Kim came here, you'd be ready for a month-long vacation."

He sighed. "I guess I'm forgetting what it was like a few months ago." He reached for the saddle soap. "How are you and Kim getting along?"

"Great. I wasn't too sure how I'd like working for a city girl." She shrugged. "Guess I thought she'd be stuck up and afraid of getting her hands dirty. But Kim jumped right in and started helping."

Standing up, the redhead repositioned the saddle in front of her to attack it from a different angle. "In fact," she continued, "I'm hoping when summer vacation starts I can cut my hours here to spend more time with my kids."

J.D. frowned. "I know Kim has been sharing a lot of your chores. But if you spend less time here, she and I will be in the same boat you and I were in before she came."

"Not quite. In the summer a lot of teens are looking for work. We should be able to find some who could handle the simple chores. Remember, things are running a lot more efficiently now."

"Yeah, I guess." J.D. sighed. Becky was totally unaware she also filled the role of chaperon. If he and Kim were alone even more over the summer, it would be harder than ever to concentrate on work. He'd already been having a hell of a time trying to forget their kiss. Good thing Ben would be coming home soon.

\* \* \*

The next several days the weather stayed hot but rainy, and few rides were scheduled. J.D. taught Kim how to clean saddles and bridles. Becky took all the washable blankets home to launder. Kim worked out reduced rates with the vet and farrier for routine shots and hoof trimming by having the whole barn done at one time.

Kim's coupons were printed and distributed. The stores which carried them reported they were disappearing fast, and some even asked

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

for more.

On the third rainy day, Kim and J.D. sat in the office cleaning the last two saddles when she suddenly got an idea. “J.D., have you ever considered having a moonlight trail ride and bonfire?”

He put down the sponge soaked with saddle soap and looked at her as if she’d just suggested burning the place down. “Why would I want to do that?” He picked up a rag and started to buff the leather with a new vengeance.

“I’m serious! It would be fun! We could have teenage or young adult clubs come as a group. They would love it!”

The more Kim thought about it, the better she liked the idea. She put down her own cleaning equipment and jumped up, pacing the floor as she bubbled with excitement and inspiration. “We could do it about once a month, during a full moon. We’d have food and drinks—give them a package deal.”

J.D. continued working, shaking his head as she rambled on. After a while, he shrugged.

When she paused to take a break, he said, “I’ve heard of other stables doing things like that.” He put down his work and met her eyes. “What about insurance?”

“I’ll check on it.”

“Bad weather?”

“We’ll schedule a rain day.”

“Mosquitoes?”

“We’ll spray and have everyone wear repellent.”

He chuckled. “It sounds like you’ve thought of everything.” His eyes crinkled with humor.

She placed both palms on the desk and leaned on it, facing him expectantly. “Then we can do it?”

His gaze drifted to the V-neck of her blouse, and he swallowed hard before glancing away. “I, uh...”

Cheeks warming, she straightened and crossed her arms.

## **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

He met her eyes and grinned. "Okay, check on the details—insurance, insect control, supplies. Then we'll see." He stood up, stretched, and nodded toward the window. "Looks like the weather is clearing up. I think I'll take a ride out to check the trails." He reached for his hat.

Kim picked up the phone book before he was even out the door. By the time he'd saddled Apache and led him out of the barn, she had already made her calls. She watched from the window as he easily mounted the big horse and started down the path used by trail riders.

Now she knew the meaning of "born in the saddle." J.D. sat the horse as if molded to it. They moved as one, even when they picked up a trot and then a gallop. She watched until they were nothing more than a speck in the distance.

Kim reminded herself that Charlie was just as athletic in his own way. Although his muscles came more from skiing and tennis than outdoor work, he was physically fit, too.

The memory of the feel of J.D.'s arms around her threatened, and she pushed it aside. There was no point in even thinking about letting that happen again. He was her business partner—only. And if she wanted to earn her keep, she needed to concentrate on making them money. With a sigh, she got back to work.

J.D. had not returned when Becky arrived an hour later. "Why don't you ride on out and check on him?" she suggested to Kim. "Everything is done here, and I can handle the phone. You could probably use some fresh air."

Kim hesitated. Although it was time for her to go home, nothing waited for her there except dirty laundry. Charlie would be working for a few hours yet. Maybe she'd give him a call later...or maybe not.

Deciding further thoughts about her boyfriend could wait, she concluded that a horseback ride now sounded like a great idea. "I'll take Mouse," she said, having discovered that the little mare was willing and fast.

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

A few minutes later, she was saddled and ready to go. There was only one main path, and since they'd had a lot of rain recently, Apache's hoofprints were still visible, even to an untrained tracker like Kim. She had no problem following J.D.

It felt good to be on a horse again. For weeks now she'd been involved in every aspect of equine care but had not had time to ride. The energetic little mare was a fun mount. Within a few minutes they were galloping across the meadow.

Kim leaned low on Mouse's neck and let her go, feeling wild and free for the first time in months. The air was clear and fragrant with wet grasses and summer flowers. Birds were everywhere, chirping greetings and squawking warnings. Kim almost laughed aloud with delight. This was country living at its finest.

Suddenly, she heard a nicker up ahead in the trees. She slowed to a trot and then a walk as they entered the woods. Now the musty smells of decaying wood and piles of leaves assailed her. Somewhere a squirrel chattered. Although it was not a sunny day, the dark woods was a complete contrast to the brightness of the meadow.

Apache's hoofprints were no longer visible, hidden by the thick leaves on the path. But Mouse seemed to know the way and continued on, her ears pricked as she listened for sounds up ahead.

They reached the end of the path and the curve toward home without seeing any evidence of J.D. When Kim spotted another opening in the trees, she once again gave the horse a loose rein and urged her ahead. The little mare willingly jogged and then picked up a canter. Although she enjoyed the ride, Kim started to dread the sore muscles she knew would follow.

Without warning, the horse decided to switch directions and turned sideways into the woods. Unprepared for the quick move, Kim only had time for a startled, "Oh!" before she felt herself slip off. In the next instant the breath *whooshed* from her as she hit the hard, wet ground.

She lay there a moment, staring at the bark of the tree in front of her



## RAWHIDE AND LACE

as she tried to decide if she should move. She heard Mouse's hoofbeats disappearing in the distance. Last time she'd trust that flighty horse!

"Kim!"

She looked up at the sound of J.D.'s voice. He stood over her, his brow creased with concern. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and started to sit up.

"Are you *sure* nothing is broken?"

"Yeah. I guess I just got the wind knocked out of me. I'll be okay." He offered her his callused hand, and when she took it, helped her to her feet. Seeming reluctant to release her, he held on.

She smiled sheepishly. "I guess I'm not quite the cowgirl I thought I was."

His face clouded. He dropped her hand and grabbed her by the shoulders, his eyes flashing as he looked into hers. "Don't ever go riding alone—that's one of the main rules around here!"

She stared at him, surprised at his sudden anger. "But *you* did! I was just coming to check on you."

He dropped his hands from her shoulders, but kept them balled in fists at his sides. "I learned to ride before I could walk. I know my horses, and I know these woods like the back of my hand. And still I don't go out alone unless someone knows where I am."

Kim bit her lip, and her voice came out shaky. "I'm sorry, but I told Becky where I went."

His expression softened. "She'll be worried when your mount comes back without you, so we'd better head back soon."

Kim smiled. "Knowing Mouse, she'll stop along the way for a snack."

"That's true." He chuckled. "Then come on, I want to show you one of my favorite spots." He reached for her hand, and Kim took it, trailing close behind him as he turned off the main path to follow the natural break in the trees.

A few minutes later they emerged from dense foliage to face a

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

small pond. Kim gasped in delight at the peaceful scene ahead. The afternoon sun glistened on the still water. On the opposite shore a blue heron stalked small fish amongst the reeds, paying no attention to the human visitors to his haven.

J.D. led Kim over to where a huge oak lay fallen near the edge of the water, blackened by an old lightning strike and jagged where it had broken from the base of the trunk. "Have a seat," he said, indicating the horizontal section, which made a perfect perch.

She obeyed, sitting on the rough bark. He settled next to her, still holding her hand.

"It's beautiful." She smiled.

Watching Kim's face, J.D. nodded. He'd hoped she would enjoy it. Somehow he knew that even a city girl like her could appreciate his special hideaway.

He followed her gaze to the pond where he and Ben had spent many happy hours fishing in the water and hunting for tadpoles to catch. Someday he hoped to bring his own kids here. Now that he didn't have to sell the ranch, it looked as if it might be possible. Someday. If he ever decided to get married. If he ever had kids. And if he ever trusted a woman again.

His thoughts were interrupted when he realized Kim had turned to face him. She smiled when his eyes met hers.

"This place is special to you, isn't it?" she asked.

J.D. looked at the water again. "Yes, it is. I came today because I thought it might be a good place for the bonfire. Ben, Dad and I camped out here sometimes."

He shook his head grimly. "But I don't think I'm ready to share it with a bunch of strangers. Do you know what I mean?"

Glancing at her, he could see in her eyes that she did.

"Yes," she said softly. "We could have the fire somewhere else, along the regular paths. Sometimes you have to have a private place, all for yourself. Thank you for sharing it with me."

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

Their eyes locked. A slight breeze caught a wisp of her hair and blew it across her face. J.D. reached for the golden strands and held them between his fingers for a moment, feeling the softness, before he tucked the stray ends behind her ear. He allowed his hand to linger at the side of her neck and softly stroked her satin smooth skin.

She was so beautiful. Did she know what she was doing to him?

Her breathing quickened, and she ran her tongue over her lips. *She must be able to feel the attraction, too.* His own breath came harder. His fingers roved instinctively up the side of her neck to cup her chin and tilt her toward him.

Her eyes widened, but she didn't resist. Her other hand slid around his shoulder, and she turned her body toward him.

## CHAPTER 8

Feeling Kim tremble, J.D. knew she wanted him, too. He leaned forward and brushed her parted lips. Too late, he realized her shaking was not entirely from the kiss. Apparently the old half-rotted tree where they perched wasn't strong enough for the two of them. J.D. felt the tree begin to give way, its bark crumbling and wood shattering.

J.D. lost his balance momentarily, but managed to stay upright. Although he grabbed for Kim, he only succeeded in slowing her fall.

She landed on the soft grass, a bewildered look on her face. Afraid that she might be hurt, he jumped down and offered his hand. "Are you okay?"

Her expression quickly turned into an embarrassed blush. "Yes. Just surprised." She allowed him to haul her to her feet.

He chuckled as she brushed herself off and stepped away from the remains of the tree.

"What's so funny?" she asked, hands on hips.

Her indignant expression was so damn cute, he turned away to stifle

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

more laughter. "I guess we'd better head back." Over his shoulder, he added, "I don't know why you're so mad. You're the one who broke my tree."

"I broke *your tree*! Your tree could have broken my neck."

J.D. spun around. His rebuttal was lost in his throat when he saw that her eyes now gleamed with laughter. *Easy, Hudson. Keep it light.*

Tearing his gaze away, he focused on Apache, who happily grazed nearby. J.D. grabbed the horse's lead line. "Come on," he told Kim. "We need to get back."

He helped her into the saddle, swung up behind her, and reached for the reins. "I'll steer."

Kim nodded and handed the leather lines to him. Holding on to the saddle horn, she gazed straight ahead, not leaning on him any more than necessary.

He rode behind the saddle, close enough to feel her heat, smell her flowery scent. And wanted to be even closer to her warm female body.

He held the reins in his left hand, Western style. Since he didn't need to toss a rope, the way working cowboys did, he rested his arm on her midriff. The position stirred thoughts damaging to his peace of mind. Images that were downright...lustful.

To get his thoughts on less dangerous territory, he asked, "So what did you find out after I left the office?"

"Oh!" She sounded excited at the chance to tell him.

As she chattered away about plans for the moonlight rides, J.D. tried to concentrate on her words, but his body continued to react to her proximity. The clean smell of her hair drifted to him with every slight breeze. His arms itched to pull her even closer.

The rhythmic movements of Apache didn't help any. Every motion of the horse threw Kim's back against J.D.'s chest, and the resulting contact drove him wild. He was thankful he'd mounted behind the saddle so the curve of the leather seat kept her from touching the front of his jeans. His imagination was bad enough. He frowned and forced

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

his thoughts back to her words.

By the time Kim finished telling him her plans for the bonfire, they were at the barn. Becky came out to meet them. "I was hoping you were together. Mouse just came back." She eyed Kim critically. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. She dumped me, but only my pride is hurt." Kim blushed, but said, "I think I'll head home for a hot bath. Can you two close up tonight without me?"

J.D. leapt down from Apache and reached for Kim's waist. "I'm sure we can." He lifted her down and held her a few seconds longer than really necessary before setting her on her feet.

"I'll get my purse." She avoided his eyes and went in the office. As she came through the doorway, J.D. met her and thrust a tube into her hands.

"What's this?" She frowned, turning it to read the label. "Horse liniment!"

"Trust me, it works. You're going to be pretty sore tomorrow. This will help."

She unscrewed the top, took a sniff and wrinkled her nose.

He laughed and turned away. At least he wouldn't have to worry about what Kim and what's-his-name would be doing tonight. Most likely she'd go straight to sleep.

And he'd head home to a cold shower.

\* \* \*

J.D.'s prediction proved to be true. The next morning Kim awoke feeling as though she'd been run over by a truck. Every muscle in her body ached. She'd expected to be a little sore from riding, but the two falls had left bruises in areas she wasn't aware were hurt.

Although tempted to spend the day in bed, she settled for a quick hot shower and more aspirin before heading to work. It was Saturday, and she knew she'd be needed.

J.D. gave her a sympathetic look when she walked into the barn

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

office with a stiff gait. "Did you use the liniment?" he asked, pouring coffee.

She nodded. "Last night. But it smells so awful I didn't want to wear it to work."

The corner of his mouth turned up. "Somehow I don't think the horses would mind."

She glared at him, and he turned away. Bending awkwardly, she put her purse in the desk drawer.

J.D. handed her the coffee cup. "No breakfast this morning?"

She shook her head. "I grabbed a bagel at home. On Saturdays we don't usually have time to eat here."

"That's true. It looks like we may have to grab lunch on the run, too. Our dead hours at lunchtime are booked. Your coupons seem to be working."

When she reached to answer the phone, J.D. picked up his hat and headed for the door.

The next ten hours flew by. Trail rides were booked until dark, even through the slow hours of midday. All three workers kept busy, with barely enough time to grab drinks and sandwiches between chores.

Becky went home when the last customers of the day left on their trail ride. After J.D. and Kim brought in the horses and fed them, she collapsed on the office couch. "Oooh," she moaned. "I don't think I want to move again."

J.D. grinned. "Maybe your coupons weren't such a hot idea." He pulled two drinks out of the refrigerator and held one out to her.

Kim slowly sat up to take the soda. "I wouldn't say that. Have you totaled the fees for today?"

"No. I've been a little busy." He reached into his pocket for the cash from the most recent riders. When he retrieved the rest from the locked desk drawer, his eyebrows arched. The stack of bills and checks was double the usual amount.

"Not bad, huh?" Kim said with a smug grin when he quoted the

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

total. She checked the schedule to make sure all the rides were paid and the fees accounted for.

"Looks like you had another winning idea." He locked the money in a cash box and turned back to her.

Kim started to stand up and winced.

"Just a second," he said, leaving the office for a few minutes. When he returned with another tube of liniment, Kim moaned.

"No arguments," he said. "Take off your shirt, and wrap this around you." He handed her a towel.

"But..." The determined look on his face stopped her protest. "All right. Turn away and don't peek."

He shrugged but did as she asked. She slipped off her blouse, tucking the towel under her arms to cover her bra and the rest of her chest. "Okay." She gave a resigned sigh, hoping to hide her blush and increased heartrate at what he planned to do. Perching on the edge of the couch, she turned sideways.

J.D. sat next to Kim, purposely keeping his eyes averted. *You're out of your mind, Hudson. Talk about temptation.*

He opened the tube and squeezed a dime-size amount onto his hand. Gently he spread it on her bare shoulder, easing around the lace-trimmed bra straps, and started to rub the ointment into her skin.

She flinched at the first touch of the cold salve, but then relaxed. He took deep breaths of the foul smell coming from the ointment, hoping it would help keep his mind off the soft feel of her skin under his fingers. Moving her golden strands of hair off her neck, he concentrated his massage there before moving to the other shoulder.

Ready to continue down her back, he said, "Lie down." The words came out gruffer than he'd intended.

Kim hesitated a second before lowering herself onto her stomach on the couch. She shivered when he unclasped her bra. He resumed the massage and she closed her eyes, apparently enjoying the way his fingers kneaded her back.



## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

J.D. felt Kim's tight muscles gradually soften, and eventually her breathing became regular. If only he could do the same. Even the smell of the ointment was not enough to drive away the desire to kiss the tender pale skin beneath his fingers.

His hands moved to the edge of her jeans. He stared at the womanly curves below the waistline. Damn. Why had he started something he couldn't finish?

He tore his attention away from her nicely rounded bottom and closed the tube. "Feel better?"

When her soft even breathing was the only response, he took a closer look at her face. She was asleep! He gave a rueful grin. Guess she hadn't found the massage quite as erotic as he had.

After reluctantly refastening her bra, he found a blanket in the closet and laid it over her, as much to remove temptation from himself as to keep her warm.

\* \* \*

"Mmmmm." Kim's pleasurable dream of J.D. kissing her neck gradually faded away as she awoke to feel something warm and wet on her face. She sat up with a start. "Tiny!"

She laughed as the excited dog barked and bounced around beside her, trying to lick her face again.

"Tiny, down." J.D.'s stern voice immediately stopped the dog, who jumped back to the floor and sat in front of Kim, exuberantly wagging her tail.

Kim groggily rubbed her eyes and tried to remember why she was in the barn office. She glanced at J.D.'s amused face and realized with a start that only her bra covered the top half of her body. She grabbed her shirt and pulled it on, her face flaming. "I'm sorry. I guess I fell asleep."

"Don't apologize," J.D. drawled. "I'm not complaining about the view."

Kim could feel herself blush again, though she couldn't say if it was

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

more from embarrassment or the approval evident in his eyes. She concentrated on petting Tiny to avoid looking at J.D. again. "I'd better head home."

"I don't think there's much point in that." He pulled his legs off the desk. "We start work again in an hour."

Kim's gaze flew to the clock behind him. She groaned. "Oh, no. Did you get any sleep?"

"Not much. I imagine that couch is a little more comfortable than this chair." He stretched his arms and bent his shoulders back as he stood.

"You mean you slept there? I really am sorry. Why didn't you wake me?"

"You were too comfy. I went home for something to eat and brought Tiny back. It didn't look like you even missed me."

Kim shook her head. "I guess I was really out of it." She reached up and rubbed her shoulders. "Your liniment seems to have helped. I feel a lot better."

"Good. Let's go to the house for a hot breakfast."

She hesitated. "I don't know, J.D. That may not be a good idea."

He turned and met her eyes. "Afraid I'll try to kiss you again?"

Her eyes widened at his bluntness. "Well..."

He held her gaze, waiting as a muscle worked in his jaw. Suddenly, he smiled. "Look," he said, "the way you smell, I'm surprised Tiny was so anxious to kiss you."

Kim threw him a mock insulted frown. Then she laughed. "Well, I guess I'm safe then."

Tiny trotted along as they walked to J.D.'s house.

"Can you make some omelets while I take a shower?" he asked when they entered his kitchen.

Kim worriedly scanned the room. With relief she spotted a cookbook. How hard could an omelet be? "Sure."

She asked him where to find basic supplies. As soon as he left her

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

alone, she started frying some bacon.

After she stuck some bread in the toaster, she hunted through the cookbook for omelet directions. Her heart sank as she realized the difficulty of the task she'd agreed to. Why couldn't she have just told him she didn't know how?

The smell of something burning interrupted her reading, and she jumped up, spilling the glass of juice she was drinking. The bacon! "Oh no!" she gasped. It was too late to save the blackened mess.

As she dumped the pan in the sink with disgust, a loud beeping sound alerted her that J.D.'s smoke detector was going off. Another burning smell assailed her, and she whirled around to see smoke pouring from the toaster.

Kim yanked the plug out of the wall and frantically searched for a pot holder to remove the burnt bread. She heard running footsteps and looked up.

J.D. stood in the kitchen doorway. "What the blazes is going on?" He hurried into the room, hastily zipping his jeans as he glanced around.

She stepped aside as he raced to the window and threw it open, then ran out to do the same in the next room. Sinking onto a stool at the counter, she waited until the loud beeping subsided.

Kim drew in a sharp breath as the smoke dispersed, revealing J.D. in the doorway. Her gaze skittered from his damp dark hair, to his scowling face, to his shirtless torso.

"What happened?" he asked.

She ignored the question, her brain short-circuiting at the sight of the water glistening across the pattern of hair on his broad...tan...muscle...chest. Her gaze dropped to his washboard stomach and...

"Kim!"

She gulped in a breath of air. "I was trying to make breakfast."

J.D.'s gaze left her to sweep around the disaster in his kitchen. His

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

dark eyes focused on the spilled juice, the black toast, the charred remains in the sink.

Without a word, he walked over to the cabinet and pulled out two mugs. He picked up the coffeepot and started to pour, then did a double take and peered into the cup. "A little weak, isn't it?" he asked, straight-faced.

Kim frowned and walked over for a better look. "Oh no, I must have forgotten to put the coffee in it!"

A muscle twitched in J.D.'s jaw. Then he threw back his head and laughed, setting his cup back down so suddenly that the hot water splashed out all over the counter.

Relieved that he wasn't mad at her, Kim relaxed and giggled.

When he'd stopped chuckling long enough to take a breath, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me you can't cook?"

"You never asked. Besides, I can cook...a little. I can make sandwiches...and salad." She caught his gaze and smiled.

He shook his head and started laughing all over again, leaning against the counter for support.

Both in good humor now, they cleaned up. J.D. put the coffee in the machine and restarted it while Kim wiped the counters and disposed of the burnt toast. Even Tiny turned up her nose at the charred bacon, sending J.D. into another laughing fit.

Kim emptied the pan into the garbage and started to scrub it with a steel wool pad, uncomfortably aware of the nearness of the chortling man behind her.

He was still shirtless, and Kim wondered if he knew how sexy he looked. Hopefully he'd been too distracted by the mess in the kitchen to notice her reaction to his appearance.

"I think I'll make the next attempt at breakfast," he said behind her. "Would you like to take a shower?"

Without turning around, she nodded. "Can I borrow one of your shirts? This one still smells like liniment."

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

“Sure, help yourself.”

Kim easily found J.D.’s room with the adjoining bath. Curious, she looked around. A king-size four poster bed covered with a navy-colored quilt dominated the center of the masculine dark brown and blue room. A few old posters of sports figures and country music stars were the only wall decorations.

No picture of a special woman? Kim remembered his reaction when she’d asked if he’d ever been married. Maybe he didn’t believe in having only one girlfriend.

She spotted his dresser. In it, she found T-shirts and removed an orange and navy blue one from the top of the pile. Taking it with her, she locked herself in the adjoining bathroom to shower.

The shaving supplies on the counter reminded her that this was a man’s domain. A wet towel appeared to have been hastily dropped on the floor, evidence of the quick end to his shower when the beeping smoke alarm had sent him running out to investigate.

Kim picked up the damp terrycloth and caught a whiff of J.D.’s scent. She hugged it close and breathed deeply, remembering how warm and good he had felt when he’d taken her in his arms. Would he ever kiss her again? Was it fair to either of them to encourage him?

She sighed sadly and hung up the towel before stripping off her clothes and turning on the water. The wet shower stall evoked the image of J.D. with his wet hair and bare chest. His day’s worth of unshaven beard only made him more attractive. It was a good thing he hadn’t tried to kiss her then, for the heat flowing through her veins told her she couldn’t have resisted.

The hot water felt good pelting her sore muscles, but it only reminded her of the feel of J.D.’s hands on the same muscles just a few short hours ago. She switched the water to cold.

Ten minutes later, she finished and dressed. J.D.’s T-shirt hung almost to her knees, but it would do. She had learned by now not to bother with too much makeup for working in the barn, so she applied

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

just a touch of mascara and lip gloss from her purse before combing out her hair and heading back to the kitchen.

Since she was accustomed to carpeting, the natural wood floor felt foreign to her bare feet, but reminded her this was an old house. J.D.'s family had lived here for years. Though he kept it neat, J.D. obviously didn't have time for detailed cleaning. The furnishings were worn but comfortable and the place already felt homey to her. For a moment, she wondered why she felt so at ease in J.D.'s house. Could it be because she thought of him as a lot more than a business partner?

Delicious smells came from the kitchen. She entered the room and saw J.D., still bare-chested, standing at the stove and stirring a pan of scrambled eggs. The domestic scene made her feel like his woman. Her pulse rate quickened. She'd like nothing more than to slip her arms around his muscular back and kiss the corded tendon at his neck.

She stiffened and forced the fantasy away, ashamed of her disloyalty to Charlie.

J.D. felt Kim's presence and glanced up from his position at the stove. She looked clean and fresh scrubbed, her damp hair hanging straight down her back. Her cheeks had a rosy glow from the shower and her eyes were shining with...what? Happiness? Desire? She looked absolutely delectable.

But not for him.

He forced his gaze back to the eggs. "You can set the table. Everything is ready."

The sound of a car motor drew his attention to the window. He frowned, puzzled at the glare of headlights. "Who the—?"

The slam of a car door followed. Tiny growled and headed for the front door. J.D. set aside the pan of eggs and went past Kim to follow the dog. He switched on the porch light and opened the door before whoever it was had a chance to knock.

He stared straight into the laughing blue eyes of his brother.

"Ben! I thought you weren't coming till this afternoon."

***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“I wanted to surprise you.” Looking over J.D.’s shoulders, his brother raised both eyebrows.

Turning, J.D. realized his sibling had spotted Kim, who stood shyly behind him. Obviously just-showered and braless, she wore his extra-large University of Florida T-shirt over her jeans—while he was still shirtless and barefoot.

J.D. swallowed and glanced back at his brother.

Ben’s mouth curved with a knowing grin. “Looks like I succeeded.”

## CHAPTER 9

J.D. ignored his brother's wickedly teasing grin. He grabbed Ben's arm and pulled him inside the house, clapping him on the back.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything." Ben threw Kim an apologetic glance. "I woke up at midnight and couldn't wait to get out of that dorm. So I packed and headed out."

Before she could reply, J.D. answered, "You're not interrupting anything. This is my new partner. Kim Ford, meet my kid brother, Ben."

She smiled and came forward to offer her hand. "Hi, Ben. I hear you're going to help us out this summer."

He gave J.D. a pointed look. "It's the least I can do."

Kim glanced back and forth between them. "I can feed the horses if you want, J.D. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about."

He nodded to her. "Okay, take my keys."

Scooping them up from the counter, she stopped just long enough to pull on her boots before heading out the door.



## RAWHIDE AND LACE

“Business partner, huh?” Ben’s eyes twinkled with amusement as he took the cup of coffee J.D. handed him.

“That’s all she is.”

“I suppose that’s why you both look newly showered and she’s wearing your shirt?”

Shrugging, J.D. insisted, “Look, I wouldn’t kick her out of my bed if she wanted to be there. But she’s involved with someone else, and we’re friends—that’s *all*.”

“Then why are you so defensive?”

J.D. set his cup down and walked over to the window. “Things aren’t always the way they look. You believed what you saw instead of trusting me once before.” He stared out the window, watching Kim’s cute wiggle as she made her way to the barn in the dawn light. “I guess I’m not sure you don’t still blame me for that.” He turned around and leaned against the windowsill, catching Ben’s eye.

“I’m sorry, J.D. You know how it looked. But I realize now what Lisa’s really like. She pulled the same thing with my roommate a few months later. That’s why I broke up with her.”

Jaw clenched, J.D. shook his head. “You believed him, but not your own brother?”

“Hell, J.D., I didn’t catch her in his bed! He *told* me she was coming on to him! If you’d explained the truth, I’d have believed you.”

“Would you?”

Ben sighed. “Lisa said you invited her to your room. You never denied it.”

J.D. kept his voice low, leashing the bitterness. “I didn’t think I should have to.”

Ben set his cup down on the counter next to J.D.’s. “I don’t know. Maybe I *wanted* to believe the worst of you. My whole life I’ve tried to be just like you. You always did everything first, and I had to try like hell to keep up. Most of the girls I brought home got crushes on my big brother. I guess I expected it to happen again. When it did, I wanted

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

someone to blame. Deep down inside I knew it wasn't your fault."

"But even after you broke up with her, you didn't call me," J.D. accused.

"Because I was embarrassed. I figured you were still mad at me."

Muttering a curse under his breath, J.D. crossed the room and opened the carton of eggs. Absently breaking some more into the pan, he asked, "What changed your mind?"

"I found out you paid my tuition, and the real reason you quit school."

J.D. froze. "What did you hear?"

"I'd rather you told *me*."

J.D. met Ben's eyes and stared at him for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. "Okay." He handed his brother the bag of bread. "Make more toast. We can talk while we eat."

\* \* \*

Welcoming whinnies greeted Kim when she entered the barn. Since J.D. usually fed the horses in the morning before she came to work, this was the first time she'd had the opportunity to do the feeding alone. After unlocking the inner doors, she slid the keys into her jeans pocket. She found the dimly-lit barn relaxing and the soft nickers of the horses somehow comforting. As she threw a flake of hay into each stall, she thought about meeting J.D.'s brother.

Ben looked a lot like his older sibling, except that his teasing eyes were blue and friendly instead of dark and mysterious. Both men were close to six feet tall, though Ben hadn't developed the muscular build J.D. possessed from working on the ranch. Still, it looked as if he could handle hard labor. It would be nice to have another man around to help, especially with all the building they had planned.

She'd been embarrassed at the insinuating look Ben had given J.D. after he'd spotted her. Although it must have appeared as though something was going on, she hoped that by now his big brother had set him straight.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

Kim smiled as she began dumping grain into the horses' feed buckets. While some men liked to brag about their conquests, real or imaginary, somehow she didn't think her business partner needed to boast about his women to prove his maleness.

When she emerged from the barn, she gasped in delight. The sun peeped over the top of the trees. The sky was a kaleidoscope of color, ranging from pink to blue with all the shades in between. Except in pictures, she'd never seen anything like it.

Looking around, she realized that a couple of hours really made a difference in the wildlife around the ranch. The swarms of buzzing insects had not yet made an appearance. The sounds of birds, barely audible in the distance during the day, now surrounded her with a delightful harmony of song. A hawk hovered above the pasture for a moment before swooping down to land on a fence rail barely ten feet from Kim, cocking his head to stare at her.

She smiled with contentment. Getting used to the country, she liked it more all the time. She continued on the path to the house. The ground was still damp with morning dew. After stamping her boots to remove the drying mud, she slipped them off and went inside.

Ben and J.D. were seated at the table, finishing their meal. "I'll reheat your food," J.D. told Kim. He rose and headed for the kitchen.

"Thanks." She followed him and poured herself a cup of coffee while he put her plate in the microwave and set the timer.

J.D. leaned on the counter and turned to face her. "Any problems?"

Kim shook her head. "No, they're all fed. How soon should we turn them out?"

"About an hour." The microwave beeped and J.D. retrieved her plate. "According to your schedule, we've got several rides at eight, so we'll have to start tacking soon."

"Okay." She took her breakfast and joined Ben at the table.

He welcomed her with a grin over his coffee cup. "Let me help out today."

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

"Great." J.D. returned to the table with a fresh mug of coffee. "Kim has good ideas for bringing in business, but she's working me to death."

"Good. It's about time somebody did."

"Wait till she puts *you* to work."

She wrinkled her nose at J.D. and continued eating her eggs. It was good to hear the brothers' friendly bickering. Whatever problem was between them seemed to be either resolved, or at least put aside. J.D. was in much better humor, though it was hard to tell when it had actually come about. Was it due to Ben's arrival, or their own changing relationship?

Throughout the rest of the morning Kim had no time to speculate about J.D. Even with Ben's help, they were busy until lunchtime.

Becky arrived, and Kim was preparing to take a break when a familiar car pulled up in front of the barn. A mixture of happiness and foreboding filled her at the sight of the late model blue Cadillac. "Uh-oh."

"What's wrong?" Becky asked.

"My parents are here."

Kim hurried to the car and threw herself into her mother's arms. "Mom! What a nice surprise! I'm so glad to see you!"

After returning the hug, Kim's mother stepped away to let her husband have a turn. He pulled her to him with an exuberant grin.

"Hi, Daddy," Kim said, enjoying the security of his arms. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Her father pulled away first. "We wanted to surprise you. We got in last night and tried to call you from the motel," he said, a hint of accusal in his deep voice. "You didn't answer your phone, and we didn't know how to get to your apartment."

"Oh, sorry." Kim felt a twinge of guilt when she remembered why she hadn't been home. "I worked late." She noticed the expression on her mother's face and remembered she still wore J.D.'s shirt over her

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

jeans. Apparently that hadn't been such a great idea.

How many surprise visitors could they get in one day, anyway?

Kim changed the subject. "How long can you stay?"

"A week. Your sister will fly down in a few days and drive back with us," her father said.

"That's great! I miss Suzanne." Seeing the way they were glancing about, she spread her arm to indicate the grounds. "Well, what do you think? We're still in the process of remodeling, but—"

"How big is it?" her father interrupted.

"Over fifty acres. I'm half-owner of everything but the house."

"How many horses?"

"Twelve that we use for trail rides. We may buy more when we expand—"

"How many employees?"

"One right now, besides myself and J.D."

"I see." Her father looked around, nodding. "When do we get to meet this partner of yours?"

Seeing his approach, she asked, "How about right now?"

J.D. stopped in front of the trio. Becky had already clued him in on who the older couple was, but even if she hadn't, he could have guessed. Mrs. Ford looked like a slightly older version of her daughter. Her willowy frame and youthful face made her appear more like Kim's sister than her mother. Mr. Ford was a large man, both in height and girth. The enthusiastic way he'd grabbed Kim had shown his affection for his daughter.

She hastened to introduce them. "J.D., I'd like you to meet my parents, Faye and Donald Ford. Mom and Dad, my partner, Jonathan Dean Hudson."

He tipped his hat and shook their hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. I didn't know you were coming. We'd have worked something out so Kim could take off and visit with you. I'm afraid we're pretty busy right now."

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"That's okay, we'll just look around on our own, if you don't mind," the older man said, though his tone indicated he didn't care if anyone minded or not.

"Sure, help yourself." J.D. caught Kim's eye and raised a brow before he nodded and turned to assist some returning trail riders.

"I've got to go," Kim told her parents. "We're awfully busy—"

"You don't actually saddle horses, do you?" her mother asked.

J.D. gritted his teeth and kept his back turned.

"Sure I do. It's part of the job, and I like it a lot."

"But, Kimmy...your beautiful nails!" her mother cried.

"I can wear fake ones if I go any place fancy. Believe me, these are a lot more practical for everyday. They just need a good scrubbing right now."

"I can't believe you're actually *happy* here," her mother said.

J.D. cast a surreptitious glance at Kim over his shoulder. Her trapped expression reminded him of a deer caught in headlights.

"You want me to handle the phone or the next riders?" he asked, hoping to shame the couple into leaving.

Kim flashed him a grateful smile. "If you can handle tacking the next horses, I'll just show my folks around the barn on my way back to the office."

He nodded. "Fine."

"Come on, I'll need to get back to work soon." She strode off with the older couple in tow.

J.D. tried to ignore the snatches of whispered conversation that floated back to him. He assumed they held more disapproval.

Fifteen minutes later Kim came back. When the riders J.D. had been helping headed out, she said, "I'm sorry about my parents. They don't exactly approve of my investing in the ranch."

"I kinda gathered that." He lounged against the fence. "Where are they now?"

"I gave them a brief tour and then left them in the office with cool

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

drinks. I told them I had to tell you about the next rides.”

“New customers?”

“No. A confirmation. The call gave me an excuse to escape my parents.” She grinned.

“Did you buy into the ranch to spite them?”

Kim blushed. “No!”

“Not even subconsciously?”

Her gaze dropped to the ground. “Maybe a little,” she admitted. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I got out of school. They talked me into going to Ohio State ’cause that’s where they both went. Then they talked me into studying business because that’s what they did. And they’re both good at it. They wanted me to work for them. I wanted to do something on my own...something just for me.”

She turned a wistful gaze out across the pastures. “When I saw your ad, it sounded ideal. Then I came out to see this place and immediately loved it. I felt as if I belonged. Since you needed help to stay in business, it seemed like the perfect job for me.”

“Still, it’s been quite an adjustment for you.”

Nodding, she smiled. “A little.”

He kept his voice soft, unaccusing. “How do you feel now?”

She turned her head and met his eyes. “I love it here! I feel useful—like I’m doing something important.”

“Good. You are.”

Blushing again, she turned away and started toward the barn. “Guess I better go take my folks off Becky’s hands.”

“All right. I’ll get Ben to help me for awhile.”

When Kim entered the office a few minutes later, her father was finishing a phone call. “Okay, great,” he said. “We’ll see you at eight then.” He hung up the phone and turned to Kim.

“It’s all set,” he said. “We’re having dinner with Charlie and his parents.”

Kim frowned. “You didn’t include me in those plans, did you? I

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

can't leave until after dark."

"Of course you can, Kimmy. Becky said she'd cover for you, didn't you, dear?" Her mother cast a quick glance in the redhead's direction.

Kim looked at her stable hand and caught her shrug of resignation. Poor Becky hadn't stood a chance against both her parents, she realized guiltily.

"It's okay," Becky said. "Ben will be here. We'll manage."

Glancing from her mother to her father, Kim decided she might as well go to dinner with them and get it over with. Maybe she could convince them she really liked the ranch and then they'd leave her alone.

Her parents followed her home from the Triple H a short while later. After she showed them around her small apartment, they went back to their motel to get ready, leaving her to do the same.

As she slipped out of her jeans, Kim felt the jangle of something in her pocket. "Oh no," she groaned, "the keys to the barn!" J.D. wouldn't be able to lock up the office tonight. A quick check in her purse revealed she also had the spare set he'd given her.

She called the ranch, offering to bring the keys back. But J.D. told her he'd leave Ben in charge and come to her apartment to get them.

An hour later, she had showered and washed her hair. She decided to wear one of her favorite dresses, since it was also one her parents had given her. The sky blue material matched her eyes. She pivoted in front of the mirror, admiring the way it molded her figure.

Her curled hair hung loose and fell into waves over her shoulders. Diamond earrings, also a gift from her parents, were her only jewelry.

Kim was putting the final touches to her makeup when the doorbell rang. She slipped on her high-heeled sandals and cast a last look in the mirror. It had been a long time since she'd fussed over her appearance, and she felt good about the results. She just wished she could look forward to the evening ahead of her.

\* \* \*



### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

J.D.'s heart thudded against his chest when Kim opened the door. She looked like a goddess. His gaze traveled over her figure and back to her face. He was glad he'd realized she might be dressing up and had taken the time to shower and change. But in his casual clothes, he still felt like a pauper facing a princess.

"You look great."

Her smile was radiant. "Thank you. I guess we're going to Orlando. Charlie told me to dress up."

J.D. nodded, a pain stabbing his gut at the reminder that she was going out with the other man.

"Come on in," Kim said. "I'll get the keys."

He admired her shapely legs as she walked toward her bedroom. When she disappeared, he looked around. Although the room was small, she'd added some plants and wall decorations that gave the rather plain apartment a personal touch.

"Here they are," Kim said, returning to the room.

J.D. reached out to take the keys and his gaze rested on her fingers. Though she kept her nails short now, she had manicured and polished them. His callused hand brushed her soft skin as he took the keys, reminding him of the differences between them.

"Thanks," he said gruffly, turning to leave.

"I'm sorry I forgot to give them back to you this morning."

"That's okay. All our family surprises kind of threw everything off a beat."

"Would you like something to drink?" she offered.

J.D. was about to refuse, but another look at her convinced him he wanted to bask in her beauty as long as he could. Charlie would have her for the rest of the evening; he could at least have a few more minutes.

"Thanks." He took a seat on the couch and waited while she brought two glasses of iced tea and handed one to him.

"I won't stay long," he said. "I know you're going out."

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

She shrugged. "I'm all ready, and frankly, I'm not really looking forward to tonight."

Surprised, he lifted both eyebrows. "Oh?"

"My parents are probably hoping to enlist Charlie's parents to help in their campaign to make me forget this crazy idea of running a ranch."

"Do they all know each other?"

"Yes, my dad is one of Mr. Simpson's clients. They do a lot of business together. Since I refused to move back home and go into Mom and Dad's firm, I think they're all hoping to convince me to at least work for Charlie's father." She shook her head. "I'm dreading it."

J.D. crossed an ankle over his opposite knee as he studied her. "Don't sell yourself short, Kim. You've got a lot more guts than you think you have."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the way you convinced me to change things at the ranch! I was used to doing things my way, so I resisted most of your ideas. But when you made me listen to you, you really turned the Triple H around."

She smiled. "I guess we are starting to show a profit..."

"And we haven't even tried half of your ideas yet."

Kim's eyes shimmered in the dim light. "Do you really think I'm doing a good job?"

He met her gaze levelly. "Of course I do. Not only that, I need you, Kim."

## CHAPTER 10

Kim's eyes misted and J.D. sat forward. Before he could touch her, the doorbell rang.

She glanced up. "That'll be Charlie."

"Show time."

"Guess so." She smiled as she stood up. "Thanks for the pep talk."

"Any time. Better not keep him waiting."

She smoothed her dress and turned the knob.

Charlie Simpson stood at the door in a black tux. His smile of greeting faded as he looked past Kim to J.D.

Raising his glass, J.D. met the other man's gaze with a cool nod, but remained comfortably ensconced on the couch. "Hello, Simpson."

"Hudson." Charlie turned to Kim. "Are you ready to go? My parents are in the car."

"Yes." She glanced at J.D., an enigmatic expression on her face.

He rose from his seat. "I need to head back anyway." He strode to the kitchen and placed his glass in the sink. Picking up his hat from the

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

back of the couch, he turned to say goodbye.

Simpson helped Kim into her lace jacket. Her gaze met J.D.'s for just a moment.

His heart slammed against his chest. *Damn.* Why had he stayed to see this? He must be a glutton for punishment. He looked away before he could say something he'd regret. Teeth clenched, he set his cowboy hat on his head, nodded politely, and strode past them. "You two kids have fun."

On the way back to the ranch, J.D. wished he felt as sure of himself as he'd acted in front of Simpson. The truth was, everything he'd told Kim was fact. He needed her as a partner. But more than that he wanted her as a friend. And he'd take her on whatever terms necessary to keep her. Even if it meant sharing her with Simpson?

His knuckles stiffened from his iron grip on the steering wheel, and he forced himself to loosen his hold. Good thing he hadn't gotten much rest last night. Maybe the total exhaustion would help him fall asleep early tonight instead of lying awake thinking about Kim out with another man. Hopefully she was tired enough, too, that she and city boy would end their date early.

When J.D. arrived back with the keys, he found his brother sweeping the barn. "That was good timing," Ben said in a sarcastic tone. "I just finished the last of the chores. I thought you said she lives close by?"

J.D. shrugged. "She offered me a drink, so I stayed a few minutes to talk."

"Oh."

Ben's amused tone rankled. "Not that it's any of your business what we talked about, but she wasn't all that thrilled about going out tonight," J.D. grumbled, slamming the office door harder than necessary.

"I got that impression. Her parents make her break a date with you?"

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

“Of course not! She’s still going out with her city slicker. Now he’s got her parents, and his, on his side.” He fastened the lock and strode off.

“Meaning what? Her boyfriend doesn’t want her in business with you?”

Shrugging, J.D. stifled the urge to smile at Ben’s refusal to give up an irritating topic. The kid hadn’t changed much. By the time he reached the outside door, his brother caught up with him. After securing the barn, they headed in the direction of the house.

“I can’t say I blame the guy,” Ben said. “How should he know nothing is going on?”

“He’ll just have to trust her.”

“Does she shower at our house often?”

J.D. swung a mock fist in Ben’s direction. “I already explained all that to you.”

“Yeah. Why she fell asleep in the office and why she didn’t want to put her own clothes on again. If you two are friends, all that makes sense, but the way she blushed...”

“She was embarrassed. After all, it did *look* as if something was going on.”

Ben was quiet for only a few steps before he brought up the subject again. “So her boyfriend’s the reason you’re not going after her?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s *her* reason.” As he stepped onto the porch and unlocked the front door, J.D. took a deep breath. Might as well tell the rest.

He switched on the light and turned to face his brother. “She was raised in the city, Ben. Just like Lisa. Just like Monica. I’m not going to make that mistake again.”

“You’re comparing her to my old girlfriend and your ex-fiancée just ‘cause they’re city girls?”

“Women like that think it’s fun to play with a cowboy for a while. But they don’t want to settle down out here. Not once they find out

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

how hard the life is.”

“Geez, J.D., you make it sound like we live out in the wilderness or something. We’re an hour from Orlando—entertainment capital of the world! There’s plenty of social life there. What more could you want?”

“We’re not talking about me. Monica thought she’d like being a rancher’s wife—until she got here. She only lasted two days before she told me she couldn’t handle it.”

“All girls aren’t that superficial. Kim’s been here a while and hasn’t been scared off yet.”

“*Yet* is the operative word.”

“She seems to fit in pretty good here.”

J.D. sighed, remembering how great Kim had looked in diamonds and lace, while he’d been the ultimate contrast in denim and rawhide. “I could never fit into her world.”

“She’s adapting to yours. Can’t you compromise?”

“Why should I? I like things the way they are.”

“You fit in just fine in college—which you never finished, by the way.”

J.D. shrugged as he pulled a couple of microwavable dinners out of the freezer. “So? You know why. I lost my scholarship.”

“Which you didn’t bother to tell Dad and me about.”

“I was embarrassed ’cause I blew it. He had such high hopes for me. I let my grades slip after Monica and I split up. I thought I’d go back after I earned enough to pay for it myself.”

“What’s stopping you now?”

J.D. opened his mouth to argue that he didn’t have the money. But he knew Ben could dispute that. “I don’t have time now that I’m running the ranch.”

“Are you sure that isn’t just an excuse? Between Kim and Becky and me, we could handle the evening chores. Why don’t you think about it?”

J.D. nodded, glad Ben had finally dropped the subject of Kim.

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

“Maybe I will. Guess it couldn’t hurt.”

\* \* \*

Kim allowed the waiter to remove her barely touched shrimp cocktail. When the appetizer was replaced with a Caesar salad, she gazed at it without interest. The conversation had ruined her appetite.

As she’d feared, once the two older couples exhausted the topic of their own businesses, they turned to her and Charlie.

“So when are you two going to tie the knot and start working on grandchildren for us?” her father’s booming voice suddenly challenged.

Kim gulped the swallow of wine she’d just taken and threw Charlie a panicked gaze across the table.

The corner of his mouth turned down but he kept his voice even. “I think that’s between Kim and me, sir.”

She gave him a grateful smile before stabbing at her salad. Would this night never end?

Her father refused to give up the subject of her future. “What do you think of the Triple H, Charlie? Kim told me you backed up her decision to buy into it.”

Charlie caught her eye for a moment and smiled. “I did have an ulterior motive for wanting her to move here,” he admitted. “But I agree with her. She saw the potential. The land alone is worth the money she put into it. All it took to turn the place around was the knowledge to run it like a business. It’s turning into a first-class stable. I think she made the right decision.” He reached for his wine glass as he met her father’s eyes.

Kim looked up in surprise. Although Charlie had never argued against the idea, she’d had the impression he didn’t care much for her choice. He was such a devoted friend. If only...

“But what about the work, Kimmy?” her mother spoke up. “Isn’t it awfully hard? You’ve ruined your hands, and your skin will be like rawhide if you continue to stay outside so much.”

“My hands are fine. I wear gloves for the heavy stuff. I buy lotion

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

and sunscreen by the gallon.”

Her mother shuddered. “To think you went to college only to wind up cleaning stalls—”

“There’s a lot more to it than that, Mother.” Kim remembered J.D.’s voice earlier that evening when he’d told her she had more strength than she realized. She put her fork down and sat up straight as she faced her parents.

“Yes, I do take care of the horses and even muck stalls. I also pay the bills, order supplies, answer the phone, coordinate activities, and do anything else that needs to be done,” she said firmly. “I won’t apologize for doing those things.”

“Do you actually like all that?” Her mother’s voice sounded disbelieving.

“Yes, I love it!”

Her father cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him. “I don’t know much about ranching, but the Triple H sure seems to be doing well. It was busy the whole time we were there.” He lifted his glass, grinning. “A toast to Kim and her new enterprise. I’m proud of you, honey.”

Stunned, she met his eyes and felt a sudden burst of joy. She’d finally proven herself to him! And herself. This night had turned out all right after all.

Beaming as they all raised their glasses to meet hers, she returned her father’s smile. “Thanks, Daddy.”

\* \* \*

Kim’s parents spent the rest of their Florida vacation playing golf and enjoying the tourist attractions during the day and visiting her briefly most evenings. But they no longer tried to talk her into going back to Ohio or leaving the ranch.

Her sister arrived to join their parents for the last few days of their stay. Since Kim couldn’t get away for lunch, Suzanne brought some deli food to share at the ranch.



### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

After setting out the bowls of shrimp salad, rolls and glasses of tea, Suzanne settled on the chair in front of the desk. "This looks great," Kim said, taking her usual seat and digging in.

She eyed her older sister's perfectly coiffed short blonde hair and immaculate clothing. Somehow Suzanne always looked elegant—even in a sundress.

Pushing aside the twinge of envy at the contrast in their present appearances, Kim asked about Suzanne's current activities.

Her sister soon switched the topic back. "So, how's ranch life?"

"Great. It's been an adjustment 'cause J.D. doesn't always agree with my ideas. He usually comes around, though. I love the work. Each day is a challenge."

"You're not bored yet?"

Kim laughed, shaking her head. "I don't have time to get bored!"

"I can tell you think you made the right choice. You certainly look great—so strong and healthy! Outdoor life must agree with you."

"Thanks. Even Daddy admits the ranch is a good investment. It's already showing a profit."

"So...you're going to stay here? For how long?"

Kim ignored the wistful tone in her sister's voice. "I don't know. At first I thought I might want to let J.D. buy me out once he got back on his feet. Now that I know how much I enjoy this type of work, I'd even like to have my own ranch."

"You mean buy him out?"

Shaking her head, Kim took a sip of tea, then explained. "No. I doubt J.D. would go for that. After all, this is his family business. But I could always sell my half and buy a different one."

"Like in Ohio?"

Kim shrugged. "I like Florida. You know how I've always hated cold weather. I'm in no hurry to go anywhere else. Especially since J.D. now seems happy with our arrangement the way it is. The other night he told me how much he wants me to stay."

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

Suzanne gave her a speculative look. "What about Charlie? Mom and Daddy were hoping the reason you wanted to move here instead of staying with them was because you were going to get engaged."

Kim set down her tea and dabbed her mouth with a paper napkin. "No, that's not going to happen."

"You don't love him, do you?" her sister asked.

Kim shook her head. "No. He's such a great guy that I wish I did, but the sparks just aren't there. I don't think they'll ever be."

"You can't force love," Suzanne said, her expression thoughtful. "But you're not seeing anyone else, are you?"

Kim wondered if she was blushing as the vision of a dark-haired cowboy entered her thoughts. "No." She shrugged. "Not really."

"Well, you should start," her sister advised, a note of speculation in her voice. "What about J.D.?"

"He's tacking up horses right now."

"I know. I saw him outside. That's not what I meant."

Feeling a definite warmth in her cheeks, Kim reached for her tea. "What about him?"

"He's kind of cute. I think there's more going on than a business partnership."

"You do, huh?" Kim avoided her sister's eyes.

Suzanne gave a knowing chuckle.

Kim shook her head. "J.D. and I aren't dating...but we are alone sometimes and..."

Suzanne grinned and gave her a thumbs up sign. "Good. It's about time."

"I don't know..."

Smile fading, Suzanne asked, "What's wrong, Sis?"

Kim took a deep breath and began to explain how her relationship with J.D. had been purely professional until the night he'd kissed her.

"So what's the problem, if you enjoyed it?"

"Charlie. Though we're still friends, it's not enough for him. I told

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

him we should date other people, but I don't think he has."

"Maybe you should tell him you're interested in someone else."

"I've tried. But I don't want to hurt him. He thinks I'm still trying to get over what Greg did...almost did."

"Aren't you?"

Tears welled up in Kim's eyes. "I thought so until J.D. kissed me. I've never enjoyed being with Charlie that way."

"Does Charlie know that?"

Sighing, Kim said, "I think he suspects."

"What about J.D.?"

She shook her head dismally. "I'm not sure he's interested in a relationship. At least he seems to have something against marriage. Anyway, he doesn't talk about us. He acts as if he wants to keep our connection professional. And we fight more than we get along."

"Don't you and Charlie ever fight?"

"No."

Suzanne's mouth dropped open. "*Never?*"

"No, we've never had a fight."

Laughing, Suzanne said, "It sounds to me like maybe you're due for a good one."

"Well, I guess if I tell him I'm attracted to J.D., we might have our first."

"Why don't you just wait and see what happens with J.D. before you break it off with Charlie completely?" Suzanne asked. "No point in burning bridges."

"I don't think anything will happen with J.D. anyway, but I don't want to take advantage of Charlie. He was always there for me as a friend."

Kim took a deep breath as she ran her hand across her tea glass thoughtfully. "What happened with Greg took a long time to get over. But it is over and I'm going on with my life. I'm just not sure where Charlie fits in now."

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

"You know," Suzanne said, "if he wasn't so in love with you, I'd go after him myself. I don't know why I let him go."

"You met someone else."

"But it didn't last. I don't even remember that guy's name." A sad expression came over her face. "Charlie is the kind of guy a girl marries."

"Only the right girl." Kim looked speculatively at her sister. "If I break his heart, would you like to mend it for him?"

Suzanne shook her head. "I'm going back to Ohio in a couple of days. Besides, he wouldn't be interested."

"He was once. Maybe he just needs a reminder...and a nudge."

Pursing her lips, Suzanne said, "We were never serious. And then once he met you..."

"We all became *friends*," Kim finished for her. "I really appreciated the way you and he took me under your wing. After Greg, I was so afraid of guys."

Suzanne shrugged. "It worked out well for all three of us...at the time."

The phone rang and Kim signed up another ride. When she hung up, she noticed the look on Suzanne's face. "What?"

"After you tell Charlie where he stands, what will you do?"

"Stay on here as long as I can. Hope I meet someone else."

"What makes you so sure he's not right here?"

"You mean J.D.?" At Suzanne's nod, Kim answered, "We're too different for anything lasting. It's best that we keep our relationship on a business level."

"Who're you trying to convince? Me or yourself?"

Kim opened her mouth to insist that she didn't need convincing. She already had her own mind made up: she'd never want to get involved with a man like J.D.

Or would she?

\* \* \*

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

Kim found out what an asset Ben could be almost immediately. Since he'd grown up on the ranch, he was able to start helping right away. The two extra boys she had hired on Becky's recommendation needed some training, but proved to be such hard workers, the ranch began to show even more of a profit.

The extra fencing materials were delivered during the middle of June. A gas-powered post-hole digger was rented, and J.D. and Ben went to work, leaving Kim and Becky to supervise the new ranch hands and run the trail rides.

By the end of a week, they had finished cross fencing the pasture. The weather grew increasingly hotter and more humid. Kim discovered that while, in some ways, jeans were more practical for working around the barn, denim shorts were much cooler. She added several pairs to her wardrobe, as well as some tank tops.

The first day she wore her new abbreviated costume to work, she noticed an appreciative gleam in J.D.'s eyes as his gaze traveled down the length of her legs.

"I...thought I'd be more comfortable." She poured her morning coffee.

"You'll get no complaints from me." He leaned back in his chair and stretched his hands behind him, cradling the back of his head.

"About what?" Ben asked, coming into the office.

"Kim's new outfit."

The younger brother glanced at her, grinned and winked before turning back to J.D. "I think she's got the right idea. Maybe we should start wearing shorts, too."

J.D. frowned at him. "Maybe I should start working you a little harder if you have time to worry about what to wear."

Ben chuckled and took the cup of coffee Kim offered.

"If you work me any harder, I'll have to ask for a raise."

J.D. spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Don't blame me. Kim's the one with all these new ideas to make more chores for us."

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

"I know." Ben threw her another grin. "You weren't kidding when you warned me what a slave driver she is."

Doing her best to ignore them, Kim took a doughnut from the sack and bit into it. By now, she had learned to accept the brothers' good-natured kidding as part of the job. She knew they appreciated her business abilities. The ranch was doing much better than even she had expected. Their teasing meant they accepted her as one of them, and she felt a warm glow of happiness.

She kept her voice level, but avoided their eyes. "Don't you think you should get started on the lunging pen?"

J.D. and Ben groaned in unison.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Kim sat at her desk. She was caught up on paperwork, and the two teenage hands were cleaning the stalls. It was already hot, even in the air-conditioned office. She rose and looked out the window on her way to the refrigerator for a drink.

J.D. and Ben were working on the pen. They'd made good progress already, but even at a distance Kim could tell it was hard work. And hot—perspiration soaked their T-shirts.

She grabbed three drinks and headed outside. As she approached, she saw J.D. stop working for a moment. He removed his cowboy hat and set it on the post while he pulled his shirt over his head. Bare-chested, he hung the shirt on a finished rail of fence and put his hat back on his head. His back was to Kim, so she knew he hadn't seen her yet.

His brother glanced her way and paused in the act of setting his hat on another rail. He said something to J.D., who nodded. Ben picked up his hat again and came toward Kim.

"I need to get more nails," he explained when he reached her. "One of those for me?"

Kim nodded and handed him a soda.

"Thanks." He took it and popped the top. "Your timing is perfect.

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

It's hotter than Hades out here." He removed a bandanna from his pocket and mopped his brow. "See you later," he said, continuing toward the barn.

Kim turned toward the partially finished round pen and hesitated. She was close enough by now to appreciate J.D.'s very male appearance. His bronzed back and shoulders glistened as he bent to his task, the muscles straining with effort.

She took a deep calming breath and forced her legs to propel her forward.

J.D. turned when she was only a few feet away. He raised a questioning dark brow.

"I thought maybe you could use a cold drink."

He laid his hammer on a rail and turned to face her. As he reached for the soda, their fingers touched while their gazes locked. "Thanks," he said.

She didn't release the drink right away. Her hand seemed to be frozen in place. She swallowed hard and dropped her arm to her side.

Still watching her, he popped the top and slowly raised the can to his lips.

Kim found herself unable to look away as he took a thirsty swallow. Remembering the feel of his mouth when he'd kissed her, a new wave of heat coursed through her that had nothing to do with the sun.

Dropping her gaze lower, she realized almost immediately what a mistake that was. His naked tanned chest filled her vision.

She raised her eyes to his and found him still observing her as he drank. He lowered the can. Amusement tilted the corner of his lips. "Let's go into the shade," he said, taking her hand.

Kim allowed him to pull her to a finished section of the pen, which was shaded by a tree. He climbed up and sat on the top rail, inclining his head toward the rail next to him. "Come on."

She looked doubtfully at it. "Are you sure it will hold us?"

"If it doesn't, I'll fire Ben," he said dryly. Smiling, she handed him

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

her drink and climbed up.

When she was settled on the rail near him, he held out the can.  
“What do you think?”

Kim lifted questioning eyes.

“About the pen?” he prodded.

“Oh...you guys are doing a great job. It’s exactly what I had in mind.” She took a swallow of her drink to avoid looking into his eyes again. “When do you think it will be done?”

“Tomorrow, if the weather holds up. Rainy season is starting, so we may get a lot of showers in the afternoon.”

“Well, I guess that will cool things off.” Even in the shade the temperature was in the 80s. Kim wondered how much of the warmth she felt came from within. Her tank top clung to her chest, making her feel sticky. She grasped the bottom hem and pulled it away from her, allowing some air to circulate, but stopped suddenly when she caught J.D. watching her.

“That makes it hard to get any work done.”

“Excuse me?”

“*Rain* makes it hard to get any work done,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh...yes, I see what you mean.” She nodded. Her heart beat frantically. His nearness was unsettling, the look on his face a blend of desire and wry amusement.

He leaned forward and her breath hitched. Part of her was terrified he was going to kiss her.

The other part prayed he would.



## CHAPTER 11

J.D.'s thoughts of kissing Kim were interrupted when Ben called to him from the other side of the pen. "Hey, you two! Break time is over!"

Tearing his gaze away from Kim's enticing eyes, J.D. sighed and drained his soda. "Guess he's right. We need to get this done before the afternoon storms hit."

Kim hopped down and took the empty can.

"Thanks for the drink," he said. "We'll break for lunch in another hour." He stepped off the fence and headed toward Ben.

When J.D. reached his brother, Ben threw him a speculative grin. "Did I interrupt something?"

Trying not to sound angry, J.D. said, "Of course not."

"You two looked pretty chummy."

J.D. frowned. "Have you already forgotten our discussion from the other night?"

"I thought maybe *you* had."

"Ha!" He picked up the hammer and positioned the nail.

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“Can’t be too serious, the way she looks at you.”

About to pound, J.D. stopped, his hand in mid-air. “What do you mean?”

Sticking a nail between his teeth as he lifted another board, Ben shrugged.

J.D. swung the hammer with a new vengeance. “She may be attracted to me, but she’s got a lot more in common with her city-slicker boyfriend. A college grad like her would never be happy with a drop-out like me.” He picked up the other end of the board his brother held.

Ben lifted an eyebrow as he positioned a nail on the new rail. “How do you know? Besides, you could be a college grad, too.”

Muttering a curse, J.D. threw his brother a scowl.

Ben grinned, pounded the nail in, then turned back with a thoughtful expression. “How many courses do you still need to get your degree?”

J.D. shrugged. “Just a few.”

“So why not finish?”

J.D. positioned another nail, swung the hammer and almost hit his thumb. He muttered a few more curses, then asked testily, “How can I go back now?”

“It won’t get any easier.”

He shook his head. “Like I told you the other night, I don’t have time.”

“There are several colleges within commuting distance that have night classes. The perfect time to do it is while I’m here.”

“College still costs money.”

“Use what you were planning to spend for my next term.”

“No way.”

“Then I won’t go back.”

Glowering, J.D. handed him another board. “That makes a lot of sense.”

## **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

Ben grinned cheekily. "You know you can afford it. Summer term starts next week. Check it out."

"Name one good reason."

Ben chuckled. "Kim Ford."

J.D. turned his back on his brother to cover the grin twitching at his lips. He'd done a lot of thinking after Ben made the suggestion about college the other night. He really did want to finish—for his own reasons.

He sighed dramatically. "All right, Ben. You convinced me. As soon as we break for lunch, I'll get cleaned up and head to Orlando to see about enrolling. But don't you dare tell anyone."

"I'll cover for you. Kim will never suspect where you went."

"I owe you one."

"Don't worry, I'll figure out a way to collect."

\* \* \*

With the lunging pen finished, Kim began to advertise children's riding classes in addition to the trail rides. She found an even bigger demand for lessons than she'd anticipated. All available hours were quickly filled.

Her idea for moonlight trail rides met with enthusiasm from several organizations. One of the first to sign up was the young adults' club from Charlie's church. Kim had joined the group shortly after moving to town, but she rarely had time to attend their functions.

Although she'd had another talk with Charlie after her sister's suggestion, the situation between them hadn't changed much. He insisted he wanted to stay friends even if they saw other people. But she hadn't been dating anyone. Since she didn't have much opportunity to socialize, she was looking forward to serving as hostess when his club came to the ranch.

Rainy season started suddenly one afternoon, proving J.D.'s knowledge of local weather was accurate. For a week it rained off and on all day, every day. The freshly seeded pastures thrived. The horses

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

seemed to enjoy the break from trail rides and contentedly grazed, oblivious to the drizzle. All the tack was cleaned and the horse maintenance caught up. But moneymaking activities had slowed down.

One afternoon that week Kim found herself alone in the barn with Ben while J.D. ran some errands in town. They'd given Becky and the two teenage boys the day off since there was so little work to do.

Kim decided to give the feed room a thorough cleaning. As she moved a bag of oats to sweep behind it, she gasped in surprise. A black indigo snake coiled in the corner, a suspiciously large lump in its neck.

When she cried out, Ben quickly left the stall he'd been mucking and joined her in the feed room. "What's wrong?"

Nodding at the snake, she laughed. "Nothing. He just startled me. It looks like he's been earning his board by keeping down the rat population."

Ben looked from her to the indigo and back again. "You're not afraid of that thing?"

"No, he's harmless." She replaced the feed bag and continued sweeping.

Ben shook his head. "You're really something."

"What do you mean?"

"Most girls I know would hightail it for the woods if they even suspected there was a *little* snake in here, much less one that size."

She shrugged. "I guess you've figured out by now I'm not most girls."

Grinning, he said, "Yeah. You probably wouldn't have lasted too long here if you were." His smile faded. "Does J.D. know that critter's in here?"

"Not now. We've seen it in the barn before, though." She looked sideways at Ben. "How come your brother's so afraid of snakes?"

He reached over to move another bag for her before replying. "Our mother was bitten by a rattlesnake while trying to protect J.D. from it when he was eight. He couldn't find help in time to save her. She died

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

before Dad could get her to a hospital.”

“Oh, no. I’m so sorry.” Tears sprang to Kim’s eyes as she pictured J.D. as a little boy trying to save his dying mother. Guilt assailed her for teasing him about his fear.

“Let’s move the snake outside.” She reached for it, but the reptile slithered away. They followed it outside the barn.

When they were sure the snake wasn’t coming back, Ben suggested they take a break. They retired to the office and settled on the chairs with soft drinks. They talked about Ben’s school and discussed some of Kim’s ideas for the ranch. She found the younger Hudson likable and easy to talk to. Conversation turned to more personal subjects. Ben mentioned having a date that weekend, so Kim seized the opportunity to ask about his brother.

“Does J.D. have a girlfriend?” she asked, trying to sound casual. At Ben’s quick glance, she added, “I just wondered. He asked me to stay late so he could leave early a couple days a week. I thought maybe he’s met someone special.”

Ben eyed her closely as he answered. “No, he’s not seeing anyone in particular. He almost got married once, but it was a mistake. I think he’s afraid of getting burned again.”

He tossed his can in the recycle bin and stood up. “I’ll tell you about it while we clean the tack room.”

A few minutes later, they were working side by side. Ben did the heavy lifting and moving, while Kim swept and dusted. He didn’t bring up the subject again, so she reminded him. “You were going to tell me more about J.D.”

Ben grinned. “Promise not to tell him I told you anything?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.” He set down the heavy saddle rack and leaned against it as he watched Kim sweep the corner of the room. “My big brother’d skin me alive if he knew I let on, but he’s kind of skittish about city girls ever since Monica.”

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“The fiancée you mentioned?”

“The one and only. He was in his senior year of college when a friend of his introduced him to a beautiful freshman. Guess it was love at first sight.”

Ben shook his head. “He should have realized it would never work. She came from money and apparently thought he did, too. He took her to expensive restaurants and she always had a new outfit to wear. Her clothes and hair were always perfect, and she had long fancy fingernails.”

Kim felt a stab of embarrassment as she wondered if Ben knew what she’d been like when she first arrived here. She remained silent and continued working.

“Monica wanted to get married,” Ben continued, “and when she told him she was pregnant, he was more than willing to put a ring on her finger. He brought her home to meet us and explained that she could live at the ranch until he graduated.”

Ben snorted. “But her feelings for him seemed to change real quick when she found out he was in school on a scholarship, and the big country ranch he owned was a small family riding stable. She couldn’t stand the heat, the smell of horses, or the dirt on his hands when he came in from the barn.”

“What happened?”

“She gave him back his ring. I could hear their argument even behind my closed door. Then she packed her bags, admitting she wasn’t really pregnant after all.”

Hearing bitterness in his voice, Kim glanced at Ben. “That must have been hard on him.”

Ben nodded. “He tried to go back to school after that, but his heart wasn’t in it. His grades fell, and he lost the scholarship. He found a job at a stable in Gainesville that included room and board.”

“He never finished college?”

Shaking his head, Ben said, “No, and he didn’t bother to tell our

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

dad about leaving. We didn't find out for months. Not until I registered and found out from a friend in the financial office."

"Did you try to convince him to go back?"

"Sure. Eventually he and Dad compromised. J.D. would continue to work in Gainesville until he had enough saved to finish on his own. Dad helped me with my tuition. The plan worked fine until one rainy night when our father went out with his buddies. On the way back, his car skidded off the wet road and into a tree, killing him instantly."

"Oh no!" Kim felt her heart squeeze with sympathy. "I didn't realize he'd died so suddenly."

Ben nodded. "It was a shock for both of us. J.D. and I'd had a disagreement about something else when we were both home for Christmas, so we weren't on the best of terms when we came back for the funeral. I went right back to school and J.D. stayed to take over the ranch. Guess you know the rest."

"Pretty much. So what happened to his fiancée?"

Shrugging, Ben moved the last saddle rack. "She married another college guy. I don't think J.D. ever heard from her again."

Kim threw a sly glance at her helper. "So who's he seeing on Tuesday and Thursday nights?"

Ben's lips quirked. For a moment she thought he might tell her. Then he shook his head. "Oh no," he said, laughing. "My lips are sealed. If you want to know any more of J.D.'s secrets, you'll have to ask him yourself."

\* \* \*

The rain continued for several more days. By Friday night, J.D. felt restless. He stood at the office window, staring out at the drizzling rain as he fought an equally gray mood. His parking lot was a huge mass of mud. If it rained any more, he'd have to swim to the house.

"Any objection to my taking off early tonight?" Ben asked. He set down the bridle he'd been cleaning. "I've polished this dang thing three times. Besides, I've got a date."

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

"Sure, go ahead," J.D. told him. "I'll probably quit early, too. But you be careful on the road."

"I will. And if I drink, I won't drive home."

"Okay. Have fun."

"You know, big brother, it wouldn't hurt you to take a day off once in a while just to have fun. Going out at night to class doesn't count. You planning to become a monk or something?"

J.D. smiled ruefully. "No, but I guess I could meet at least one of their qualifications these days."

"All work and no play—"

"I know. Get out of here, will you?"

Ben ducked as the piece of crumpled paper J.D. tossed just missed him. Laughing, he made a quick exit. "Don't wait up!" he called from the aisle.

Kim came down the hall from the other direction. She picked up the paper ammunition and dropped it in the trash can as she entered the office. "What was that all about?" she asked J.D.

"Ben's leaving 'cause he has a date."

"Okay. I can stay to help feed." Kim had left before dark the last few nights since rain had prevented any evening rides.

J.D. shook his head. "I don't want you out on these wet roads after dark."

"I've driven in snow, J.D., I think I can handle a little rain—"

"No!"

His tone was so vehement Kim stared at him in surprise.

"Florida roads are treacherous when they're wet," he said, lowering his voice.

"Well...okay. Let's get started feeding and maybe we'll be done by dark."

J.D. threw another disgusted look out the window, then nodded, and they got to work. As they fed the horses, a loud clap of thunder and a close flash of lightning made Kim jump. The rain started anew. By the



## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

time the last horse was bedded down, it was pitch dark outside.

Kim stood at the door of the barn, looking out. "I guess I should have listened to you."

"I'll drive you home in the truck," J.D. offered. "It has four-wheel drive."

"Okay."

He brought an umbrella from the office and held it over them as they ran to the truck. Even with its protection, they were both soaked by the time they made it to the safety of the vehicle. When they reached the driver's side, Kim jumped in and slid across the bench seat to the passenger side.

J.D. followed her inside and slammed the door. The rain came down harder again, the wind whistling uncannily through cracks in the windows. Kim shivered.

"Cold?"

"A little. I'll be okay."

J.D. inserted the key and turned it. The engine coughed and died. Twice more he repeated the ritual, muttering curses under his breath.

When it finally started, he backed the truck and turned it toward the road. His gaze fell on the gauges and he muttered another expletive.

Kim crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "What's wrong?"

"My d—*darn* inconsiderate brother didn't leave me any gas!"

"How much is there?"

"About enough to get us stranded in the middle of nowhere!"

"It's okay. I can take my car."

"No!"

His tone was so emphatic that Kim didn't dare argue. She remembered what Ben had told her about how their father had died driving home on a rainy night.

Part of her was touched that J.D. cared enough to want to keep her safe. But if he wouldn't let her leave, she'd have to stay here...alone with him. Her heart started beating frantically at the thought.

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

After several long seconds, J.D. made the decision. "Come on," he said, "let's go to the house." He drove the truck as close to the building as the fence allowed and parked it.

He opened the door and climbed out, holding the umbrella overhead while Kim slid across to join him. Together they dashed through the rain to his porch.

Once under the protection of the eaves, they stopped to catch their breath, then removed their muddy shoes and socks, leaving them on the porch with the umbrella.

Kim followed him inside. The air-conditioned interior of the house felt cold on her soaked skin. She shivered and crossed her arms, hugging herself for warmth.

J.D. grabbed a couple of kitchen towels and handed her one. "I think you'd better dry off," he said. "Use my bathroom. I'll bring you something to wear."

Following the direction of his gaze, she realized with dismay that, even with her arms crossed, the wet tank top left little to the imagination. "I'll be right back," she muttered and escaped down the hall.

She ran through J.D.'s room and into his adjoining bath. Stripping off her wet shirt and shorts, she wrapped herself in a large towel and grabbed another to dry her hair.

The reflection that stared back at her as she toweled her hair was a far cry from the sophisticated city girl who'd first come to answer J.D.'s ad a few months ago. No makeup, her straight hair wet and tangled, she now had a glow of health and energy that had been missing before. Was it due to fresh country air and outdoor life, or the man in the other room who made her heart do calisthenics?

The thought of going back out there to spend an intimate evening alone with J.D. both excited and terrified her. The look in his eyes when he'd seen her wet shirt had left no doubt in her mind as to how he'd like to spend the evening. Yet he'd been the one to suggest she

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

change. What did he have in mind?

A quick rap on the bathroom door interrupted her thoughts. "Yes?" she squeaked.

"I have a robe you can wear."

"Okay, thanks." She opened the door a crack, shutting it immediately after grabbing the garment. She heard a deep chuckle through the door as J.D. walked away.

The silk robe must have been a gift, she thought. It was not the kind of practical thing J.D. would have bought for himself. She hugged the soft blue fabric to her. The cloth smelled new, without any of the manly scent she'd learned to associate with J.D.

She slipped into the robe and sashed it at the waist. It was large and hung way past her knees. Even though the silk clung to her, at least it would be more modest than her wet clothes.

She found her brush in her purse and did the best she could to untangle her hair, letting it hang long and straight down her back.

On the way to rejoin J.D., Kim took a quick glance around his room. The bed had been made since she'd run through a short while ago, and it looked as if he'd picked up the clothes that had been strewn around. Did he straighten up to impress her with his neatness, or did he have an ulterior motive for wanting the room to be tidy?

Kim joined J.D. in the kitchen. He had changed his own wet clothes to cut-off jeans and a muscle shirt. His hair was combed but still damp.

To get her mind off how incredibly sexy he looked, she asked, "Would you like me to cook dinner?"

He cast an approving gaze over her from his stance at the stove. "I don't think so, Kim," he said dryly.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Can I at least set the table?"

"No need." He nodded toward the laundry room. "You can throw your clothes in the dryer."

By the time she came back, J.D. had finished making omelets and toast. He brought their plates and two mugs of coffee to the living

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

room.

Facing the front window, they sat cross-legged on the floor, watching the distant lightning flashes and listening to the steady beat of the rain pelting softly against the roof.

They ate silently, lost in their own thoughts. When she finished, Kim unfolded her legs and drew her knees up to her chest, being careful to keep them covered by the robe. "That was great." She continued to stare out the window, her hunger satisfied while a peaceful feeling flowed through her.

"More coffee?" J.D. asked.

"Thanks." Kim allowed him to take her cup and go for more. She felt so drowsy she didn't know if she could move if the house caught on fire.

A few minutes later, he handed her the mug and sat on the floor behind her. Grasping his own cup with both hands, he leaned back against the front of the couch.

The rain started up again, pounding on the roof with a staccato beat. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Kim trembled.

"Still cold?" he asked.

"Mmm. A little."

"C'mere." He set their cups on the end table and moved over, turning to extend his bare legs in front of him to rest on either side of her. Grasping her shoulders, he gently drew her back, hugging her against his chest.

When he chuckled, she asked drowsily, "What?"

He nodded toward the tips of her bare feet, which showed past the edges of the robe. Painted toenails peeped out. "Glad to see you haven't changed *too* much. You're still all woman."

Kim's heart raced as she warmed to his comfortable touch. It felt right to be in his arms and she cuddled closer, relaxing against him.

The gentle touch of his lips on her neck took her by surprise, sending a stampede of heated sensations rushing through her. Instead of

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

wanting to resist, she melted in his arms. She tilted her head, allowing him freer access.

He didn't hesitate to act on her encouragement. With a low growl he rained kisses along her neck, gently lifting her hair to expose more of her skin.

Quivering with excitement, she tried to twist around, eager to return his caress. But he held her firmly and continued to leave a trail of kisses along the back of her head and neck, then moved to gently nip at her earlobe and tease her with his tongue until she whimpered with frustration.

At last he turned her in his arms and seized her mouth with his own. She parted her lips, no longer hesitating at the wave of new and wonderful sensations his touch created. His mouth pressed harder, his tongue probing deeper and deeper. His hands moved as well, feeling deliciously erotic through the silk of the robe as he gently caressed her back and shoulders.

While he kissed her lips, he carefully lowered her to the floor. His hand found the sash and unfastened it.

All her senses focused on him. He straddled her, his weight on his knees as his mouth left her lips to continue its exploration of her face and neck.

Her hands were free now, and she ran them through the silken strands of his hair, wondering at its softness. She pulled his head to her, wanting him closer and yet closer.

He reached the neckline of the robe and moved lower, his hands gently parting the silk. "Lady, you are so beautiful."

His gaze moved to her breasts. Kim smiled shyly, thrilled at the approval which shone in his passion-darkened eyes. She wanted to please him, and with that thought came a certain knowledge that she loved him.

Reaching up to caress his cheek, she felt the stubble of beard rough against her hand. He caught her gaze and held it as his hand seized hers

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

and turned it. He pressed a kiss on the palm, sending new shivers of pleasure through her.

He sat back on his heels, watching her solemnly as he stripped off his muscle shirt and cast it aside. Heart pounding, she waited for his next move.

J.D. lowered himself to her again. He kissed the bare skin of her shoulders and moved to tease each breast to total arousal. Waves of heat and desire lanced through her.

She pressed her hands against the corded muscles of his chest, delighting in the tangle of hair, then explored the hardness of his powerful biceps.

Groaning again, he buried his face in the robe, kissing her body lower and still lower. His hands tantalized and teased, spreading a sweet warmth through her veins as she arched against him.

With a ragged breath, she whispered, "Oh, J.D., I love you."

## CHAPTER 12

Kim's heart sank when J.D. stiffened. He slowly shifted his weight and rolled off her. With ragged breaths, he sat up and leaned against the back of the couch.

Watching the play of emotions cross his face as he raked a hand through his hair, she asked softly, "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

He shook his head, his expression grim. "Are you protected?"

She blinked at him. Understanding began to permeate her consciousness. For the first time in her life she had been so aroused and excited that she'd completely thrown caution to the wind! "No, I—"

"You'd better get dressed before we do something we'll regret tomorrow."

Cheeks flaming, Kim hurried to the laundry room, grabbed her clothes from the dryer and escaped to J.D.'s room. How could she have been so careless? She had finally given her heart away, only to have it thrust back at her. Was the reason he'd stopped really because she

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

didn't have any birth control? Surely a man like him would be prepared in advance for an opportunity like this. Wouldn't he?

Unless... Unless he thought she was deliberately trying to trap him! Hadn't Ben told her J.D.'s fiancée had pretended to be pregnant? Maybe he thought *she* was trying to do the same thing. Could he have such a low opinion of her?

Or maybe since his last bad experience, he wasn't interested in committing to any woman at all. Ben had said J.D. wasn't dating anyone special. So, if there wasn't anyone else...

But *she* had someone else! Or at least he probably thought she did. Kim felt another stab of guilt for not making her available status clear. If J.D. didn't know she and Charlie had agreed to see other people, he probably thought she was two-timing her boyfriend.

She felt herself flush with embarrassment when she remembered the point at which he'd called a halt to the lovemaking. It had been right after she'd told him she loved him. Did he think those were just empty words? Could he think she was like his former fiancée?

Or was it because she had just admitted how important he was to her and he didn't feel the same? Since they were business partners, he'd have to see her every day. He couldn't just quit calling when he tired of her.

Kim took her time dressing, not anxious to return to J.D. Finally, when she couldn't delay any longer, she returned to the living room in her own clothes.

J.D. had donned his shirt but still sat where she'd left him, staring at the darkness outside as he held his mug with both hands. He didn't look up when he spoke. "Go ahead and sleep in my room. I'll wait up for Ben. He has an extra bed in his room, so I can bunk with him."

"I can drive home—"

"No! It's raining again, and I don't want to have to worry about you."

"But—"



### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

J.D. glanced at her and softened his voice. "I'm sorry. When I asked you to stay tonight, I had no intention of letting things get so out of hand. You're important to me. I just wanted to keep you safe."

Intending to explain about her platonic relationship with Charlie, Kim took a step toward J.D. She stopped when she saw the hard expression on his face.

"I think we need to keep our association on a business level," he said.

"Is that all you want?"

"Yes. You're an attractive woman, and I temporarily lost my head. In the future I'll make sure we stay out of situations like this." His tone was grim.

"J.D.—"

He held up a hand to stop her. "Look, Kim, we got off to a tough start, but we have a comfortable working relationship now. I think if we try to complicate that with romance, we'll make things too...well, complicated. Let's just stay friends, okay?"

Kim opened her mouth to protest, then shut it again quickly. She'd never seduced a man, and she wasn't about to start now. Abruptly she turned around and hurried to his room.

She shut the door behind her and leaned against it, staring at the bed. How was she ever going to sleep there, knowing he was so close...and yet so far? Still, she and J.D. needed to be in separate rooms tonight if they were to stay out of each other's arms.

With a sigh of resignation, she walked over to the bed and pulled back the comforter. Without bothering to remove her clothes, she slipped between the percale sheets. A sob escaped her throat as J.D.'s scent wafted up from his pillow, nearly choking her with longing. How would she ever get through tonight?

She tossed and turned half the night before finally slipping into a restless sleep, dreaming of being in J.D.'s arms only to awaken and realize it was only his pillow she hugged.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

\* \* \*

J.D. poured some whiskey into his third cup of coffee, knowing it wouldn't relieve the gut-wrenching desire for Kim, but hoping it would dull the ache. He ought to have his head examined.

Man, he'd wanted her. Still did. But was wanting her enough? She'd told him she loved him. And he wished he could believe her.

Could he trust her? She hadn't mentioned Simpson for a while. Still, until he knew for sure the other man was out of the picture, he wouldn't go any further. He wouldn't take another man's woman, whether she was willing or not.

He shook his head in self-mockery. Okay, maybe he did want her, regardless of the situation. Wanted her more than he'd ever wanted a woman. Wanted her enough to make passionate love to her right now. But not if her heart was somewhere else.

Noticing he gripped his cup so hard his knuckles were white, he slammed it down. Tiny looked up from her position on the floor by his chair and cocked her head.

J.D. stood and paced the floor as his thoughts turned to another pretty blonde, the one who'd taught him not to trust city girls.

His senior year in college, his life had been going well. Then Monica had taken his heart and ripped it in two. Would Kim do the same thing? If she really loved him, could she commit to letting him be the only man in her life?

Or would she go back to her executive boyfriend when she tired of playing rancher? Isn't that what he'd been telling Ben?

J.D. stopped and frowned. Where the hell *was* Ben?

As if in answer, the phone rang. J.D. picked it up after one ring.

"Where are you?"

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Who else calls me at this time of night? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. The roads are still pretty bad, though. I think I'll stay here at my friend's."

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

A giggle in the background told him the gender of his brother's companion, and J.D. grinned. At least one of the Hudson men was having a good time tonight. "Okay, kid, thanks for calling."

He replaced the receiver with a sigh. Now that he knew Ben was safe, he could go on to bed. But what could he do about his feelings for Kim?

\* \* \*

When Kim emerged from J.D.'s room the next morning, he was drinking coffee at the kitchen table. She stole a quick glance at him. The dark circles under his eyes hinted that he hadn't slept any better than she had.

He avoided her gaze. "There's a stack of pancakes by the stove." He picked up his hat and headed for the door. "Go ahead and eat while I feed the horses."

Kim stared after him in disbelief. After what had almost happened last night, he wouldn't even talk to her! She started to reach for a cup of coffee, then changed her mind. This morning the idea of eating sickened her.

Since she needed to shower and change anyway, she decided to go home to collect her thoughts. Maybe getting away from here would make it easier.

She half expected J.D. to come out to investigate when she slammed the front door. He hadn't appeared by the time she reached her car, so she got in and started it up. He'd figure out she'd left sooner or later.

After a shower and a light breakfast, Kim felt a little better. She began to experience a pang of guilt for leaving without an explanation. Still, Ben should be up by now to help, and since Becky and the boys came in early on Saturdays, Kim hoped she wouldn't be missed too badly.

She waited until she was sure someone else would be there to answer the phone before calling to see if they needed her to come in.

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

Becky assured her that they'd be fine until the moonlight trail ride scheduled for that evening.

Charlie's club was the group attending, and Kim hadn't seen him in a couple of weeks. She phoned to make sure he still planned to go.

He sounded surprised, but glad to hear from her. When he found out she was taking the day off until the ride, he offered to drive her that evening, explaining he had a business appointment earlier.

"Thanks, Charlie, but I think I'll just meet you there. Can you come early? I need to talk to you."

"Sounds serious."

"It is."

He hesitated for a moment, and she heard him sigh. "Sure. I'll be there."

\* \* \*

J.D. frowned when he saw Charlie Simpson's car pull up to the Triple H an hour before the start of the ride. Why was the jerk so early?

Kim pulled up next to the Corvette, and J.D. felt a stab of irritation. So that was how it was. He picked up his hat and set it firmly on his head. He may as well get this meeting over with.

Simpson put his arm around Kim's shoulders as they approached the barn. J.D. waited for them, leaning against the door.

The other man gave him a polite smile. "Hello, Hudson."

"Simpson." J.D. nodded, his gaze fastened on Kim. At least she had the grace to look embarrassed.

Ben wandered in and cast a speculative glance at Kim. His eyes met J.D.'s with the mischievous glint the kid always got when he was about to start trouble. Before J.D. could figure out what he was up to, Ben turned to Kim and said, "You never said goodbye this morning."

She paled, but her boyfriend's face remained passive. She recovered quickly, raising her chin. "You weren't up yet."

"Actually I didn't get home till dawn, when I passed you on my way home. I guess big brother took good care of you, though," he

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

added as he winked at J.D. and headed outside.

The paleness left Kim's face to be replaced by an embarrassed blush. Simpson was frowning now, too. Apparently she hadn't told her boyfriend they were alone all night.

J.D. turned away. "Go ahead and start tacking the horses," he said over his shoulder. "I need to finish a few things in the house."

Kim stared after J.D, wondering how to explain. Charlie stepped in front of her, grasping her shoulders as he searched her face. "What was that all about?" he asked, his normally kind blue eyes clouded with barely controlled anger. "Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Kim hesitated in frustration. "Sort of," she said, pulling away and glancing in J.D.'s direction. "I...we—"

"Are you sleeping with him?"

The pain in Charlie's voice cut through her own dismay. Knowing he deserved the truth, she turned back to him. "No, Charlie, I haven't, but—"

He engulfed her in his arms. "I'm sorry, baby," he crooned. She started to shrug out of his grasp. His understanding tone and familiar sympathetic touch made tears of embarrassment and frustration gather in her eyes. She gave in to the overwhelming need for comfort and relaxed against him.

He took out his handkerchief and offered it to her. "I should have known better than to think that. After what happened to you..." The sound of footsteps made them both look up, startled.

"Sorry to interrupt," J.D. said, his gaze narrowed on Kim. "But Ben said he needs some help with the bonfire. And *somebody* needs to tack horses."

Too embarrassed to show her tearstained face, Kim remained entwined in Charlie's arms. J.D. stalked past them to the tack room.

"I'd better go help him." She dabbed furiously at her eyes. "I already took the whole day off."

"Are you going to be okay?"

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

Kim reached up to touch his cheek fondly. She did her best to ignore J.D. as he walked past them carrying a saddle. "I'm fine," she told Charlie. "Thanks for the handkerchief."

*Poor Charlie.* He would never share her love of horses, or understand why she liked her job. He'd only come tonight for her sake. He was such a good man. If only she could love him the way he deserved.

"Why don't you go help Ben with the bonfire?" she suggested. "We'll talk later."

Relief flooded his face. "Okay. I'll see you when everything's ready."

Kim started to tack Apache. As she came out of the stall, she almost bumped into J.D.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you," he said, his tone hinting that he didn't mind at all. "Did Simpson leave?"

"No. He went to help Ben."

"Oh." J.D. crossed his arms and watched her, blocking her path out of the stall.

"Excuse me," she said, clenching her teeth. "I need to get past."

He moved just enough so she could squeeze through. She felt the heat from his body as she brushed against him.

A few minutes later, she returned with a saddle to find he was still there. He took it from her wordlessly and held it while she positioned the blanket on the horse. J.D. set the saddle on top, and they cinched it together, working on opposite sides of the animal.

When they'd finished, he suddenly grabbed her arm before she could leave the stall. "Kim, I'm sorry if what my brother said got you in trouble with Simpson. Ben was just teasing. If you want, I'll explain."

She snatched her arm out of his grasp and glared at him. "Don't worry about me. I told Charlie nothing happened, and he believed me."

J.D.'s narrowed eyes held a warning glint. "I imagine the tears

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

helped,” he snapped. “Can you turn them on and off at will? I used to know somebody else who could do that.”

Kim stared at him. His lips wore a cruelly sardonic grin. She tossed her head, unwilling to let the waterworks start up again. How could he say such a vicious thing to her? Was it possible that the man who had held her so tenderly last night really thought so little of her?

Shrugging away from him and hoping the pain in her heart stayed out of her voice, she said, “As you pointed out, I have work to do.”

They avoided each other as they finished the chores, laboring separately to tack the remaining horses. By the time the rest of the guests arrived, the mounts were ready. Fees for the evening’s festivities were collected and mosquito repellent passed around. Riders were paired with horses according to their previous experience.

The night had grown dark except for the bonfire and the large full moon which rose in the east over the trees. Stars dotted the clear sky. A cacophony of night birds and insects filled in the occasional lapse of conversation.

The riders were instructed to mount up. As soon as they were all ready, J.D. climbed on Apache. He informed them that he would lead the party and Kim would follow the group to make sure no one got lost or left behind. He headed out, the rest trailing behind him. Several young women volleyed for the positions immediately behind J.D. Two couples followed behind them, and Charlie waited with Kim to bring up the rear.

It was a beautiful night for a ride. Everyone seemed excited and conversation was animated. Kim tried to relax and enjoy herself. Another of her ideas seemed to be successful.

She caught a glimpse of J.D. as the front of the group rounded a turn in the path, and her heart lurched. He looked so good on a horse. His new fan club clustered around him, asking questions. Feminine giggles drifted back to her with snatches of conversation.

J.D. urged his horse to a trot, and the rest followed. His riding

### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

ability was even more apparent as the amateurs around him bounced high out of the saddle, while he sat deep in his seat, his long body absorbing the movement of his horse and flowing with it.

She glanced at Charlie, riding beside her, and caught him watching her with an odd expression. She made an effort to keep her gaze from returning to Apache's rider.

J.D. passed word back to spread out. As soon as all the riders were far enough apart to keep from running into one another, they started to gallop. Excited cries of "Yeehaw!" went through the lines, and Kim and Charlie joined in, laughing.

They avoided the dark woods and followed the dirt road instead. The moonlight reflecting on the sand gave good visibility, making it safe to run the horses there. Kim caught sight of J.D. again as he pulled ahead of the rest. Her heart swelled with pride as she watched him looking so wild and free.

Much too soon they reached the end of the road and pulled back to a walk. The leaders turned around and doubled back to return on the same path.

J.D. stopped next to Kim, so close his knee brushed hers. "How's it going back here?" he asked.

His eyes were almost hidden by the shadow of the ever-present cowboy hat, but Kim could feel them boring into her. "Fine," she answered.

He nodded and moved on. Enough of J.D.'s words to his companions drifted back for Kim to know he was explaining the reason they couldn't run the horses back. Feminine laughter accompanied his tale of how he had learned that lesson the hard way the first time he'd tried to stop a galloping horse headed toward the barn.

Kim glanced at Charlie, and he smiled at her companionably.

Back at the barn, everyone offered to lead his own mount to its stall. Ben had the bonfire going at a full blaze, and most of the guests drifted out to watch. A few others lingered in the barn to help brush down the



### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

horses. Although Charlie offered to stay as well, Kim could tell he felt uncomfortable. She suggested he join his friends outside. A few minutes later the barn cleared out, leaving her alone with the horses....and J.D.

The necessity of working near him had Kim's nerves on edge. She avoided him as much as possible, speaking to him only when necessary.

As she carried a saddle into the tack room, she bumped it against the wall and stumbled. Before she could regain her balance, J.D. was there, his steadying hands on her waist.

"Easy, Kim. What's your rush?" His deep voice sounded amused. He lifted the saddle from her and leaned against the wall, blocking her escape, just as he had earlier.

She didn't dare look at him—or explain that she was hurrying to get away from him. "I need to finish and get back—"

"To Simpson?"

She tossed her head. "*All* the guests."

"They'll be okay for a few minutes."

He made no move to get out of her way, so she gritted her teeth and squeezed past him. As soon as she cleared the saddle, his hand snaked out and grasped her shoulder.

"Whoa."

One glance at his face and her breath hitched in her throat.

## CHAPTER 13

J.D. searched Kim's wide blue eyes. Damn if she didn't look scared to death. Kind of like a spooky little filly who needed to be tamed. What was she so bloody afraid of?

He clamped down the urge to pull her into his arms and dropped his hand instead. If they were going to get back their healthy working relationship, he'd have to lighten up. "You're right. We have guests to attend to—together. How about we call a truce?"

She nodded and raced out of the barn. He stared after her. Suddenly the barn seemed much too quiet. With a sigh, he set the saddle on the rack, squared his shoulders, and strode out after her.

A few minutes later, J.D. took a position next to Ben, adding scoops of beans and coleslaw to each plate, while his brother distributed the hot dogs.

Kim and Simpson fell in behind the others at the end of the food line. As he took her plate to fill it, J.D. accidentally touched her hand. She glanced at him, wide-eyed, but didn't flinch. He smiled. "Hungry?"

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

She nodded. "Yes. All that exercise brought out my appetite." She pulled her gaze away and moved on as he handed her plate to his brother.

"How was the ride?" Ben asked, placing a hot dog and bun on her dish.

"Great. I think everyone had a good time."

"You and J.D. got the better deal. Next time *I'll* go riding and give one of *you* kitchen and fire duty."

"Fair enough," J.D. said. "I think you better trade with me, though, unless you want the fire *in* the kitchen. Last time I let Kim cook she almost burned the house down!"

Kim turned and wrinkled her nose at him. Their eyes met, and his gut twisted with more than hunger.

Ben's devilish laughter made him cringe and jerk around. Uh oh. The kid was up to mischief again...

"I remember that, J.D. Of course, what kind of breakfast did you expect the girl to cook when you hardly let her get any sleep?" Ben winked at Kim.

She pivoted away and stumbled in the darkness.

Simpson grabbed her arm to prevent a fall. "What're they talking about? When did you start cooking for J.D.?" he asked as he ushered her away.

J.D. narrowed his eyes at Ben, who grinned cheekily. "What'd I do?"

Shaking his head, J.D. filled his own plate. He noted that Simpson led Kim to a secluded spot well away from him and Ben. Good. That would make it easier to avoid watching him fondle her.

After J.D. made sure all the guests were taken care of, he and Ben found seats on the ground near the group of single women. As he pretended interest in the chatter of the pretty redhead next to him, J.D. couldn't keep his gaze from straying to the couple on the other side of the dying bonfire.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

She was obviously avoiding him, wouldn't even look at him. Still he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off her face in the firelight. It reminded him of how she'd looked in the dim light of his house last night. He warmed from more than just the nearby fire.

Was there any chance she felt even a bit of the same ache for him? Or would she be in Charlie's arms later tonight? The words she'd told the other man earlier came back to haunt him. *Nothing happened.*

Maybe they hadn't finished what they'd started, but it sure as hell hadn't felt like *nothing*! Suddenly his hot dog was tasteless. He set his plate down and concentrated on listening to the conversation around him.

Kim did her best to avoid glancing J.D.'s way, but couldn't help noticing the attention all the single women around him seemed to give the handsome rancher. Was he relishing it as much as he appeared? The guests all seemed to be enjoying themselves now, too. Lively conversation was followed by camp songs and then ghost stories. By the time the fire completely died out, everyone was exhausted. Goodbyes and promises to come back were exchanged all around.

Kim watched J.D. walk some of the women to their cars and then go in the barn. She and Charlie were the only ones left with Ben.

"Can we help clean up?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "No, thanks. I just need to make sure the fire is out. After I take the leftover food to the house, I'll turn in."

"Okay, then, I'll see you in the morning." Kim's gaze strayed to the barn. "Tell your brother goodbye for us."

Ben gave her a speculative look. "Sure."

As they turned and walked toward their cars, Kim felt Charlie's gaze on her and glanced at him. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep breath and sighed. "I saw the way your face changed when you were watching J.D. tonight. He looked at you the same way when he thought no one was watching."

They stopped at her Mustang. "Look, Kim, I think I can pretty well

## **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

guess what you're planning to tell me. When you said you didn't love me, I was willing to see you anyway, hoping things might change. But even if you're not dating him, I know you have feelings for that cowboy."

"Yes," she admitted softly. "I didn't realize how much until last night."

"At least I know who the competition is."

Kim bit her lip, wondering if she should tell him J.D. wasn't interested in a personal relationship. She decided not to mention that part. It would be kinder in the long run to let Charlie believe there was someone else. "I'm sorry. I wish I could change my feelings..."

"Me, too." He stared at the ground for a moment, then looked up as if an idea had just occurred to him. "You know, I can tell you really like this ranch. Have you thought about trying to buy out the other half? Make it all yours?"

She shook her head. "Not seriously. That would take a lot more money than what I have left. Besides, I like things the way they are."

"What if you and J.D. have a falling out?"

"We've already had plenty of disagreements, but we always compromise. We make a good team."

"So could you and I," he said as he opened her car door.

She got in and looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

He stroked his chin. "I'll call you in a few days. I may want some business advice." As he leaned over to kiss her, she turned her head so his lips touched her cheek. He shut the door before she could ask what he meant.

\* \* \*

The next morning Kim dragged herself into the office early. She opened the box of doughnuts she'd brought and held it out to Becky. "Where's J.D.?"

The redhead reached in and selected a chocolate cream. "I told him and Ben to sleep in. We've got that interview with Sam later."

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

Kim was silent as she prepared her coffee. She'd forgotten about the reporter coming today. A few weeks ago she'd suggested that a good way to promote the stable would be to get someone from the local newspaper to come out and do an article about them. Becky had offered to set up the interview with one of her classmates from high school who now wrote for the paper.

Taking a seat on the couch, Kim asked, "When is he coming out?"

"She's supposed to be here right after lunch."

"The reporter is a woman?"

"Uh-huh. Sam should give us a decent story since she always did have a thing for J.D. She just moved back to town recently. It'll be good to see her again."

"Were you friends?"

"Not really. She was a cheerleader. We hung out with different crowds. But she was always nice to me." Becky finished her doughnut and reached for another.

"So you think she'll give the story a positive slant?"

"Depends on how the interview goes. I think the stable looks great and has never run this smooth. J.D. and Ben's father was a nice man, but he was just interested in getting by. He would've never done anything to make it successful like it is now. You've really turned it around."

Kim smiled appreciatively. She hoped the reporter talked to Becky. "Don't you think J.D. could have done the same thing with a little more time?"

Becky shrugged. "Hard to say. It was going under before J.D. took over. He had to work from dawn till dark seven days a week just to keep it running. He was living day to day, struggling to pay the bills with no time to think about how to change things. Until you got here."

Kim rose and picked up the coffeepot. Becky wasn't often in a talkative mood, and she wanted to encourage her. She crossed the floor to the other woman and refilled her coffee before pouring her own

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

second cup. “Don’t you think Ben would have come home sooner to help out if I hadn’t been here?” she prodded.

The other woman shook her head. “Ben didn’t know how bad things were. He and J.D. had a fight and were barely speaking, so he stayed away. Until he found out J.D. was planning to sell off land to pay his tuition.” Becky reached for a third doughnut and sat back to enjoy it.

Kim finished her coffee and took her usual seat at the desk. “You don’t know what they fought about?”

“Something to do with Ben’s girlfriend. He brought her home to meet the family. Then they both left real sudden.” She shrugged. “Who knows? I’m just glad the guys worked it out.”

Kim nodded thoughtfully and took another sip of coffee. She glanced back at Becky, who was watching her with speculation. “What?”

The redhead popped the last bite of doughnut in her mouth and wiped her hands on a napkin. “This could be interesting.”

“What do you mean?”

“J.D. dated Sam a few times in high school. But she married the star quarterback and moved away.”

“He hasn’t seen her since?”

“Not that I know of. She divorced a few months ago and moved back to town with her kid. She sounded real anxious to see J.D. again, especially when she found out he’s still single.” Becky rose and walked over to the sink to rinse out her mug.

Kim picked up the schedule, wondering why the conversation had started to bother her. What concern was it of hers if the reporter was an old girlfriend of J.D.’s? The fact that she was a former cheerleader didn’t mean anything. Besides, Sam had married someone else, so she must not have been in love with J.D.

And what difference did it make anyway? If J.D. was afraid of marriage, another woman in the picture wouldn’t change things. The

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

real problem was that she cared more than he did.

His words from the other night drifted back to her. *You're an attractive woman and I got carried away.* He'd gone on to point out that if they let romance get in the way of their business partnership, things would get too complicated. Was he right?

The rest of the morning passed quickly. Kim had planned to leave at lunchtime, as she usually did on Sundays. However, she decided to stick around for the interview. Just in case they needed her.

J.D. and Ben arrived late in the morning to help with the trail rides, while Becky and Kim cleaned stalls and did their best to spruce up the barn so it would make a good impression. No one mentioned the night before except to comment on what a success it had been. Kim and J.D. were never alone, and she avoided him whenever possible.

At exactly one o'clock a baby blue late model Camaro pulled into the Triple H. "Is that Sam?" Kim asked Ben, nodding toward the window.

He reached in the refrigerator for a soda before crossing the room to look out. "Oh yeah," he said, grinning. "She certainly hasn't changed for the worse. Guess I'd better go welcome her."

Staring out the window with a twinge of irritation, Kim observed, "Looks like your brother beat you to it." She fought a wave of jealousy as an attractive brunette in a black blazer and skirt with a ruffled white blouse emerged from the vehicle and glanced around.

J.D. reached the reporter and was quickly enveloped in her arms. Sam followed the embrace with a kiss, right on his mouth. And he didn't seem to mind a bit.

"She seems glad to see him," Kim added, trying not to care but knowing her voice betrayed her.

Ben touched Kim's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about her. She's not his type."

Kim shrugged and turned away from the window. "It doesn't matter to me," she lied.



## RAWHIDE AND LACE

“Uh-huh.” Ben dropped his hand. He turned back to the door. “Well, I think I’ll go see if big brother needs any help entertaining her.”

The phone rang, and Kim turned her attention to her job, trying to keep her mind off J.D. and Sam. She reminded herself that the reporter was on assignment. The more she liked J.D., the better story she would write. Of course he wanted to make a positive impression. It would be good for business.

Kim looked up at the sound of voices and laughter approaching. The reporter appeared in the office doorway flanked by J.D. and Ben. Her arms were looped through theirs, a broad smile on her full red lips.

“Sam, I’d like you to meet my business partner, Kim Ford,” J.D. said as they entered the room. “Kim, this is Samantha Wilkins from the *Tribune*.”

Kim avoided his eyes and held out her hand. “Hello, Sam, it’s nice to meet you. What do you think of our stable?”

Removing her arms from those of her escorts, she shook hands with Kim. “It’s wonderful!” She took a seat on the couch, smoothed her skirt, and smiled an invitation at J.D. He sat next to her and she continued, “I hadn’t been here for years, and I can’t believe all the improvements you’ve made.”

Reaching down and removing her high heels, she massaged her stocking feet. “I think I should have dressed a little more casually, though. I was just planning to do an interview, so I came right from church. J.D. gave me a full tour. I should have plenty of information for the article. I even took some pictures.” She nodded toward Ben, who held an expensive-looking camera.

Kim settled back in her chair to listen, wondering why she didn’t like the reporter. Was she jealous because J.D. was paying Sam so much attention? He obviously found her attractive and had been interested in her once, if they’d dated. Was his interest now strictly in her handling of the story, or was it personal?

What concern was it of hers, anyway?

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

Samantha pulled a small tape recorder out of her purse. J.D. offered her a soft drink and she took it, flashing him another charming smile before turning on the recorder and starting the interview.

The questions were all very basic, focusing on the facilities at the Triple H, particularly the new activities they offered, such as lessons and moonlight rides. Samantha seemed much more interested in what J.D. had to say than the comments of either Kim or Ben, so they sat back and listened except when J.D. referred a business question to Kim. After a few minutes of being ignored, Ben excused himself to help Becky tack up some horses.

Kim remained in the office a bit longer. But she became more and more uncomfortable as Samantha continued to flirt with J.D. Finally, unable to take it any more, she too said she had work to do outside.

A knowing smile played on Ben's lips when she approached him as he filled the horses' water trough. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"What makes you think that?" Kim leaned on the fence rail and watched the rising water line.

"Your face when you saw Samantha kiss J.D."

Kim winced. "Is it that obvious?" Raising her gaze to meet Ben's, she was reassured by the understanding she saw reflected there.

He nodded, his eyes serious as he turned off the water. "You love him, don't you?"

She lowered her gaze to stare at the ground.

"Have you told him?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper, and she nodded to make sure he heard.

"What about Charlie?"

Looking up in surprise, she searched the blue eyes that stared back at her. Comprehension began to seep into her brain. "You think J.D. doesn't believe I love him because of Charlie?"

Ben sighed and leaned over the fence, crossing his arms on the top rail. "What would you think? Look, Kim, I haven't known you very

## **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

long, but I do know my brother. He told me the day I met you that you have a boyfriend and that he's the reason you only have a business relationship. I also saw the way J.D. looked at you last night with Charlie. It was the same way you looked at him with Samantha. He was a wreck after you left, and I'd be willing to bet it was because it tore him apart knowing you went home with Charlie."

"I didn't go home with Charlie! I've never felt the same way about him that I do about J.D."

"I'm not the one you need to convince. It's none of my business what kind of relationship you and Charlie have." Ben faced her and cocked his head, watching the effect of his words. "But you can't have it both ways, Kim. You need to tell J.D. where he stands."

She stared out at the pasture, drumming her fingers along the fence rail. Finally she met Ben's eyes. "Charlie guessed, too," she said. "We had a long discussion last night. He knows I don't love him."

Ben's grin spread across his whole face. "Then I think I'll see if I can finish the interview, so you and J.D. can have a chance to talk."

As he pulled away from the fence, he caught sight of the couple in question exiting the barn. "Looks like she's leaving anyway," he said. "And some more trail riders are back. Becky will need help."

"Okay." Kim followed him toward the returning riders. She tried not to watch as J.D. said goodbye to Sam, looking their way only long enough to nod and wave.

J.D. joined her at the fence to loosen the saddles on the horses which had just returned. Kim asked, "How'd the interview go?"

"Good. Why'd you leave?" He looked sideways at her as they worked.

"I needed a break. Besides, she seemed a lot more interested in what *you* had to say."

"You're not jealous, are you?"

Before she could reply, Becky called and he headed to the barn. Kim sighed with frustration. Would they ever get a chance to talk?

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

The next few hours were too busy for conversation. By the time Becky went home, the last trail riders were back. "I think I'll go start dinner," Ben said with a sly look toward Kim. "Think you two can finish up without me?"

"Don't make anything for me," J.D. said as he started to measure feed. "I'm going out."

"You're *what*?" Ben stopped in his tracks and stared at his brother. "You have a date or something?"

"Yep."

Ben threw an inquiring glance at Kim, but she shook her head. "Sam?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

Kim tried to appear uninterested in the conversation as she untacked Mouse. She kept her face turned away from J.D. in case she turned green.

"Maybe I might have wanted to ask her myself," Ben said cheekily. "I like older women."

J.D. chuckled. "Forget it, kid. She's too much woman for you."

Ben grimaced at him and cast another glance in Kim's direction. She shrugged but inwardly winced.

"You go ahead and get ready, then," he said to J.D. "Kim and I can finish up."

"Thanks." J.D. handed him the feed can and strode out of the barn. Halfway down the aisle, he started to whistle a country tune.

Ben and Kim finished the work silently. When they met in the office to close up, Ben laid a hand on her arm. "I guess you and J.D. didn't get a chance to talk?"

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes. "It's okay, though. Obviously he doesn't feel the same way I do. I just need to get used to the idea." She hated the quiver in her voice, but wasn't able to control it. Picking up her purse, she turned to the door. "See you tomorrow."

\* \* \*

### ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

After spending another rough night tossing and turning in between dreams of J.D., Kim arrived at work early and exhausted the next morning.

J.D. sat at the desk, his feet propped up on the top. He looked up when she entered and tossed her purse in the desk drawer. "Mornin'."

Kim schooled her features to remain bland. "Have a nice time last night?" She reached for her coffee mug.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Thanks for asking." He watched her, a faint grin quirked at his lower lip. "Sam is bringing her son for a trail ride tomorrow."

"Great." Kim hoped her voice sounded more enthusiastic than she felt. She remained standing as she prepared her coffee, drained it, and turned to leave. "If the horses are all fed, I'll start turning them out." She exited the office without waiting for an answer.

She'd waited too long. J.D. had found someone else! Fighting the nausea in the pit of her stomach, she mechanically put a halter on Morticia and snapped on a lead rope. She led the filly out to the pasture and turned her loose. As she shut the gate, a shadow fell across the grass in front of her. Knowing it was J.D., she didn't turn around.

She flinched as his warm, rough fingers grasped her shoulders.

"Still afraid of my touch?" his deep voice asked softly.

"Of course not!" She wrenched free and stumbled toward the barn, not bothering to fasten the latch.

She heard him mutter a curse as the gate swung open. Seconds later, he snapped it closed. She didn't stop until she reached the barn. Not knowing which horses were scheduled, she picked up a tack box at random and headed into the first stall.

Her fingers shaking, she tried to brush the horse, fully aware that J.D. had followed her and watched from the stall entrance. When she realized she'd forgotten the bridle, she put down the brush and tried to walk out.

"What's wrong?" J.D. asked, stepping in front of her to block her

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

path.

“We have work to do!”

“Nothing that can’t wait a few minutes.”

“Let me pass.” She glared at him. His dark eyes fastened on her with amusement.

“Kiss me first.”

“What?” Her heart thudded against her chest. She felt paralyzed by his hypnotic gaze as he reached over to cup her chin.

“No...” she muttered, knowing her tone denied her words. “Aren’t you the one who doesn’t want to let romance complicate our working relationship?”

“That was before you broke up with Charlie.” When she glanced at him, surprised, he said, “Ben told me this morning. Besides, our relationship has been complicated since the minute you got here.”

She smiled in spite of her reservations. “That’s true.”

“So, how about it?”

When she stiffened again, he pulled back, arching a brow. “What are you afraid of? You know I’d never hurt you.”

“I know.”

His eyes searched hers. “What is it then? Simpson? Do you still have feelings for him?”

She shook her head. “We were never more than good friends.”

His brow arched higher. “Never? But any fool can see he loves you.” He frowned. “Why are you so afraid to let a man get close?”

Kim swallowed and chewed her lip. Meeting his eyes, she knew it was time to tell him the truth. She blurted it out. “I was almost raped two years ago.”

At J.D.’s sudden intake of breath, she hesitated. But his face showed no sign of blame, only concern.

“Tell me what happened,” he said grimly, taking her hands in his.

“It was a guy my parents knew and wanted me to go out with. I didn’t like him, but I didn’t trust my instincts enough to refuse their

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

wishes. I agreed to go to dinner with him. Afterwards I pleaded a headache and asked him to take me home. He forced his way into my room and..."

Her voice broke at the memory of her terror when she had realized Greg wouldn't take no for an answer.

J.D. pulled Kim to him, his body stiff. She started to tremble. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have known there was a reason you reacted like you did to my first kiss. I thought it was because of Simpson."

Kim took a deep breath and continued. "Charlie and my sister came back from their own date early and stopped him in time. But after that I was afraid to date. Charlie and Suzanne started taking me out with them, and we became friends. She got a new boyfriend, and Charlie sort of took me under his wing. He's such a nice guy that I hoped someday I'd be ready for a relationship with him. I didn't realize what I was missing until I met you."

A moment passed before he said anything. "When I kissed you, you ran off. Were you afraid of me?"

Still wrapped in his arms, Kim shook her head. "No, it just brought the memory back for a moment. You showed me I could enjoy being with a man again—as long as it was the right man."

She pushed away just enough to see his face and smile at him, her tears forgotten.

He pulled out his bandanna and gently wiped her cheeks. "Do I get my kiss now?" he asked with a sexy grin.

"Um-hmm." Kim parted her lips.

He lowered his mouth to hers. Longing surged through her, like a fire racing through her veins, hot as lava from a volcano. Her arms came around him and pulled his muscular chest close as he deepened the kiss. She was dimly aware of being pushed back against the rough wood of the stall. All her senses concentrated on the intense pleasure of the moment. She drank in his heady male scent, felt the solid strength of his arms and chest, listened to his quick breathing.

***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he muttered between raining kisses over her face and neck.

He pressed his body against the full length of hers. “I think so.”

“Lady, you’re something. I want you, more than ever.”



## CHAPTER 14

Kim froze. He'd said want—not love. She pulled away and pushed at his chest. “Not here.” She searched his eyes. The black pupils were wide with desire. Was there anything else? She couldn't tell.

His breathing was fast and ragged. He stepped back and took a deep breath. “What is it? Am I coming on too strong?”

She shook her head and ran past him out of the stall.

He started to follow her until the sound of hoofbeats announced that Apache was taking advantage of the open stall door.

“Damn!” J.D. raced off after the horse. Apache had a head start and easily escaped out the front of the barn. “Get a bucket with a handful of grain!” J.D. yelled to Kim. “There's no way to outrun him.”

She obeyed, having no time for other thoughts as they worked to capture the escaped animal.

If Apache hadn't already had breakfast, the enticement of sweet feed might have worked. On a full stomach, though, the horse was much more interested in enjoying his freedom. He ran past the fenced

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

pasture into the open fields.

Ben came out to help, but it took the three of them almost an hour to corral the clever gelding and get close enough for J.D. to slip a rope around his neck and lead him back in.

By then it was time for trail rides, so all three were busy for several hours. Ben agreed to be the guide for the first group.

As she went about her chores, Kim tried to keep her thoughts on business, but they kept straying back to J.D. Now that she'd poured out her heart to him, would things be any different? Once again he'd admitted only that he wanted her body. What about the rest of her?

\* \* \*

J.D. was locking up the barn office when the phone rang. With a tired sigh, he picked it up. "Triple H Trail Rides."

"Hudson? It's Charlie Simpson."

Tamping down the urge to slam the phone back in the cradle, J.D. said, "Kim's already gone home for the day."

"I figured she had. I want to talk to you."

"Me?" He sat down, frowning. "Why?"

"I want to buy your half of the ranch."

"*What?*" J.D. jumped to his feet again. "Why?"

"I want to surprise Kim. She loves it there. I could tell last night at the bonfire that she really likes working around horses, and you know what a success she's made of the business. She'd buy it herself if she had the money."

"Oh yeah?"

"She told me."

J.D. felt the first spur of uneasiness. "When?"

"Last night. I asked her if she wouldn't like to be full owner."

His heart sinking, J.D. managed to keep his voice even. "I can see why she'd feel that way. What's in it for you? You don't even like horses."

"That's not quite true. I'll never feel the way Kim does about your

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

ranch, but I can tell it's a great investment. We could expand—"

"Whoa! What do you mean 'we'?"

"Kim and I."

"You're assuming I'd be willing to sell."

"Why not? I'll give you a good price."

J.D. snorted. "I've got more invested than money here."

"You were willing to sell once before."

"Not exactly. I was going to sell a horse and get a silent partner in the ranch. That's a bit different than selling my family homestead."

Simpson sighed. "Think about it, okay? I'd really like to do this for Kim. All our relationship needs is for us to be together more."

J.D.'s heart slammed against his chest. Kim had said she'd broken up with the other man. Now he wanted to buy her a ranch? Which of them was she stringing along? Maybe she was like Monica after all.

Well, two city slickers weren't getting *his* ranch. "There's no need to think," he said. "I'm not selling."

"What if I make you an offer—"

"No! If Kim wants a ranch of her own, let her buy another one. I'll buy *her* out."

"Can you do that?" Simpson's tone sounded hopeful.

"I could still sell that horse, if necessary. But why should I? I like things the way they are. Kim and I work well together."

"Is that all you do together?"

The jealousy evident in the other man's voice rankled. "Why don't you ask Kim?" J.D. suggested, doing his best to keep his tone even.

"I already have."

"And?"

Simpson sighed, and there was a long pause before he spoke again. "She'll get tired of ranching eventually. I want to be around when she does."

"And if she doesn't?"

J.D. could hear him take a deep breath before he spoke. "She's got a

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

business degree, J.D. Do you really think she'll want to stay isolated on that ranch forever? It shouldn't take long for her romantic notions about cowboys to pass once you're out of the picture."

"I told you, I'm not leaving."

"So buy her out. I'll find her a ranch on the other side of town."

Tamping down a string of expletives, J.D. settled for grinding his teeth. "Fine. You do that. Call me back with a price."

He slammed the phone down before he could admit that Simpson had just voiced what he'd feared all along. A special lady like Kim would never belong here—would never belong to *him*.

\* \* \*

The next morning J.D. managed to stay so busy that Kim wondered if he was purposely trying to avoid being alone with her.

When Samantha and her son arrived for their trail ride, J.D. went out to meet them. Kim watched from the barn window as the other woman got out of her car and leaned over to get something out of the back seat, giving J.D. a full view of her well curved derriere in tight jeans.

As Kim started to turn away, she saw Sam flash him a wide smile and reach for him. His arms came around the brunette as she parted her lips. Nausea churned in Kim's stomach. She spun on her heel and returned to her seat.

She stared blankly at the desk, trying to block the memory of the vision of the man she loved kissing another woman.

A few minutes later J.D. stuck his head in the door of the office. "I'm going to take Apache and go with Sam and Brian." He disappeared again without waiting for approval.

Before Kim could react, the phone rang. "Triple H Trail Rides."

"I'm calling about the Quarterhorse filly for sale," a pleasant female voice said.

"We're not selling any horses," Kim answered.

"There's a sign out in front of the ranch. I saw it this morning. May

## *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

I speak to J.D.?”

Frowning, Kim said, “He’s busy right now. Can I have him call you back?”

After taking the woman’s number, Kim went outside. Sure enough, someone had nailed an advertisement for a filly under the ranch sign. She spotted Ben on her way back inside and asked, “Is J.D. selling Morticia?”

He snorted. “Yeah. He told me last night.”

“Why? He loves that filly!”

Looking puzzled, Ben met her gaze. “He told me he’s going to buy your half of the ranch. He’ll still need to get a loan for the rest but...” He shrugged. “Did you two have a fight or something?”

“No...” Kim thought back. They’d hardly seen each other all morning. And when they had, he’d been very distant. Had she done something terrible enough to make him want her gone from the ranch?

Someone called to Ben for help with a stubborn horse, and Kim slowly made her way back to the office. She thought about the way J.D. had behaved the previous day and then the way he’d gone off with Samantha a little while ago.

Kim and J.D. hadn’t been alone since their kiss in the barn the day before, which had ended suddenly—right before Apache got out. She had just confessed her deepest secret, something she’d never even told her parents. Although he’d seemed to be sympathetic, his understanding had turned to passion. Was that all he felt for her?

Once again J.D. had told her he wanted her. He hadn’t mentioned love. And now he was making plans to buy out her half of the ranch. Without even discussing it with her!

Had she been wrong about his feelings? When she’d agreed to kiss him in the barn, she’d been under the impression that the only thing stopping him from pursuing her had been his belief that she was involved with Charlie. But maybe she’d been right all along—maybe he still wanted to play the field. Could she continue to work next to the

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

man she loved if all he wanted was a roll in the hay?

There would never be a future with a man who was ready to make love to her one day and then would chase another woman the next. And what about all those Tuesday and Thursday evenings? Maybe he had a different girlfriend each of those nights, too.

Finally, she swallowed hard and made a decision. After the intimate kisses she'd shared with him the previous day, he'd barely given her a second glance all morning. Apparently he was only interested in a physical relationship. When she was busy, he was happy to chase someone else. He hadn't wasted any time getting close to Sam.

Kim knew she had to get away from the stable, away from J.D. She couldn't continue to work here, loving a man who didn't return her feelings, seeing him every day and knowing how she reacted every time he touched her. She had too much pride for that.

Kim told Becky that she was leaving for the day, loaded a few personal items in her purse, and took a last look around as she headed to her car. The lump in her throat grew when she compared the flourishing green pastures with new fence and freshly painted barn to the run-down stable she'd seen on her arrival at the Triple H. She had a lot to be proud of. At least she was leaving the stable in much better shape than she'd found it.

She considered looking for a nearby ranch to buy into, but decided she didn't want to compete with J.D. or take a chance on running into him in town.

Her friendship with Charlie was probably over, too. She hadn't bothered to return his call last night, not wanting to give him false hope.

There was no point in staying in Florida. Maybe she could find a ranch in Ohio that needed help. She'd let J.D. buy her out if that was what he wanted.

Blinking back tears of resignation, she climbed into her car and pulled away.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

\* \* \*

A few hours later J.D. returned from several back-to-back trail rides. He found his brother in the office.

"How was the ride with Sam?" Ben asked from his seat behind the desk.

"Not bad. Brian seemed to have fun."

"What about Sam?"

J.D. grinned and shook his head. "She knows I'm not her type. We discovered the night we went out that about all we have in common is the past. I doubt she'll be back, but she'll give us a good feature story in the paper."

Ben watched as J.D. took a soda from the refrigerator. "Did you talk to Kim today?"

Popping the top on the cola, he shook his head. "Not really. I've been doing rides since this morning. Why?" He settled on the couch and started to drink.

"She's gone."

He shrugged. "She'll be back for evening feeding."

"No. I mean *gone*. I just got off the phone with her. She wants you to buy her out—for the original price she paid."

"*What?*" J.D. jumped up and crossed the room in two strides. He slammed his drink on the desk so hard it sloshed. "Why?"

"She wouldn't say. Just told me to make sure we covered her shifts 'cause she wasn't coming back." Ben leaned forward and stared accusingly at him. "Are you sure you didn't have a fight? She sounded like she was crying."

"Damn!" J.D. smashed his fist on the desk and turned away to stare out the window. After a few long moments, he turned back to his brother. "Didn't she say anything else?"

Ben looked thoughtful. "Yeah. Apparently she didn't know anything about your plan to buy her out until I mentioned it. She sounded more surprised than I was when you told me last night. Didn't

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

you discuss it with her? What's going on?"

J.D. shook his head, puzzled. "I'm not sure. Her boyfriend called me yesterday—said he wanted to buy my half of the ranch for Kim." He held up a *whoa* sign when Ben's jaw dropped open. "Don't worry. I refused. But then he suggested I buy out Kim's half. He thinks ranching is just a phase she's going through."

"And you believed that?" Ben's expression was incredulous.

Shrugging, J.D. sat down, resting his hands on his knees. "You know I've been afraid of that all along. She's got a lot more in common with Charlie Simpson than with me. She'd get tired of me, just like Monica did. Why put myself through that again?"

"She doesn't love him, you idiot!"

"He must think she does if he wants to buy her a ranch."

"Then why is she going back to Ohio?"

J.D. raised his eyebrows. "She is?"

"Yep. And she doesn't want you to sell Morticia, so she's letting you buy back the ranch for a fraction of what it's worth now."

Feeling a gnawing guilt, J.D. stared at the floor. Could he have been wrong about Kim? Did she love him after all?

"Look around you, J.D. Look at how Kim improved this place! She modernized it without sacrificing anything important. If you think she doesn't belong here, you must have let one of the horses kick you in the head—'cause you sure lost whatever sense you were born with!"

Sighing, J.D. got up and walked over to the window. He gazed at the freshly painted fences, the healthy, well-groomed horses tied at the rail awaiting their next rides, and the bright flowerbeds that surrounded the ranch house. Damned if the kid wasn't right. Kim belonged here. This ranch was as much hers as his. He couldn't let her go this way.

He turned to Ben. "When did she leave?"

"It looks like it was right after you went out on that ride with Samantha. I tried to tell her there's nothing between you and Sam, but she hung up."



### *RAWHIDE AND LACE*

J.D. shook his head with self-reproach. "She probably thought Sam's coming here today was a date, especially when I agreed to take them."

"Why did you?"

"You were already out with another ride. Sam isn't much of a rider, and her son had never been on a horse before. Since we made that rule about sending guides..."

Ben's eyes narrowed with condemnation. "If you haven't told Kim how you feel yet, she's probably hurting pretty bad."

J.D. sank dejectedly back onto the couch. "I blew it, Ben. I not only didn't tell her—I kissed her yesterday, right after telling her Sam was coming here today."

"Did she kiss you back?"

"Yeah. Things were going pretty good 'til Apache got loose. We were so busy catching him we never got another chance to talk. And then after what Simpson said last night... I figured it was best to keep her at a distance."

He muttered another curse as more guilt assailed him, remembering the look on Kim's face when he'd told her he was riding with Sam.

Could she have seen the reporter kiss him a few minutes before that? Although he'd been too surprised to resist, he hadn't kissed her back. But it might have looked that way to an observer. When he'd rushed into the office, he'd been in a hurry, anxious to get the ride over with. It hadn't occurred to him to explain to Kim. Maybe she'd seen and misunderstood...

Ben rose and picked up the phone, holding it out. "I'd say you have a call to make. I'll go help Becky."

J.D. took the receiver and began dialing Kim's number before his brother was out the door. It rang twenty times. No answer. Maybe she'd reconsidered and was coming in for feeding time after all.

He shook his head. No, once Kim made up her mind about something, she stuck to it.

## RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. kept trying. When he hadn't reached her by late afternoon, he knew he had to do *something*.

He drove by her apartment, but her car wasn't parked outside. As a last resort, he went to see the only person he knew who might know how to reach her. Charlie Simpson.

"What can I do for you?" Simpson asked, resuming his seat when his receptionist retreated after showing J.D. into his office.

J.D. took a step closer. "Do you know where Kim is?" he asked, trying not to reveal his panic.

Simpson crossed his arms and sat back. "Yeah. I know, but if she doesn't want to talk to you, why should I tell you?"

"Do you want her to leave town?" J.D. asked, his temper rising as he eyed the blond man with suspicion.

Frowning, Simpson leaned forward. He drummed his fingers against his desk while he stared back. "No," he finally conceded.

"Then you'd better tell me how to reach her so I can talk her out of it."

The other man seemed to be considering what to do.

"Do you know why she left the ranch?" J.D. asked after a moment.

"Not exactly." Simpson sighed and leaned forward to place his clasped hands on the desk in front of him. "She told me she's in love with you."

Hope sparked in J.D. "Then why won't you help me?"

"We'd already agreed to date other people. When I realized you were the competition, I hoped that if I got you out of her life by ending the partnership, she'd come back to me."

"So that was all your idea—not hers?"

Simpson nodded. "She didn't know anything about it. She stopped by a few hours ago to return some stuff she borrowed. She said she's moving back to Ohio. I couldn't talk her out of it. She sounded upset but didn't explain. I figured you had a disagreement about how to run the ranch."

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

J.D. shook his head. "No."

Simpson stared at his hands a long moment, as though trying to decide if he should say more. Finally he raised his eyes to meet J.D.'s. "Have you told her how you feel about her?"

"How in blazes can I do that if she won't talk to me?"

"I'll help." Simpson sighed. "Until today, I thought the reason Kim was resisting me was because of her past. I thought as long as I was patient, she'd come around." His voice took on a bitter note as he added, "But I finally figured out she'll never care about me that way 'cause, while I was waiting, she fell in love with you."

J.D. sank back down on the chair and ran his hand through his hair. "She told me what happened to her," he said. "I'm glad you were there for her."

"Yeah, me too." Simpson stared at the desk, his expression grim. "Anyway," he added, "that was two years ago. She's come a long way since then. I'd do anything to keep her from being hurt again."

J.D. met the other man's eyes with a direct gaze. "So would I. I love her, too."

Simpson stood up. "I believe you." He took a deep breath and said, "She's at her apartment, packing. Her car's getting a tune-up for the trip back to Ohio." He extended his hand. "Take care of her. She's special."

J.D. clasped the other man's hand firmly. "I know. And I will. Thanks, Charlie."

\* \* \*

J.D. slammed down the barn phone again. What the hell was he going to do? Kim's landlady said she dropped her off to get her car. But she wasn't at her apartment, and she still wasn't answering her phone. What would he do if she left town before he could stop her?

"Did you see Kim?" Ben asked, coming into the office.

"No, I still can't find her."

"But...she was just here!"

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

J.D. blinked. "Now?"

"She came by to get some personal disks she forgot to take out of the computer. I tried to stall her till you got back, but she wouldn't stay. She left maybe ten minutes ago."

"Which way did she go?"

"Probably the opposite of the way you came in."

"Yeah..." J.D. frowned. If she left ten minutes ago, he might never catch her. Unless he took a short cut...

He felt a glimmer of hope. "Apache's tacked up, right?"

"Yeah. I was going to use him for my guide horse on the next ride. Why?" Then Ben grinned. "Oh, sure. Take him. I'll use another mount. But you better hurry!"

\* \* \*

Blinking back tears of frustration and pain, Kim tried to focus on the road ahead of her. Had it been only a few short months ago that she had come here to start a new life?

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement and glanced out her window. A man on horseback raced across the field toward her. She slowed and took a closer look.

Was that J.D. on Apache?

Suddenly the horse reared up, front legs flailing. While the rider fought to control him, the Paint shook his head and sidestepped wildly, prancing in place.

Kim pulled her car over to the side of the road and parked to enjoy the view. J.D. looked like one of the cowboys in her favorite old movies racing across the prairie to rescue a heroine in distress. When Apache reared up, visions of the Lone Ranger and other Western heroes came to mind.

For a moment it appeared the horse was under control. Then he reared again.

Thinking J.D. might need help, Kim turned off the ignition and stepped out. As she shut the door and turned back to the field, she saw

## ***RAWHIDE AND LACE***

that the horse no longer had a rider.

Alarmed at the thought that J.D. could have fallen and possibly been trampled, Kim ran to the fence and climbed over. She started to run as soon as her feet touched the ground. "J.D.!" she tried to scream. Her voice came out in a strangled sob.

Apache stopped a few feet away from where she'd seen him rear. He now stood calmly, though his nostrils still flared with fear.

Kim quickly crossed the field, stopping only a few yards away when she saw with relief that J.D. now stood on the other side of the paint, patting its neck. He turned his head toward her, though his hands remained on Apache.

Kim couldn't see his expression under the shadow of his cowboy hat, but he appeared to be physically all right. She hesitated. He didn't seem to need her help. She should turn and go without risking a confrontation. Still...she couldn't leave without finding out for sure.

"Are...are you all right?" she asked, taking some deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

"Yeah. I slid off when I thought he might fall. Something spooked him."

She nodded. "I guess I'll be going then." She turned and started to walk toward her car.

"No! Kim...wait."

The emotional tone of his voice almost stopped her. She swallowed hard and took a steadying breath before answering. "There's nothing more to say. We don't want the same kind of relationship." She threw the words over her shoulder. "There's no point in pretending otherwise."

"I need you."

"You want me. There's a difference."

He muttered a curse, and she could hear footsteps and hoofbeats as they followed her. Then Apache gave a loud snort.

Kim turned. The look on J.D.'s face caused a shiver to go down her

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

spine even before he spoke. "Don't move!" he ordered, his tone low and even.

It was only then that she heard the low rattling sound on the ground next to her foot. She swallowed, glanced down, and had no problem obeying his command. Her limbs seemed to be frozen in place.

Her frightened gaze flew back to J.D. His normally tan face was pale. But as his eyes met hers, she knew he wasn't afraid for himself. He was far enough away from the snake to be safe. His fear had to be for *her*.

In that moment, she knew he loved her. The knowledge warmed her heart, and she smiled in spite of her dangerous situation.

The corner of his mouth twitched as he held her gaze. Then he shifted his attention to the snake. His eyes on the reptile, he slowly slid his hand into Apache's saddlebag, carefully removing a long-bladed knife. He released the horse with a gentle push against his chest to get him to back away. Nostrils flaring, the gelding cooperated by moving until he was a safe distance.

Her heart still racing, Kim found she was holding her breath. She allowed her gaze to drop down again. The snake was still coiled, though its attention seemed to have been distracted from her by J.D.'s movement. She took a cautious step away.

The snake once again focused on her. At the same moment, J.D. strode forward and stepped on the reptile just behind the head with his heavy boot. Before it could move, he leaned down and sliced off the head with his knife. He dug a quick hole in the sand with his heel and buried the dangerous part of the snake.

Kim gasped with horror as the decapitated body began to writhe around J.D.'s feet.

Stepping away, he took a deep breath. "It's okay. The body may keep moving for a while, but it can't hurt you." He turned and looked into her eyes. "Are you all right?"

Kim let out a long, shuddering breath. "Y-y-yes. Thank you."

### RAWHIDE AND LACE

J.D. held out his arms, and she gladly slid into his solid embrace. She could hear the strong thump of his heart as it beat against his chest.

He'd just faced his worst fear—to save her! Tears of relief and happiness began to gather in her eyes. “Oh, J.D. You do love me, don't you?”

Pulling back, he frowned as his gaze searched hers. “Of course I do! How could you have any doubt?”

“You...you never told me...”

Taking a deep breath, he reached for her hands and held them in both of his. “I do love you, Kim.”

She raised her eyes to meet the dark intensity of his. “Really?”

He nodded. “I know I was a fool not to tell you. I've known for a long time now. I would have told you sooner, but I thought you belonged with Charlie Simpson. You seemed to have so much more in common with him.”

She blinked to stop the tears still gathered in her eyes. “Charlie is a good friend. I used to think I could love him. But after the first time you kissed me, I knew I didn't care for him that way.”

“Then why the h—*heck* didn't you tell me?”

“I did. I told you I loved you, but then you didn't seem to want me. I didn't know you felt the same way about me. Even after I told you about Charlie, you went out with Sam—”

“There's nothing between Sam and me, which I'd have been happy to explain if you'd given me half a chance!”

“But—”

J.D. reached up and placed his finger over her lips. “The question is, now that we know we love each other, what are we going to do about it?”

“Well, I guess I'll come back to work, if you still want me.”

“Of *course*, I want you to come back to the Triple H!”

Dropping his hand, he hooked it on his belt. “Somebody has to help Ben run the ranch while I'm in school,” he added with a grin.

### **RAWHIDE AND LACE**

Kim raised her eyebrows. "You're going back to college?"

He nodded. "I already have. I've been taking night classes for several weeks now. That's why I asked you to cover some evenings. I only have a few courses left to graduate with a degree in animal science. Ben's willing to stick around another term if we need him."

She smiled her approval. "That's great!"

J.D. walked over to Apache, who was happily engrossed in a clump of clover. He picked up the reins and led the horse over to Kim. "You'd better get home and start unpacking."

"Oh! I can't! I'm supposed to move out tomorrow. My landlady already has another tenant. She even bought my furniture." She frowned. "Well, I guess I can go back to the motel for a while—"

"Then we better plan a fast wedding."

Kim looked at him in amazement. "*A wedding!* Are you asking me to marry you?"

J.D. quirked a dark eyebrow. "Are you going to say yes?"

She stared at him. "I thought you didn't want to get married."

"I never said that. I don't have anything against marriage. I used to think you were like another city girl I knew once. But you're nothing like her. You're the perfect partner for me. In every way."

He reached under her chin to tilt her face up, drying her cheeks with his bandanna. "So what's the answer?"

Kim laughed, finally feeling true happiness. "Yes, yes, yes! I'll marry you as soon as we can make the arrangements. But *you'll* have to do the cooking."

J.D. chuckled. "No argument there." He pulled her into his arms for a very unbusinesslike kiss.



**AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC  
PROUDLY PRESENTS**

**A STABLE RELATIONSHIP  
BY  
SANDI HADDAD**

Pediatric nurse Cassy Collins dreams of one day becoming an accomplished equestrienne. Her riding instructor, former champion horse show jumper David Carlyle, needs to recover both emotionally and physically from a bad fall.

But neither expects a relationship, stable or otherwise, to complicate their lives.

*Available Summer 2003!*

## SANDI HADDAD

Native Floridian Sandi Haddad has always been a romantic. As a child, she made up pretend games that always included a romance with a happy ending. Thinking she could never actually make a living as a fiction writer, she followed her second choice of careers. Along the way to becoming a registered nurse, she took English and creative writing courses as college electives. After working a few years as a maternity and pediatric nurse, she met and married her own hero, Fred, an engineer. She was happy to stay home to raise their four children. When the youngest started kindergarten, she decided it was time to either go back to nursing or see if she could succeed at writing.

Sandi knew she was on her way when her first full-length hardcover romance, *A Stable Relationship*, won the Virginia Romance Writers' Holt medallion. A second sweet hardcover romance featuring a nurse heroine, *Vital Signs*, was published by Avalon Books in 2000.

Sandi also has five novels contracted to Amber Quill Press. The first, Aspen Gold finalist *Ticket To Romance*, *Physical Evidence*, a romantic mystery, and the traditional contemporary romance *Rawhide And Lace*. A new edition of *A Stable Relationship* and the sequel *A Stable Account* are also scheduled for release in 2003.

Her husband of more than 25 years is now in management of a large utility company, and their oldest daughter is married with a family of her own. Fred and Sandi live on a mini-ranch on the space coast of Florida with their three youngest children, two horses, and an ever-growing menagerie of pets.

# AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS

IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

ROMANCE

MAINSTREAM

MYSTERY

PARANORMAL

FANTASY

HISTORICAL

HORROR

YOUNG ADULT

WESTERN

**AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC**

<http://www.amberquill.com>